

## **The New Art Gallery of Alberta: Honour, Horror and High, High Ceilings**

**ART GALLERY OF ALBERTA, EDMONTON JAN 31 TO MAY 30 2010**

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**(excerpt)**

Situated at the heart of Edmonton on Sir Winston Churchill Square, the Art Gallery of Alberta adjoins the Francis Winspear Centre for Music, the civic plaza and city hall; a testament to the centrality of the arts in the life of the city.(...)

The opening roster of exhibitions demonstrates the types of international shows and corresponding partnerships that the gallery is now able to support. (...)

The Art Gallery of Alberta's deputy director and senior curator, Catherine Crowston, worked in consultation with Degas scholar Ann Dumas from the Royal Academy in London and Joseph S. Czestochowski of International Art in Memphis to bring together 50 mainly sculptural works from 24 international collections including the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian in Washington for "Edgar Degas: Figures in Motion." (...)

Crowston was interested in Goya's etching *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, from his *Los Caprichos* series, because it inspired Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's 2008 audio installation *The Murder of Crows*, which makes its North American debut in the expansive third-floor gallery. A second work by Cardiff and Miller, 2009's *Storm Room*, was commissioned by the Art Gallery of Alberta for the RBC New Works Gallery on the second floor. Cardiff and Miller's return to Edmonton for these inaugural exhibitions seems entirely fitting given their long history with Alberta. Miller was born in Vegreville just east of Edmonton, and the two met while studying at the University of Alberta. Both were key figures in Lethbridge's burgeoning art scene in the 90s, teaching at the University of Lethbridge and exhibiting extensively in Alberta and elsewhere before achieving international acclaim with the *Paradise Institute* at the 2001 Venice Biennale. In 1997, the Edmonton Art Gallery was first to buy one of their audio installations, *To Touch*. Significantly, Cardiff and Miller, who now split their time between Berlin and Grindrod, BC,

built their careers in Alberta before becoming fixtures on the international scene. It's a career trajectory that perhaps foreshadows what the Art Gallery of Alberta hopes to foster more of in the future. Originally commissioned for the 2008 Sydney Biennale, Cardiff and Miller's 30-minute soundscape *The Murder of Crows* uses the same technical process as their 2001 work *Forty Part Motet*, but involves over 700 separate computer-controlled tracks played back through 98 speakers, which stand in for both a murder of crows and the technology that structures our reality through sound. Unlike *Forty Part Motet*, where the spectator configures the score by walking from speaker to speaker or track to track, *The Murder of Crows* centralizes listeners in a provisional amphitheatre of folding wooden chairs. At the centre of this 75-by-25-metre audio installation, a dismembered gramophone lies on a 1940s burgundy-leather-topped card table. From it, Cardiff's voice intermittently breathes a series of short narratives, nightmares that recall the horrors of war and man's inhumanity to man. These audio vignettes intermix with an electro-acoustic cinematic soundscape of violent storms, flocking crows and factory sounds that merge with a Bohemian Rhapsody-type aria. Anticipation builds as a marching band seems to be pushed through the space by an encroaching Russian choir that sings Aleksandr Aleksandrov and Vasily Lebedev-Kumach's *The Sacred War*—once an anthem for Soviet patriotism, now all but drifted into folklore. Cathartic swells of chanting nuns from Thrangu Tara Abbey Kathmandu, Nepal, heighten the emotional intensity through a remarkable depth of sound, sculpting a space that sounds much larger than it is. Finally, as it often is in the movies, we are left with a paradoxically optimistic end in the form of an indie-rock ballad, *The Crows Did Fly* (Kathmandu Lullaby), written by George and sung by Janet, perhaps with their daughter in mind. One can almost see the credits roll as the space falls silent and listeners leave their seats to contemplate the personal cost of violence and war. Cardiff and Miller collaborated with Berlin-based film composer Tilman Ritter and the Babelsberg Film Orchestra to compose *The Murder of Crows* as a requiem for the old world—a pre-9/11, pre-George Bush world where, in the artists' estimation, "we weren't so paranoid and things weren't so dark." The installation does indeed recall Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, which depicts a collapsed Goya engulfed by his nightmares and surrounded by a flurry of owls and bats. Produced after a five-year bout with cholera and his resulting deafness, *Los Caprichos* depicts Goya's sensory and political isolation. *Los Caprichos* (caprichos meaning whim or fantasy) denounced the social oppression and economic crisis of Enlightenment Spain that could easily be seen to parallel our own time. Like Goya's etchings, Cardiff and Miller's soundscape conjures false monsters or imagined realities that

might still have the potential to transform even the most frightening of worlds at a moment when reality and fantasy seem one and the same.

The Murder of Crows is like experiencing a film without images, and it recalls Cardiff's earlier audio walks, which she describes as film scores for physical environments. The soundscape is structured like poetry or a dreamscape, where a collage of narrative and musical tropes from a variety of genres are linked associatively through metaphor to score our imaginations. In particular, The Murder of Crows relies heavily on fairy-tale and film references — the Brothers Grimm, Apocalypse Now and Hitchcock come to mind—to conjure horror and cultivate a state of cinematic suspense. Within popular culture and particularly film, the crow's call is both a sign of warning and a sign of mourning that foreshadows the moment when we “know something terrible is going to happen.” The suspense is real, the horror explicit, at times even humorously so because of its baroque and absurd combination of genres. Yet The Murder of Crows transfers real anxiety to the listener; it becomes our mirror, reverberating back to us our culture's deepest fears and loathings. Storm Room is a theatre set: a completely self-contained, manufactured thunderstorm for our nightmarish pleasure. Originally produced in situ for the 2009 Echigo Tsumari Art Triennial, the Art Gallery of Alberta's Storm Room is a doppelganger of sorts as it recreates a room in an abandoned house in Doichi, Japan, where the original work was staged. Storm Room builds on the violence and theatrics of 2007's The Killing Machine, but this haunted space is minimal. The interior, which you enter from the back, is empty save for a few domestic props: a sink, a mirror and buckets catching drips. Walls of windows sheeted by recirculated water are traced with signs of missing passages that lead nowhere. Periodically, an oscillating fan blows a ghostly band of cool air that conjures remembrances of the former occupant. Thunder claps and strobe lights flash, momentarily freezing participants in their own afterimage to become spectres themselves. It is almost impossible not to imagine someone monstrous or deranged will appear from around the corner. Perhaps you imagine a Japanese kappa, a children-eating water imp who is said to protect natural water sources. But there are no corners to turn; there isn't anyone present except for you and the people with whom you share your fear. Storm Room cultivates your fear, and gives it back to you in the form of an entertaining experience. By extension, it makes visible the way capitalist culture cannibalizes all experience, be it natural or artificial, to repackage for endless circulation. Cardiff and Miller's audio environments seem to parallel a larger shift in museums' merging with the entertainment industry and commercial culture. In many ways, the new Art Gallery of Alberta participates in the spectacularization of the museum that we have seen recent years, with

“starchitecture,” blockbusters and event-based programming designed to capture audiences who are willing to pay to have memorable experiences. To some extent, the gallery has to do this; expectation and economy demand it. It seems as if the new contemporary art museum is irrevocably tied to Joseph Pine and James Gilmore’s idea of the experience economy, an economy that relies less on the delivery of goods and services and more on the marketing and sale of experiences. Today spectators are participants who go to the museum to be seen as much as to see. Yet the Art Gallery of Alberta’s opening curatorial direction seems cautious and critical of this trend, demanding functional gallery infrastructure and producing substantive exhibitions with credible partners. From this perspective, Cardiff and Miller’s installations are a good self-critical choice for the launch of the new Art Gallery of Alberta because their experiential installations subtly critique the construction and commodification of experience through spectacle. Storm Room, in particular, flashes a haunting doppelganger of the contemporary art museum itself.

Link to the full article:

<http://www.canadianart.ca/online/reviews/2010/02/11/art-gallery-of-alberta>