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NOW



Searching for a different voice

Midi Onodera,
Judith Doyle
and Rhea Tregobov



New voices and widening horizons

By SUSAN G. COLE

In the YYZ Gallery at 116 Spadina Avenue, a major art exhibition is opening in just four hours. Jamelie Hassan is fiddling away trying to get a response from a recalcitrant video monitor. Michaelle McLean trudges in from the city's worst snow storm this year carrying the last, vast piece of her installation, and three more participants in the show are waiting to talk to NOW.

The atmosphere, nevertheless, is surprisingly calm, as the white walls of the gallery transform. Curator Judith Doyle, her blond hair hanging every which way, sits in artist's black on the floor chatting with filmmaker Midi Onodera. The soft-spoken Onodera has defied the inclement weather with a bluejean jacket and is anxious to talk about her personal search for her Japanese heritage. Rhea Tregobov, in a long jersey dress that looks like art in its own right, opts for a chair. Together they are three contrasts in style and ethnicity and their chemistry reflects the mix in the new feminist art exhibition, *In a Different Voice*.

The show is a collaborative effort between the YYZ and the Funnel Theatre (507 King Street East). The Funnel will show experimental and documentary films for the next four Fridays, starting tomorrow, while a variety of installations combining photography, video and paintings will hang at the YYZ for four weeks. Ambitious in its scope, the exhibition marks the first time the YYZ and the Funnel have sponsored a show jointly and offers a rare chance to see documentary and experimental films curated in a single showing. In *A Different Voice* expands the question of female identity beyond its conventional scope, taking into account cultural roots and the experience of immigration.

Feminism fate

The title of the exhibition is a tip of the hat to Carol Gilligan whose book, *In a Different Voice*, traced the particular quality of female voice and decision-making that takes into account real experience instead of the abstract moral imperatives of right and wrong. Through her research on male and female response to ethical dilemmas, Gilligan discovered that women look at a range of questions. As Doyle puts it, "Women seem to attempt to make and maintain connections and links between positions that are sometimes quite different."

Except for a grant from the National Film Board in Toronto which has provided for the publication of a catalogue for the show, the exhibition is entirely unfunded.

"We were turned down twice for Canada Council grants, just in case you thought feminism was trendy," Doyle says. "If you wear outfits and talk folklore, that's multiculturalism. But once you start talking politics"—she feigns a look of total confusion—"it's too-o-o-o complicated."

What the juries found too difficult to handle was the complex interweaving of three specific themes: generation, ethnicity and feminism. Doyle explains the idea.

"We are trying to look at the place of women alongside the displacement of immigrant and minority culture within society. We are trying to get at the feeling of being territorialized, the feeling of being outside the dominant language, the feeling of being neither here nor there."

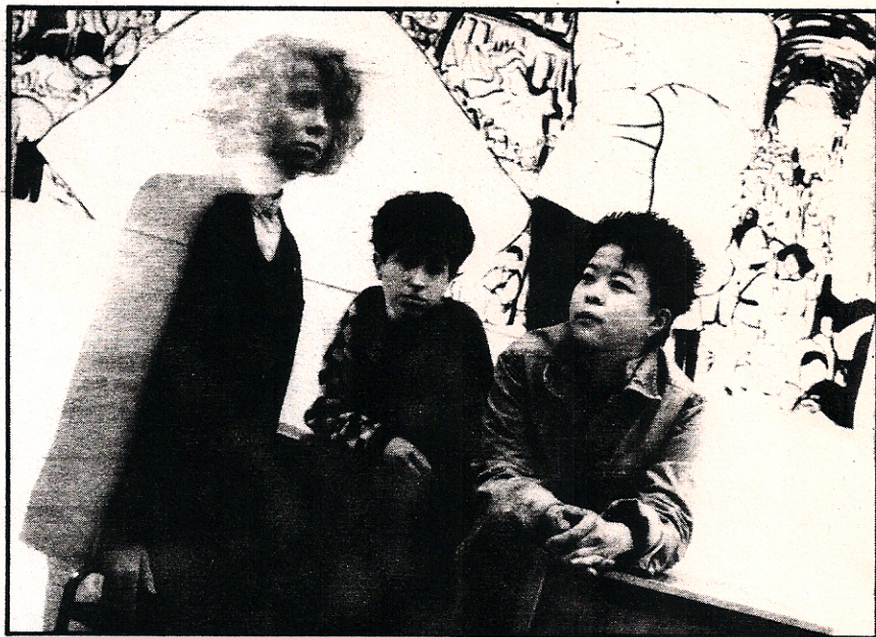
"Marilu Mallet's film about Chile (*Journal Inacheve*) is a good example. It describes how if you are an immigrant from Chile you are here. But you're not here, because part of you is still in Chile. But you're not in Chile either because Chile is changing, and so are you. There is the feeling of being in two places, neither of which is your own."

Extreme words

The show exposes a new idea of the immigrant self. For Tregobov, a poet, the exhibition gives her a chance to address her Jewish roots, and in a different voice, this time in performance instead of poetry.

"The piece called *I'm Talking from My Time* is two-thirds transcription of conversations with a 96 year old woman, my grandmother. There are so many stereotypes about Jewish mothers, and this one was a Jewish mother par excellence. But what she actually says is unique and destroys the stereotype. I've always been angered by the way stereotypes can wipe out experience."

Tregobov could not rest with the transcriptions as they were. "When I saw her words on the page, I wanted to have her face in proximity to them, because her words were so extreme and extraordinary, so much so that when people saw the transcription they thought they were my words, highly crafted poetry. Yet they were straight transcriptions. I had to have her face there," she laughs. "Also there was a bit of anger at dumb Toronto audiences that made me



Judith Doyle (left), Rhea Tregobov and Midi Onodera are part of a combined gallery show/film series that explores feminism in the context of immigration and cultural roots.

want to show them what Winnipeg, what the prairies were like."

And so the piece, mounted with slides and photographs taken by Peter Higdon, opens with blank Winnipeg facades. A picture of Tregobov's grandmother appears. She has a face detailed with the lines of a life intensely lived; then a voice inside the face is heard in an attempt to explore the difference between what we see on the outside and what kind of voice there is behind it.

Where Tregobov attempts to get at the roots of stereotypes and how they are formed, filmmaker Midi Onodera tries to get at the roots of her Japanese heritage and how it has been treated on Canada's soil. Her new super eight film deals expressly with the cultural links between three generations of Japanese women in Canada, and attempts to find her place among them. Although years ago she had prepared some photographs and text pieces on Japan, tracing the themes of Hiroshima and science fiction, her film contribution to *In a Different Voice* is a departure from her earlier films which revealed an idiosyncratic vision of contemporary sexual relations. Admirers of her last film, *Ten Cents a Dance*, can expect something entirely different.

Total departure

"This is a total departure," says Onodera. "But the internment issue had been building for me for years. I realized that my grandmother who is 97 years old is getting quite senile. I began to write letters to her, even though she speaks only Japanese and I speak practically none. I had never been able to talk to her, though I always felt there was some level of communication. The film is an attempt to get the letters off the page."

"It's interesting to look at the laissez faire attitude that male Japanese have toward the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. But for women, the experience never seems to go away. The strength is still there. You can see it in the way they brought up their children."

It was difficult to find the right approach on an issue that the Japanese Canadians have not yet sorted out as a community. This struggle to "get it right" was overwhelming to Onodera.

Doyle, whose own film on Nicaragua called *Eye of the Mask* recently won a special award at the Mannheim Film Festival, sympathizes with the problem. "There's always the pressure to be politically correct. I know from working on my film that when you're trying to show differences and contradictions, you can feel terribly torn. There are a lot of demands made by people with different perspectives who think they should represent the issue." Onodera intends to expand the sketch to feature length in order to cover all the terrain.

As is obvious from the artists' preoccupation with their grandmothers, the theme of generation is closely developed in the exhibition. Apart from Tregobov's contribution and Onodera's film sketch, Carolyn White's triptych of photographs celebrates her mother's joy at becoming a grandmother. But Doyle is wary and does not want the theme of generation to be confused with a pro-family stance.

"We are not interested in reconstituting the family," she insists. "In fact, we were a little concerned that the show might have too much of a heterosexual bent. That was why we wanted to include gay filmmakers like Midi and Jean Young."

The constant artistic reference to

generation did cause Onodera some discomfort, making her feel like the process of the art exhibition was imitating too well the aspects of life the show was intended to critique.

"There was a lot of discussion about women having children, and how I might see myself within that situation because, well, I am not going to have children. So I had the feeling of isolation and displacement within the context of the show itself," says Onodera.

The artists and curator Doyle are anxious to follow through on the energy generated by Women's Perspectives at the Partisan Gallery and the formation of the Women's Cultural Building three years ago. Warns Tregobov, "That's the history of the women's movement. Ten years of frantic activity and loss of life and then 10 years of oblivion."

But Doyle has no intention of letting feminist art slip from the public gaze. "Feminism may not be as trendy as it was in the arts community three years ago. I think that with the exception of *Fem-Fest*, this is the first exhibition of work from a feminist perspective in a while. But we decided that we were going to maintain the momentum of the past three years and not let it go just because a number of critics were getting bored."

Says Onodera, "Besides, feminist art shows are taking a different form. Before, we were producing papier mache wombs. That's all you would see — organs, all over the place."

That has changed. The art on display evokes a new awareness of personal identity and the ethnic and political consciousness from which it springs. Speaking from a different voice, feminist artists are beginning to establish an identity that emerges from much more than just their genitalia.