

IRENE F. WHITTOME

WORDS DO NOT MATTER

Galerie Simon Blais
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Artist, respected teacher, Irene F. Whittome is the *grande dame* of Canadian contemporary art scene. Master printmaker, recipient of numerous awards crowned with the Order of Canada (2005), she has exhibited her works in numerous museums, including Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art and the Musée du Québec.

Followings on the heels of a major retrospective, *Paperworks III*, at Galerie Simon Blais two years ago, Whittome is once again exhibiting her most recent works in the same venue.

Inspired by the scenery surrounding her new studio in Stanstead, an abandoned quarry that she purchased in 2005, these works on paper are a continuation of the artist's *démarche* in the field of visual art.

Fine strips of paper with words printed in German run like a grid over the canvas, glued to its surface in some works, or attached loosely in other, creating a three-dimensional space.

There is the ever-present fragility, and an intellectual undercurrent that is apparent in all of Whittome's creations.

From the silent scream of a giant turtle in *Curio*, to the DNA inspired images from *Paperworks*, she invests her art with a profound emotional and metaphysical element.

Standing in the middle of the gallery, surrounded by her latest works, she is hesitant in explaining the process.

"What you have here is myself and all the vulnerability of that. It was a risk, but I thought, now I can put myself out there on that level saying 'life is fragile, words are fragile, everyone is searching now for something that probably can't be found', we are in that transitional period, so it's about that fragility. A sort of a cry out..."

Is there a connection to the *Curio* installation, to the soundless scream emanating from the open mouth of the turtle sitting on a closed copy of a Latin Dictionary?

"I think I pick up there with the cry. The turtle could be a metaphor for myself, and then the mouth open but there was no noise, it was just open. You couldn't hear it, it was muffled inside. So there is a similarity here, the tape holding the words in. The words are hidden, concealed, but there is that cry."

There is also a healing process inherent in these works. An idea of repair, of taping to hold together, not only to stifle?

"Yes, there's a tear so what do you do? You repair. We need something tangible. We need to almost be taken in our arms, that type of protection and that type of warmth."

Was working on these latest installations a healing process for the artist herself?

"Everything that I am is in my work. My intelligence, everything through my experience. I process it and give it in my work. As an individual, it's totally different. The artist, the work and the individual are so separate, and maybe through the work there is some intelligence that tell you this is the tone."

The exhibition is very quiet, monochromatic, somewhat in defiance of or deference to the profound message it carries. Was she not afraid it might not come through?

"Certainly not everyone is going to get that, because the Internet has made visual art so banal. It sucked the life out of visual arts because people go on line to see an exhibition. We are in a bad patch right now, but it will come back. It has to come back.

"I find that in silence and non-action and stillness I can understand and feel those things. And what I'm going to do with them is another thing. Individually we all have to contribute to that. I reached a point in my life where I ask, what can I do now to contribute and still remain myself and still add something to what is already there."

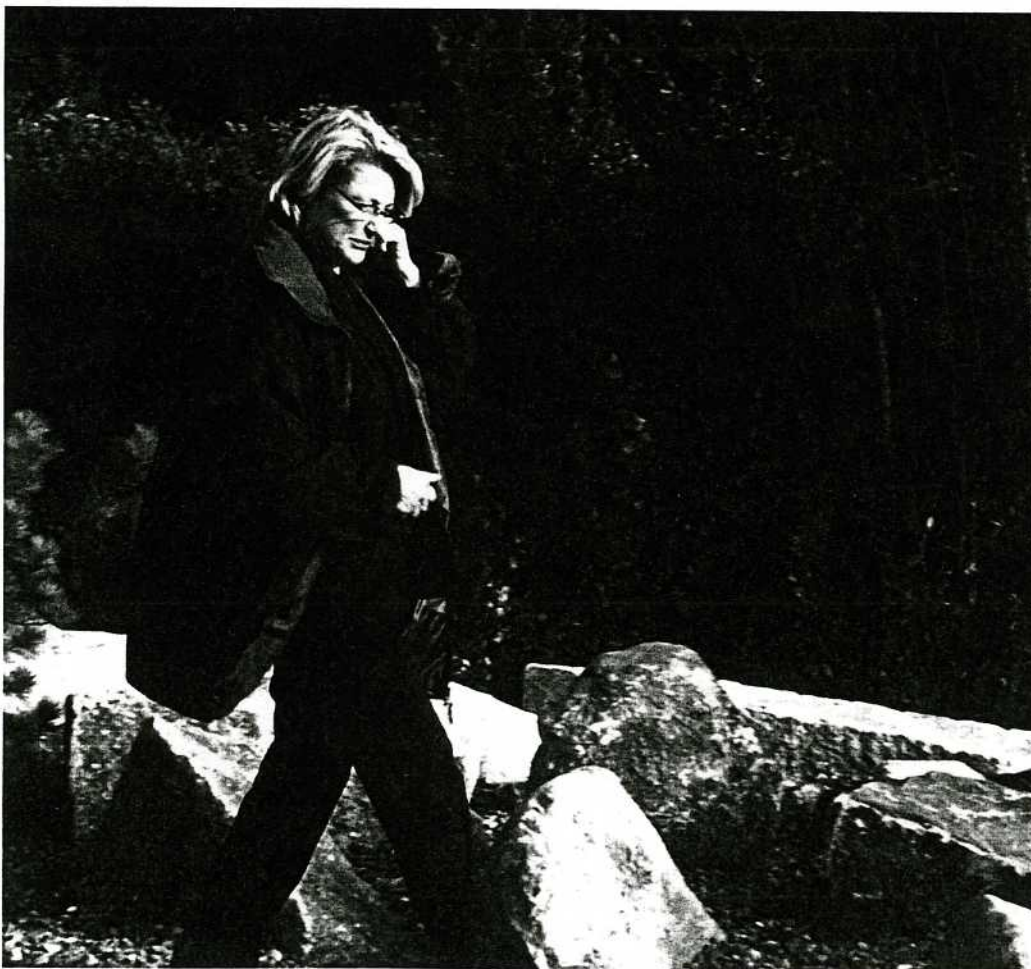
For an artist, what does it mean to contribute?

"Realising that as an artist is to hang in there and just keep working, and go as deep as you can in where you've chosen to be and just wait.

"I see it through mythology. If you're going to jump on the back of that tiger, you've got to be able to hang on to it. So make sure, if you do that, you have to grab the tail and not fall off.

"It's a long, long ride."

Dorota Kozinska



Carrière Ogden,
Stanstead, 2005
Photo: Françoise Cloutier