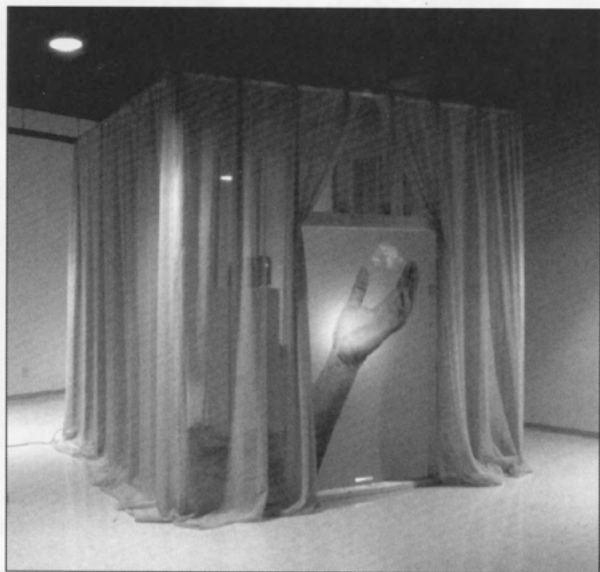


Bodies of Knowledge:

The Counterdiscursive Art of Elizabeth MacKenzie



By **SUSAN GINGELL**

I. A Present Encounter

ENTER THE PHOTOGRAPHERS GALLERY IN SASKATOON and if Elizabeth MacKenzie's *Radiant Monster* (1996) is up and running¹ you will hear a whooshing tom-tom beat before you see the installation. When you walk into the exhibition space, your eye vaguely takes in a large architectural structure of two-by-fours, suggesting a house when the framer's work is done but the finish carpenter won't be needed for a long time yet. You notice the filmy beige drapery that softens the rough pine lumber of this room within a room, but your eye is drawn to a video recording of an ultrasound examination of a fetus displayed in a blunted pie-wedge shape, familiar from the radar screen. Your mind finds confirmation of your first impression that the whooshing sound is like the fetal heartbeat heard on a monitor in the labour room of a hospital. The eye registers the large-scale photograph below the radar screen: the image of a cupped hand, luminous on its upper surface and ambiguous in gender.

The juxtaposition of moving and still pictures prompts the mind to creative connection. Is this hand, strangely familiar, the inverse image of the penile digit of God reaching out to touch Adam into life in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting? Who might be in the palm of whose hand, even if the connections are not visible? Control, after all, works better when it operates unseen. The whooshing beat continues in unchanging rhythm, and the fascination of human life *in utero* draws your eye back to the ultrasound

scan, which dwells for a space on the ribs, then moves again to reveal ... a face. My God, a human face. In the womb. You're seeing a human face in the womb, through the wonders of medical technology. And hearing a tiny heartbeat, magnified and insistent with life.

But wait a minute. This is a fetus, a not yet human baby, and images like this are central to anti-abortion, Right-to-Life propaganda. Alerted, you ask, so where is the mother in all this? And where, for that matter, the father? And that tom-tom sounds relentless after a time. The steady throbbing suddenly seems to you like the insistent demands of young children on the mother. And you look for her, but *her* human face is not there. Displaced, replaced by the fetal face, as medical technology has transformed sound waves of a frequency above what is audible for humans into visual images in a way that effaces the mother. The maternal torpedoed by a technology born in the theatre of war. A different kind of operation altogether than that which takes place in the examining rooms and operating theatres of the contemporary hospital. Or is it? You think of the human body spied on in its most intimate places—Big Brother is watching; so you've found a form of the Father, if not the father—the body bombed with cobalt, assaulted by drugs, invaded, mutilated. But you remind yourself that, in medicine, recovery is the goal.

And you wonder if the mother can be recovered? Under the filmy skin that clothes the spare pine frame, you discern the bonehouse that gives room to the fetus, but this is more rigid structure than organic form. More motherhood than mother? you wonder, as Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* surfaces in your mind. Motherhood the institution within which the individual's experience of being a mother occurs, constraining her, giving a shape to her days and nights, a shape engineered by patriarchy. (The Father found out again.) The lumber uprights now are bars that hold the invisible mother prisoner, and that sound is beating, beating, in your ears. And the camera that travels over the fetal shape again and again, finds a body so different from the maternal bonehouse that it might be an alien life, a monster that has taken up residence there.

You discover another possible trace of the mother in the words projected from slides on a screen below the video of the fetus and the photo of the hand. Her voice made visible but inaudible, drowned out by the beat of the being whom sound makes visible. Yet if you read

ABOVE
Elizabeth MacKenzie,
Radiant Monster
(1996), installation
at The Photographers
Gallery, Saskatoon.
Photo: Judy Bowyer.

the text displayed line by line can you not reconstruct the mother who has named this tiny being occupying the territory that is her body? "Invisible Stranger Mine/This Radiant Monster/Her Dreaded Beloved/That Enchanting Tyrant/Our Dangerous Angel/These Dazzling Fictions/Adorable Demon You." Motherhood as ambiguous experience.

Other mothers named on the card on the gallery wall: artist-mother Elizabeth MacKenzie, who has birthed this *Radiant Monster*, and dedicated it to her children Lucy, Jack, and Alice; and Sue Hamilton, another Edmonton woman, who shares with MacKenzie the experience of having given birth to a live child and then losing her baby. And then you know where you've seen that cupped hand before: in "A Presence Marked by an Absence" (1994),² MacKenzie's bookwork that encloses that image, imprinted with a baby's foot, along with text, in the skin of translucent pages. Your mind moves to connect those (onion)skin(ny) pages, which signify the obscuring of relation when a dear one dies, to the curtain skin of *Radiant Monster*. And moves on to discover the trace of the now absent one—a footprint presence on the opening translucent page of the bookwork—echoed in the fetal presence imprinted as ultrasound image on the (nearly) absent mother's skin in the installation.

As you leave, the fetal image continues to move, alive and at the centre of attention for as long as the installation remains in the field of your vision. The mother once more disappeared by technology. The first and last impressions you have are those you have heard as the fetal heartbeat, the sound of which you have made your own kind of sense. (If you had an opportunity to ask MacKenzie about the "heartbeat," you would discover that the intrauterine audiotape records the sound of blood moving through the mother's arteries—her body's lullaby to the fetus, a security blanket of sound that pediatricians think will calm the newborn launched into the alien world beyond the mother's body—but you would find too that MacKenzie has anticipated this misinterpretation, calculated this effect of the radical uncertainty at the interface of organic and technological in the space of pregnancy.) But you have made your sense of the disembodied sound just as medical technology has made its meanings from sound waves it transforms into wavering visible outlines. The image vague and shifting, as if there were a thin, beige curtain over the camera lens.

II. Reconstructing the Past

I HAVE ATTEMPTED TO RECREATE THE EXPERIENCE OF SEEING AND interpreting *Radiant Monster* to show how the mind is kept mobile by the multiple indeterminacies and ambiguities of MacKenzie's work. Despite the viewer's inability to fix meanings of specific aspects of her art, the counter-patriarchal discursive effect of her juxtaposition of aural, visual, and textual images is undeniable.

For nearly two decades now, Elizabeth MacKenzie has been convening viewers in exhibition spaces, confronting them with visual images and text, inviting them to feel and think in response to what they see. Training at the Ontario College of Art from 1974 to

1979, she found her mostly male instructors still grounded in a macho aesthetic that held painting to be an essentially male activity (the painterly equivalent of the pen is penis writerly equation to which Margaret Atwood calls attention in *The Handmaid's Tale*), though in the world beyond the College women's art was being celebrated as never before. A formative moment for MacKenzie came with her visit to a National Gallery exhibition of Joyce Wieland's quilts, which taught her that art could be something other than the representation of universal ideas confined to media culturally coded male. MacKenzie thus found a space within the OCA's Experimental Arts division, and began working in video, a medium which she found nurtured the narrative element in art that minimalist modernism had effectively banished from the world of painting. Spending a year in New York at the OCA's off-campus program exposed MacKenzie to a gallery scene intensely interested in conceptual art and the blurring of traditional boundaries between sculpture, painting, and drawing. The artists she encountered there acquired whatever knowledge they needed to work in a particular medium without devoting themselves to any one exclusively, a pragmatic attitude to method MacKenzie was herself to adopt.

An early work in video, *I am an artist. My name is ...* (1986), was motivated by a circumstance that replicated MacKenzie's experience at OCA. Commuting out to York University with art professor Judith Schwarz, who had invited her to speak with her students, MacKenzie listened to her friend talk about her department's plan to buy yet another film about men speaking about painting. At a time when so many women were working in the medium, female artists' exclusion from discourse about art practice was frustrating to both women, and within the hour of travel a counterdiscursive collaborative project was planned. Mindful of the way women experience difficulty staking claim to the status of artist, MacKenzie and Schwarz decided their video would be a talking heads series of women artists going public with the scandalous admission that they were both women and artists. "Hi, my name is Henry, and I'm an alcoholic" echoes ironically behind the formulaic self-presentation of the 102 women artists who participated in the project. MacKenzie and Schwarz's decision not to edit the resulting four-hour document but to let the female artists' speech and presence communicate with viewers as directly as possible is testament to the two women's belief that their role was to create the circumstances that would empower women to represent themselves as artists whose practices could legitimately command public interest. Process was as important as product.

The project was also MacKenzie's first professional experience of collaborative work. "I like to work with other artists ... I usually have a collaborative work on the go while I'm working on individual projects," MacKenzie said in a telephone conversation. "Engaging with other artists helps pull me out of my own methodology," she explains, adding that collaborating allows her to be intimate with another artist in a way that is uncommon outside of art school.³

In 1995 MacKenzie collaborated on another video project, this time with Saskatoon artist Ruth Cuthand.

Notes

1. Elizabeth MacKenzie's installation, *Radiant Monster*, was displayed at The Photographers Gallery, Saskatoon, from September 9 to October 5, 1996.

2. Elizabeth MacKenzie, "A Presence Marked by an Absence," *Blackflash* 12.2 (Summer 1994): pp. 7-14

3. Elizabeth MacKenzie, telephone interview, January 4, 1997. All quotations and opinions attributed to MacKenzie have been excerpted from this interview, unless otherwise noted.

Though MacKenzie joked about recycling and her being an ecofeminist when I asked her about the recurrence in her next exhibition of the image of the hand holding the egg, its reappearance is clearly indicative of the continuity of her concern with women's bodies and the bodies of knowledge about them.

Word for Word explores the two women's attempts to reclaim the lost tongues of their mothers, French in MacKenzie's case, Cree in Cuthand's. A polished product again not being the point of the video, the women made no attempt to correct the grammatical errors in their written transcriptions of what they say, just as they do not gloss over their stumbling attempts to speak the languages they are struggling to recover. The result is decidedly hard on tutored ears, but the point of the film is to represent what has been lost and to signify both the gap between mother and daughter, and what must be risked to bridge it. Treating a serious subject, the video doesn't lack the wit and playfulness that characterize MacKenzie's work generally, offering viewers the image of a teapot standing beside a can of Habitant pea soup to suggest what it was like for MacKenzie's mother to live between two languages. Because the film also addresses MacKenzie's attempt to communicate with her own daughter, who is enrolled in a French immersion school, as well as to set her situation into play with Cuthand's, the video ends with a *Sesame Street*-style dialogue between a reddish-brown sock puppet speaking fluent Cree and a white one speaking fluent French.

Video was not, however, the only medium with which MacKenzie experimented in New York. She began to work there with the projection of silhouettes onto walls, drawing their outlines onto the mural surface. Interested in the way characters move into and out of situations in Egyptian friezes, she explored the potential of static images in sequence to create narrative. The drawn projections made it difficult for viewers to determine where the silhouetted objects were placed, where the representation was coming from. But for an artist whose gender set her in ambiguous relationship to her profession, the opportunity to experiment with visual ambiguity was irresistible. The art and the artist's situation were intimately related.

Early solo exhibitions, like 1980's "Drawings of a Certain Nature" at the Mercer Union Gallery in Toronto and "Intervening Moments" at the YYZ artist-run space she helped found, saw MacKenzie playing visually and textually in the space of ambiguity, the "certain nature" of the first exhibition's title simultaneously referencing claims to secure authority in interpreting what the viewer sees and the vagueness that fails to specify what the certain nature is.

The political potential of her work on walls came to the fore in 1986, when MacKenzie decided to use her art to counter the Right-to-Lifers' loud chanting and placard claims made outside the Morgenthaler Abortion Clinic in Toronto. Women who made their way through or around the clamouring, hostile protesters outside the three-storey converted row house found themselves entering a cold, empty space with a male security guard. The ground floor had been cleared because of things being thrown through the windows. MacKenzie wanted to fill this war-zone space with "presences in support of their [the abortion-seeking women's] right to be there," she tells me. MacKenzie and her collaborator Anna Gronau began their work by interviewing clinic workers, immigrant women's groups, and people at Native women's centres. The aim was to supplement their knowledge of why White

middle-class women might have abortions with first-hand information about why other women would seek them and what the fuller context of their lives was. Equipped with this information, the artists set to work to make the clinic spaces more welcome. Inside the front door near floor-level, they drew running shoes strewn on a floor. On one wall, life-sized women of Asian, African, and European descent were ranged on a couch; friezes of women's heads surmounted doorways and filled in other blank spaces. Over a fireplace, family portraits were clustered, depicting the many configurations of family that are the reality in contemporary Canada. Perfume bottles and hairbrushes decorated the walls in bathrooms. Though the main intent was to make the images as "warm and sweet as possible," MacKenzie explained to me, the difficult situation the clinic clients faced was also acknowledged in an image of two hands, one of which clutched a crumpled piece of paper while the other held a telephone. These images were supplemented by texts in many of the languages the women using the clinic spoke.

In very different contexts, first the Laurentian University Museum and Arts Centre in Sudbury and then an empty warehouse space at 1087 Queen Street in Toronto, MacKenzie developed her work on walls and her understanding of what it meant to be a woman. People passing the Toronto installation of *Identification of a Woman* (1986) couldn't help but notice the spotlight, larger-than-life, rather wild-haired woman's head looking out at them through glasses that magnified her eyes to a remarkable size. MacKenzie called further attention to this reversal of the usual visual dynamic that positions woman as object of the male gaze by picturing the woman adjusting her glasses, or perhaps about to take them off, thus alluding to the filmic cliché of a woman's sexuality becoming apparent when she removes her glasses. The active spectator becomes passive spectacle, a looker only in the reduced sense of being good-looking. Placing this representation immediately adjacent to another that disrupts traditional sight-lines reinforces the resistance to the appropriative male gaze. The *profile perdu* image of the same woman looks at a headless and footless nude female figure holding a camera whose eye looks out from her crotch, just level with her observer's face. The suggestion of a closed female visual economy cannot, however, efface the reality that its disposition is determined by values in an absent but still powerful patriarchal economy. MacKenzie's use of herself as model for the nude and other images in *Identification of a Woman* was her response to the problem that, however feminist the context of representation, the female nude will evoke previous, more exploitative views of the female body. When I asked her about the meaning of scale in her representations of women, seeking confirmation of my sense that the effect of an insistence on woman as presence wasn't a merely idiosyncratic response, MacKenzie quickly agreed, adding, "I like the idea that the women are monumental."

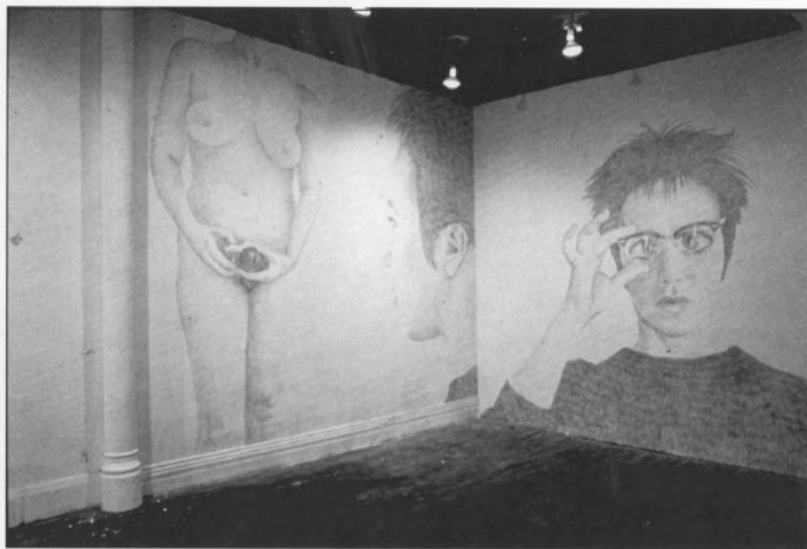
The struggle for female autonomy is wittily suggested in another image from *Identification of a Woman*: the outstretched arm of a woman whose fist clutches an iron in a way that echoes the Black Power movement's salute. The citation of this image of struggle is

further reinforced by the way the limb bursts up from the floor in what has become a characteristic trope for MacKenzie. It signifies women's grounding in specific spaces, the physicality of woman becoming one with building acting as a reminder of our embodied condition. Analogously, arms jutting down from a ceiling evoke ironic memories of a male God reaching down to his creations below, though His arm is sometimes replaced in MacKenzie's vision by the arm of a woman.

MacKenzie's work is always site-specific even when installations bearing the same title are mounted in different places. In the Toronto incarnation of *Identification of a Woman*, power lines ran both across and down the walls, dividing the space in ways that MacKenzie invested with meaning. The iron(ic) power salute, which stretched across the horizontal dividing line to end near the ceiling, dominated and was separated from two previous images confined to the lower half of the wall in a quasi-narrative series of female development. The opening image of a hand holding an egg between thumb and forefinger was confined in the lower left box of the triptych in a way that spoke of the constraints of woman's reproductive biology, even while the simple harmony of the graceful lines suggested the positive aspects of creativity, bodily and artistic. The central panel depicted a slight, open-faced girl whose shoulders are hunched forward by her arms angling down into her unseen lap. Despite the gentle smile, the girl seems cramped in her space, and the angle of her arms is echoed in those of the woman she will become, the woman holding the camera over her genitalia in rejection of the male assumption of the right of access to women's sexuality.

Though MacKenzie joked about recycling and her being an ecofeminist when I asked her about the recurrence in her next exhibition of the image of the hand holding the egg, its reappearance is clearly indicative of the continuity of her concern with women's bodies and the bodies of knowledge about them. A reminder that meaning is always contextual, never fixed, is created by the image's semantic being altered by its place in the 1987 installation, *Eating Virtue*. MacKenzie investigates Western women's troubled relationship to food in *Eating Virtue* by juxtaposing simple images of the preparation and consumption of food, images that affirm the pleasures of eating, with polysemous verbal texts (consider "FOOD RULES," for example) that refer to the values now associated with eating disorders. The disembodied anorexics' and bulimics' voices that speak from the walls testify to lives ruled by food, but also to the control the anorectic exercises over it: "The food must be eaten quickly so it is no longer dangerous" reads the text below an arm angling down from the ceiling to offer the iconic apple of temptation. The admission "I'd time myself to make sure that five full minutes pass between each bite of food" captions the image of a hand holding an ice-cream cone well away from the body.

The most memorable image of the installation, however, depicts a woman licking a plate. MacKenzie confessed to me that making public this image of herself shamed her because "it's me talking about my hunger, my desire." Cindy Richmond, who in 1990 curated *Eating Virtue* for Regina's Mackenzie Gallery, contextualizes this confession when she explains the



effect of the interplay of images and verbal text in the show: "the conflict [is] between the pervasive demands of media representations in which women cater to the needs and pleasures of others, and the apparently less significant claims of women's own personal needs and pleasures.... are we being asked to desire one thing for others, and another for ourselves?"⁴ MacKenzie's mode of working here, as in previous and subsequent shows, has its own politic. Projecting photographic images and then drawing in graphite on walls that will be white-washed after the exhibition is her way of resisting the commodification of art. Richmond argues that MacKenzie's work "endures as an exploration of a concept, not as an object which has its value determined by the laws of supply and demand as they operate in the commercial art market."⁵

The concepts explored in MacKenzie's MFA exhibition "Invisible/Stranger/Mine" (1993) were the "panoptics of pregnancy"⁶ and the binary of the mechanical/technological and the organic. Theorist Len Findlay, who served as an examiner of the show and supporting paper, found MacKenzie's method admirably adapted to her meaning.⁷ Commenting on her use of the technology of the pencil to copy photographic images by drawing on the wall, Findlay names her strategy "defiant infantilism." It evokes childlike practices of transgressive drawing on walls and mechanically following silhouettes or cutouts to create recognizable images as well as more adult graffiti. Thus, MacKenzie puts into productive tension the infant/adult binary, Findlay claims, and evokes a whole history of art education that involved a pattern of moving from copying the work of the Masters, through higher forms of mimesis, to the rare achievement of the original work of creative genius. MacKenzie refuses to participate in this tradition, thereby "staging her own vulnerability" to the judgements of viewers and critics schooled in its values, even as she reveals her knowledge of the visual art canon by her ironic citation of the *Venus de Milo* in her truncated image of the woman with the blurred face and a fetal ultrasound image projected onto her belly.

"Invisible/Stranger/Mine" is part of a continuing exploration of pregnancy in which the *Radiant Monster* and *With Child* (1991) installations occupy other points on the continuum. The particular anxieties of

Notes

4. Cindy Richmond, "Disordered Desire," *Elizabeth MacKenzie*, exhibition catalogue (Regina: Mackenzie Art Gallery, 1991), p. 3
5. Richmond, p. 4
6. Elizabeth MacKenzie, "Spacemen and Invisible Women," MFA thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1993, p. 17.
7. Len Findlay, personal interview, January 9, 1997. All opinions and quotations attributed to Findlay have been excerpted from this interview.

ABOVE

Elizabeth MacKenzie, detail (view of S.E. corner), *Identification of a Woman* (1986), installation, graphite on walls at 1087 Queen Street West, Toronto.

Notes

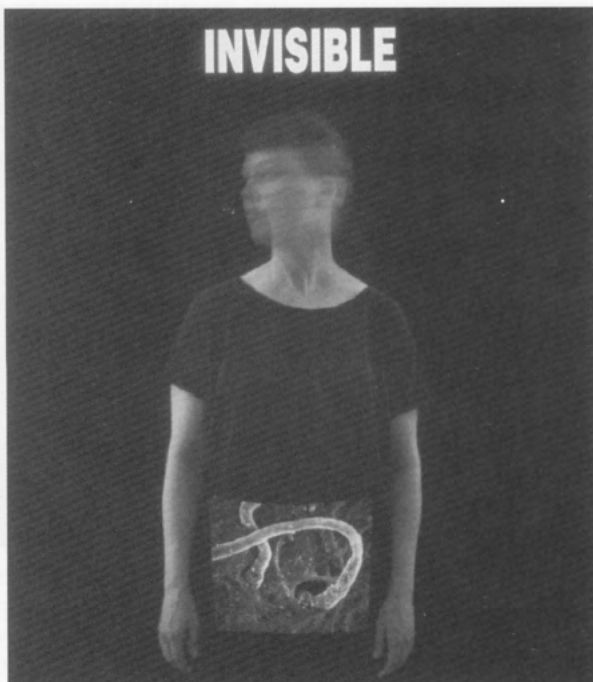
8. Patricia Yaeger, "The 'Language of Blood': Towards a Maternal Sublime," *Reimagining Women: Representations of Women in Culture*, ed. Shirley Neuman and Glennis Stephenson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 89.
9. MacKenzie, "Spacemen and Invisible Women," p. 9.
10. MacKenzie, "Spacemen and Invisible Women," p. 32.
11. MacKenzie, "Spacemen and Invisible Women," p. 31 & n. 85.
12. MacKenzie, "Spacemen and Invisible Women," p. 31.
13. MacKenzie, "Spacemen and Invisible Women," p. 32.
14. MacKenzie, "Spacemen and Invisible Women," pp. 35-36.

Author's Acknowledgements

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ABOVE

Elizabeth MacKenzie, detail, *Invisible/Stranger/Mine* (1992), cibachrome prints. From the 1993 exhibition "Invisible/Stranger/Mine," Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, University of Saskatchewan. Photo: Grant Kernan.



the artist becoming mother, fearing that her reproductive creativity might abruptly end her artistic productivity, are brought to a transition fraught with tension for any woman. Developing Julia Kristeva's insights in *The Powers of Horror*, Patricia Yaeger explains that "in the act of giving birth women splinter the concept of personhood, become the wound in humanity, for they encounter the world both as speaking and reproductive beings."⁸ The ambiguous identity of the pregnant woman made her an irresistible subject for MacKenzie when she became pregnant herself.

As MacKenzie remarks in the paper she wrote to accompany her Master's exhibition, "As an artist I am trying to recuperate images of the unborn to suit my own needs and understandings of my pregnancies. I am at once offended and engaged by these images which seem to deny my very existence. I refuse to be left out of the picture in relation to my own reproductive identity and experience."⁹ The offence comes from the way medical technologies have voided the authority of the woman's own knowledge of her pregnant body, and fetal photography has, as MacKenzie explains, "developed without any apparent concern for the inclusion of the subjective experience of pregnancy."¹⁰ MacKenzie's knowledge that Right-to-Lifers have appropriated fetal photography for their purposes, acting as voice for the "rights of the unborn" while the subject who already has a voice (the pregnant woman) struggles to make her voicing of her needs heard,¹¹ clarifies the tension between the inaudible mother's voice represented in the silent verbal text of *Radiant Monster* and the loud whooshing beat whose broadcasting is designed for the comfort of the fetus. Moreover, "when fetal photography is framed as the representation of 'Life Before Birth' [as it was for example in the famous *Life* magazine photo-essay of April 30, 1965] only the life which is *developing* within the process (the fetus) is referred to,"¹² so that even an apparently politically neutral representation of the fetus turns out to be anything but. This background makes clear the reason for the blurred face of the

woman in MacKenzie's "Invisible/Stranger/Mine" exhibition, the torso-only representations of the women in *With Child*, and the only vaguely human body of the mother in *Radiant Monster*.

The images of the autonomous fetus floating in outer space in "Invisible/Stranger/Mine" and *With Child* cite the representations in popular culture of the fetus as spaceman, "floating in a black field, interrupted by tiny pinpricks of light, very much like 'outer space' that gained significant currency through the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*."¹³ But the way *With Child* places the image of its tiny, independent spaceman in the dark at one end of a mural at whose other end is the giant luminous image of a pregnant woman's abdomen held by her hands, and the inclusion of a huge inscription of "Mommy" on a room divider, insist on reclaiming woman's life as the central one in pregnancy. At the same time, the scale of the female figures is, as MacKenzie explained on the phone, both a way of representing "the extreme transformation of your body in pregnancy" and a reference to the huge place mothers have in our lives: "They're always much bigger than we are ... I find them frightening."

III. Looking to the Future

TALKING ABOUT THE PROJECT ON WHICH SHE'S CURRENTLY AT work, an investigation into the most extreme metamorphoses of the body in pregnancy and death linked to Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque and grotesque, MacKenzie reports that she's thinking carefully about scale. Intent on making her viewers uncertain about the exact size of the images they will see when they enter the dark womb-like space she's building, MacKenzie means this uncertainty to be metaphoric of the pregnant woman's struggle to re-learn her body boundaries. We use our own bodies as a way to measure another's body, so when we find a body that is literally represented in a way that suggests its link to our own but its size insists on a difference from our own, we become disoriented, MacKenzie explains. And so the carnival ride of pregnancy is one for which she will provide a ticket.

MacKenzie told me that she'll never give up her interest in pregnancy, so a passage in her "Spacemen and Invisible Women" prompts me to wonder about the direction her on-going project of representing the pregnant body will take. She asserts, "Rather than creating an extended and fictional perceptual capacity based on the position of the fetus [to whom subjectivity is ascribed in anti-Choice propaganda], the capacity to imagine oneself as two within one should be investigated. Simultaneity and ambiguity are aspects of pregnancy which should be engaged with rather than denied."¹⁴ If her valuable and necessary work on pregnancy to date has been primarily counterdiscursive in nature, created to contest patriarchal representations or erasings of the pregnant woman, the work of imaging the positive alternatives that no longer primarily reference patriarchal images remains to be done. I'd buy a ticket for that ride any time. ●

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