



Mining Beauty

Frances
Ferdinand

As an exhibiting artist, primarily as a painter for the past thirty years, my work has always been driven by thematic content whether personal, social or political. Whatever the theme there is a search for the veracity of the subject and spiritual connections between the artist and the viewer.

“Mining Beauty”, an exhibition encompassing works a decade apart, reveals my ongoing interest in concepts of female beauty and fashion. It presents a link to where I have been and points to the direction my work is heading in.

The “*Embodied Ideals*” series gleaned source material from Western haute couture fashion images and fine art paintings from late 19th to mid-20th century. Through discovering High Fashion advertisement images in early modern American fine art journals, I was led to explore the ways in which Art and Fashion inhabited each others worlds. Through juxtaposition I could explore their commonalities in presenting the female subject as an object of beauty, desire and commodity within the social, cultural, and historical constructs of the time. In drawing attention to the viewer’s gaze I could question whether these intersecting spheres continue today and are still subject to male approval. The super-imposition of text was intended to add another layer of commodification to the work. These diptychs were intended to allow for a re-appraisal of distinctions maintained between “art” and “advertising”, “high” and “popular” culture, as well as a re-assessment of ideals shared by both the fashion and art worlds.

At this stage in my career, I have become more reflective and drawn to the roots of family and early life as a vehicle for exploring identity and memory. Many childhood memories involve sewing with my mother, and this combined with a continued interest in fashion, has made me realize the current work re-visits the same themes but presents them from an alternate perspective.

The present work explores Feminine Beauty and Fashion through “mining” my personal history amongst other source materials. By collecting and combining remembrances of feelings and occurrences, physical documents and materials, I weave a narrative “cloth” linking childhood to the present. The ‘paisley’ motif becomes a metaphor for my own migration. Its evolution became symbolic of mine as a ‘hybridized’ Sri Lankan Canadian. The sewing “toolbox” of measuring tape, pins, buttons, bobbins and fasteners, are re-purposed in the works and also act as metaphor. Within the sewing process a tissue paper pattern is used and discarded. Here it is re-purposed, its transparency and fragility signifying a transitory state. The shapes of the patterns, combined with overlaid imagery allude to the absent body, one that exists in memory.

The Artist as embodied through a “dress” is now feminine subject and object of the artwork. The fashion presented is homespun, often iconic, the female identity presented as a piecing together of events and memory, the gaze inward, the beauty residing in the self-revelation.



The historical development of painting and the representation of the human form are almost synonymous. Go ahead: go back, say, 13,000 years ago, and to a place that is colloquially known as *The Cave of Hands* in Patagonian Argentina, and look at the shape of a human hand, dozens of them outlined onto a cave wall, stenciled and sprayed: some of the very first images, the first expressions of an aesthetic sense of an “I”. However partial, however incomplete, they are arguably a representative part of the birth of the figurative impetus.

Frances Ferdinands aesthetically explores the figure. Even in this day and age, there's still something really rather subversive about that. The aesthetic depiction of the figure – and by that I mean the depiction of the human body, whether clothed or not – is fraught with potential repercussions. The body is, after all, a bit of cultural landmine; one misstep, and things can blow up in your face pretty damn quick as those who are only just barely tolerant of its representation – whether for truly hardcore religious reasons or otherwise – slam the hammer down.

It's because the body is loaded with baggage, of course, enveloped as it is in a thick haze of associations (sexual and otherwise), connotations, references... It's heavily coded, in short, and part of that coding – even perhaps a very large part of that coding – directly involves the stuff of which we clad it: textiles.

And here's where Frances Ferdinands comes into her own. As a painter, her work took her directly into that world of textiles and the narrow, more intensely coded realm that is fashion. Specifically she became interested in how fashion is advertised, how it markets itself to a larger world, how its images coerce us into buying into a specific dream, into consuming a specific, manufactured myth. Out of that came a series of diptychs juxtaposing images based, on the one hand, on old advertisements in which fashion is foregrounded as a sales mechanism (and which includes, of all things, a toilet paper advertisement in which clothing and the cultural message it inevitably conveys is cleverly set front and centre), and images based on some of the great works of art on the other.



Balcony

The two halves of *Balcony* explain it better. The eye traverses a split field that is almost aesthetically binocular in nature. The scene is titular: a balcony, in both halves, a seated woman resting her hands along its rail in both halves, a standing male figure as background in both halves. The left image has been mined and reworked from a painting by Monet, the right an image mined and equally reworked from the world of magazine advertising. From fashion.

But they're really both about textile-become-fashion-become-aesthetic sign, in a way: the scrupulous clothing, the overture of opulence and elegance, and perhaps even the merest hint of bored decadence. Oh, and I've almost neglected to mention the visual inclusion and traverse across the discrepant halves of the piece by a critically important line of text: “*the most beautiful of all lies.....*”

It's actually incomplete, a quote from the French composer Claude Debussy that is absent, a significant word. In the original it reads “*art is the most beautiful of all lies,*” but Ferdinands renders it partial, for art the noun, art the verb, even, is right there before us, foregrounded, backgrounded, utterly present. It is, of course, the very context of things, and in a bit of a twist, in literalizing Debussy's thoughts, Ferdinands indulges in a bit of “lying” herself. What we see before us isn't a visually representative quote of a great work of art and a minor bit of fashion advertising. Ferdinands has switched things up a bit, altering one of the figures (and I won't divulge which). You wouldn't know this unless I told you, and that's part of the point. Deception works. The lies can be all too easily taken for truths.

Bewitched, of the same series, shifts things ever so slightly. Still working with the diptych form, Ferdinands makes the canvases transitional rather than juxtaposing. The eye smoothly traverses from one side to the other without abrupt discontinuity interjecting itself. But again, it's all about the figure, all about the problematic relationship between art – between what we know of as fine art – and the tricky world of advertising (in this instance, a magazine advertisement for perfume foregrounding fashion. Two central figures, both of women, the leftmost elegant and at ease, coolly self-

absorbed even, the right wilder, caught in mid-dance, one arm extended, the other clutching her long skirt, two background figures clapping, and a male figure – transitional between the two halves of the diptych – with his head tilted back in either ecstasy or in sleep. Your call.

So solve the puzzle. Which one sells a product, which one lays claim to nothing but the aesthetic? Oh, while you're working that out, make sure you incorporate the contextualizing of the line of text that traverses the painting: "the desire of a moth for the star."

That's but two works from a series of sixteen. Older pieces, pure painting, a series now itself contextualized by a body of newer work in which Ferdinands articulates a more abstract, even sculptural vision born of the realm of fashion, of textiles.

Migration is a triptych in which things begin to come apart. By that I mean the "integrity" of the painterly plane is violated by the intrusion of small objects as Ferdinands begins moving away from pure, unadulterated image and towards the realm of the sculptural.

But we are, however, still aesthetically functioning within the parameters of a wall-hung canvas plane, and entering into the very personal world of Ferdinands' own familial migration from Sri Lanka to Canada, a process fraught with racism as authorities forced her family to provide proof of lineage dating back to the 16th century and the beginnings of Dutch habitation and economic exploitation of her country.

Simultaneously, she takes us to the very bones of fashion, the roots of textiles, in a literal way by incorporating imagery of the likes of the human skeletal structure, and in a more metaphorical way by incorporating objects, text, and the very paper patterns integral to the making of a piece of clothing. The bones. The roots.

Wallflower is more overtly representational, but pushing even harder against the delimitations of the canvas plane. The pattern is obvious: a garment, or the map of one, anyway, the



Bewitched

metaphorical DNA of fashion, the two-dimensional genotype generating the wearable thing, the phenotypical thing we would actually call fashion, the thing that is a fundamental of life. And look: there are buttons and pins. The plane is riven with them. Ferdinands poises, here, at the edge of the fully dimensional. The sculptural artifact is ready to spring forth.

And it does (and how) with *From Doilies to Dustmasks: The Poetry of Protest*. Here is the figure, fully dimensional, rendered as a garment, a dress, cladding a dressmaker's dummy. Some of what we see is what we might expect to see in something that might be worn: an elegant bodice of lace, some sheer trim along the bottom edge. But

it's deceptive. Look closer: the bodice is comprised of doilies, and the sheer trim wrought from the translucent drapery of ordinary privacy curtains.

But it's what's in between those two polar extremes that is of real, deeply historical, social and cultural importance. Ferdinands has shaped a torso out of numerous dust masks – you know, the disposable kind with the elastic strap holding it against your head.

Masks of any kind have their own enormous auras of meanings, associations and connotations, but all of it is of less importance than the role Ferdinands has assigned them here: she's researched into the history and development of women's rights in Canada, and then textually inscribed it individually onto each of the mask. So, in "1917 B.C. becomes the first province to give mothers the same legal rights as fathers regarding children," and, astonishingly, in "1940 Quebec becomes the last province to make it legal for women, excluding those from a racial minority already banned from voting in other provinces, to vote and run for office."

This, this, is the meat of it. *From Doilies to Dustmasks* enacts a narrative of the history of

women's rights as they were grudgingly given in Canada, moments and times inscribed entirely around its sculptural form, the body – the female body – encased, masked, in the unexpected textiles of the story.

Frances Ferdinands pointedly reminds us that the aesthetic is, in the end, *deeply* political. Textiles and fashion may very well *appear* to tell of cultural trivialities that seem to come and go, but actually are much more meaningful, much more deeply encoded than that.

The body may be a cultural and social landmine, but textiles are its tripwire

Frances Ferdinands shows us a path. We should pay attention and walk in her footsteps.

Gil McElroy August 2014

Gil McElroy is a poet, artist, independent curator, and art critic currently living in Colborne, Ontario.



DETAIL



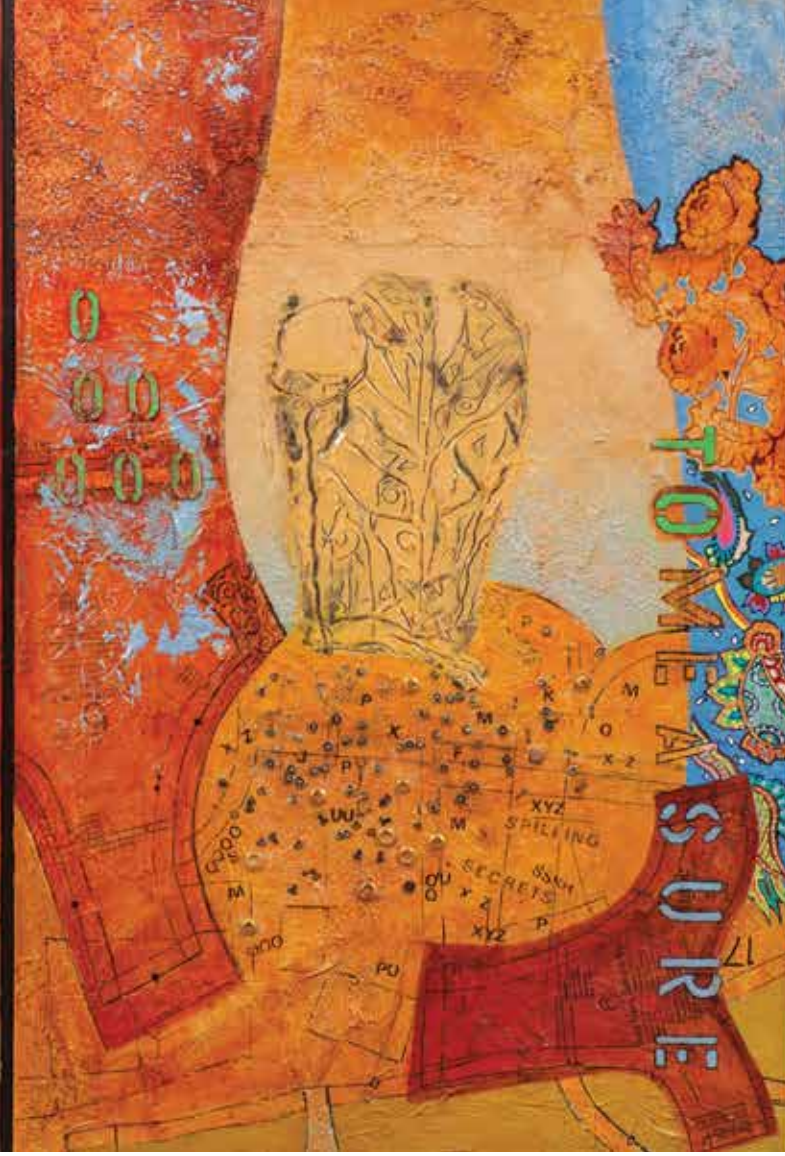
From Doilies to Dustmasks: The Poetry of Protest



America



Insider





10 Elegy



Vestments



Seduction



A-Line China

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Education:

B. ED. (1977) University Of Toronto (Visual Art & Drama)
HON. B.F.A. (1974) York University (Visual Art)
A.R.C.T. (1972) Royal Conservatory Of Music, Toronto (Piano)

Selected Grants & Awards:

Canada Council Travel Grant: 1999
Ontario Arts Council Exhibition Assistance: 2014, 2013, 2008, 2007,
2006, 2005, 2004, 2003, 2000, 1999, 1995, 1989, 1987, 1986
Ontario Arts Council Artist-In-The-School Grant: 1994, 1992,
1991, 1978
Canada Council Project Grant: 1985
Ontario Arts Council Project Grant: 1975

Publications:

Featured Artist In “*Acrylic Innovation*” – Nancy Reyner,
Northlight Books, 2010
Featured Artist In “*Rethinking Acrylic*” – Patti Brady,
Northlight Books, 2008
Co-Editor Of “*Eclectic Eve*” – Coach House Press, 1973

Residencies:

1997 Rocky Neck Art Colony, Gloucester, Massachusetts

Gallery Representation:

Propeller Centre For Visual Art, Toronto
Articsok Gallery, Toronto

Exhibitions: Solo

2013 Propeller Centre, Toronto, Ontario “*Convergence*”
2009 Lola’s Lounge, Sarnia, Ontario
“*Frances Ferdinands @ Lola’s*”
2008 Artsplace, Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia
“*Food For Thought*”
2007 Propeller Centre, Toronto, Ontario “*Food For Thought*”
2004 Buffalo Arts Studio, Buffalo, New York (U.S.A.)
“*Embodied Ideals*”
2003 Gladstone Hotel, Toronto, Ontario
“*Embodied Ideals (Preview)*”

2003 Kelowna Art Gallery, Kelowna, British Columbia “*Adrift*”
2001 Macdonnell Gallery, Toronto, Ontario “*Adrift*”
2000 Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario “*Adrift*”
2000 Ka’Ikena Gallery, Kapi’olani College, Honolulu, Hi.
(U.S.A.) “*Palm Breeze*”
1997 Gallery 13, Rocky Neck Art Colony, Gloucester, Mass.
1991 Kenneith Gallery, Sarnia, Ontario
1990 Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario
“*Frances Ferdinands 1983-1989*”
1988 Albert White Gallery, Toronto, Ontario “*Urban/ Nature*”
1987 Galerie Arpege, Collingwood, Ontario
“*Mysterious Travellers*”
1986 Albert White Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
“*Mysterious Travellers*”
1986 La Centrale (Formerly Powerhouse) Montreal,
Quebec “*War*”
1985 Kozak Gallery, Toronto, Ontario “*War*”
1981 Merton Gallery, Toronto, Ontario “*Solitary Women*”

Exhibitions: Two or Three Person

2014 Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg “*Mining Beauty*”
2010 Rouge Concept Gallery, Toronto “*Ripe*”
2008 Diamond-Newman Fine Arts, Boston, Mass. (U.S.A.)
“*Echoes Of Surrealism*”
2006 University Of Waterloo Art Gallery, Waterloo, Ontario
“*By Appearances*”
1987 Lynnwood Arts Centre, Simcoe, Ontario
“*Figurative Impact*”
1985 Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, Ontario
“*Old Wars By Young Artists*”
1982 Merton Gallery, Toronto, Ontario

Exhibitions: Selected Group

2014 Articsok Gallery, Toronto, Ontario “*Ubuntu*”
2014 Guelph Humber University Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
“*Round Robin*”
2013 Articsok Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
“*21st Century Surrealism*”
2013 Impresario, Cobourg, Ontario “*Nuwork*”
2013 Guelph Humber University Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
“*Colloquium*”
2011, 2010 Elaine Fleck Gallery, Toronto Ontario “*The Best Of...*”
2010 Toronto Image Works Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
“*Hang With The Best*”

2009 Womanmade Gallery, Chicago, Illinois (U.S.A.)
“*Cultural Memory: Transdiasporic Art Practices*”
2007 Bau-Xi Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
“*The City At Night: Tribute To Brian Kipping*”
2007 Lennox Contemporary, Toronto, Ontario
“*Double Date*” (Tableau Vivant Performance)
2006 Womanmade Gallery, Chicago, Illinois (U.S.A.)
“*Anthropomorphism*”
2006 A.K.A. Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
“*Double Date*” (Tableau Vivant Performance)
2005 Galeria Carrion Vivar, Bogota, Columbia “*Nord – Sud*”
2005 Niagara Gallery, Toronto “*Artists For Africa*”
2005 Latcham Gallery, Stouffville, Ontario “*Go Figure*”
2004 Womanmade Gallery, Chicago, Illinois (U.S.A.)
“*Fabrications*”
2001 Lieutenant Governor’s Suite, Queen’s Park, Toronto,
Ontario “*The New Spirit Of Ontario*”
1997 Granite Shore Gallery, Rockport, Mass (U.S.A.)
1996 Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario
“*Heritage Park Collection*”
1993 Passions Gallery Provincetown, Mass (U.S.A.)
1993 McIntyre Gallery Regina, Saskatchewan
1992 Galerie Ader Tajan, Paris France
“*Art Contemporain Du Canada*”
1992 Lynnwood Arts Centre, Simcoe, Ontario
“*Beyond Time & Circumstance*”
1990 Art Gallery Of Northumberland, Cobourg, Ontario
“*Contemporary Realism*”
1987 Humewood li Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1986 Byward Market Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario “*MP’s Choice*”
1984 Tatay Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
“*Six Niagara Street Artists*”

Catalogues

2014 *Mining Beauty*, Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg
2013 *Convergence*, Propeller Centre For Visual Art, Toronto
2011 *Contemporary Fine Art, (Spring Issue)* Elaine Fleck
Gallery, Toronto
2010 *Contemporary Fine Art, (Fall Issue)* Elaine Fleck Gallery,
Toronto
2008 *Food For Thought*, Artsplace, Annapolis Royal,
Nova Scotia
2007 *Double Date*, Lennox Contemporary, Toronto, Ontario
2004 *Embodied Ideals*, Buffalo Arts Studio, Buffalo, New York

2001 *New Spirit Of Ontario*, Queen’s Park, Toronto, Ontario
2000 *Adrift*, Gallery Lambton, Sarnia, Ontario
1992 *Art Contemporain Du Canada*, Galerie Ader Tajan,
Paris, France
1992 *Beyond Time & Circumstance*, Lynnwood Arts Centre,
Simcoe, Ontario
1990 *Frances Ferdinands 1983 – 1999*, Gallery Lambton,
Sarnia, Ontario
1985 *Old Wars By Young Artists*, Robert McLaughlin Gallery,
Oshawa, Ontario

Collections: Public/Corporate

Advanced Photographics, Danvers, Massachusetts
Archives Of Ontario, Toronto
Archon Construction, Toronto
Canada Life Assurance, Toronto
Cadillac-Fairview Corp., Toronto
Carrousel Holidays, Toronto
CHSLD Providence Notre-Dame De Lourdes, Montreal
City Of Markham, Ontario
Dresdner Bank Canada, Toronto
Franco-Nevada Mining, Toronto
Girig, Inc. Toronto
Gallery Lambton, Sarnia
Gerling Global Life Insurance, Toronto
Ipsos –Reid Research, Toronto
K.P.M.G., Toronto
KPM Kente Management Co., Belleville
Linda Leibel Art Source, Toronto
Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto
Music For Media, Toronto
OJCR Construction, Toronto
Remmus Textiles, Montreal
Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa
Satov Consultants, Toronto
Seamark Corporation, Gloucester, Massachusetts
Standard Broadcasting Corporation, Toronto
Tom Thomson Art Gallery, Owen Sound

Works In Private Collections in Sri Lanka, Canada and The U.S.A.

List of Works

Front Cover – *“Wallflower”*

2014, 36”H x 36”W, charcoal, tissue paper patterns, buttons, quilting pins, wallpaper, plastic toy chairs, bobbins, copper wire, Acrylic on Canvas. Mixed Media Painting. Unframed

Back Cover – *“Offering”*

2005, 36”H x 36”W, Acrylic on canvas. Unframed

“America”

2000, diptych, 36”H x 66”W, Acrylic on canvas. Framed

“Bewitched”

2000, diptych, 36”H x 54”W, Acrylic on canvas. Framed

“Balcony”

2001, diptych, 36”H x 48”W, Acrylic on canvas. Framed

“Adornment”

2003, diptych, 30”H x 66”W, Acrylic on canvas. Framed

“Insider”

2003, 48”H x 72”W, diptych, Acrylic on canvas. Unframed

“Seduction”

2004, 36”H x 72”W, diptych, Acrylic on canvas. Framed

“Offering”

2005, 36”H x 36”W, Acrylic on canvas. Unframed

“Paisley To Plaid”

triptych, 2013, 40”H x 52”W, oil stick, charcoal stick, laser prints, fabric pepel leaves, stencil with molding paste, Acrylic on Canvas. Mixed Media Painting. Framed

“Migration”

triptych, 2014, 36”H x 66”W, tissue paper patterns, laser prints, letraset, stencil, molding paste, acrylic gel, hooks & eyes, press studs, wallpaper, Acrylic on Canvas. Mixed Media Painting. Framed

“Elegy”

2014, 30”H x 30”W, oil stick, tissue paper patterns, lace, Acrylic on canvas. Mixed Media Painting. Framed

“Vestments”

2014, 30”H x 30”W, oil stick, tissue paper patterns, stencil, imprinted spools of thread, Acrylic on Canvas. Mixed Media Painting. Framed

“A-Line China”

2014, 30”H x 30”W and 10”H x 10”W, MDF board, acrylic paint, porcelain chopsticks, porcelain bowl, nails. Mixed Media Wall Relief. Unframed

“From Doilies to Dust Masks: The Poetry of Protest”

2014 Dimensions Variable. Approximately 60”H x 20” W x 20” D, doilies, dust masks, image transfers, pearls, sequins, ribbons, acrylic gel, acrylic paint, thread, sheer curtain fabric, lace, vintage wire stand. Sculpture.

“Standards” (revised)

2014 diptych 36”H x 48”W, image transfer, stencil, Acrylic on canvas. Mixed Media Painting. Framed

GRAPHIC DESIGN:

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Offering



Frances Ferdinands **Mining Beauty**

September 9–October 18, 2014
Art Gallery of Northumberland

Victoria Hall, 3rd floor
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Cobourg, ON K9A 2M2

 art gallery
of northumberland

www.artgalleryofnorthumberland.com