



in touch
Sally Michener
installation



in touch

Sally Michener
May 31 – September 27, 2009

In 1988 the Burlington Art Centre made a major commitment to their nascent ceramic collection by commissioning a large scale permanent installation for the Conservatory. At that time Sally Michener created the work 'Keeping in Touch', which consists of four life sized figure - each representing one of the four elements- earth, air, fire and water plus a totem for each figure representing the element. Sally also oversaw the construction of a series of 'plants' based on the sphere, cube, pyramid and a large grouping of stick plants which were constructed by members of the Sculptures and the Potters Guild members. For many people this work is what they first think of when speaking about the Permanent Collection at the Art Centre.

Sally Michener's interests and concerns over man's relationship to the environment, which formed the bases of the greenhouse installation, has continued and can be seen in her 2009 Courtyard Installation, 'In Touch'. In the Conservatory the work suggests that if man lives in harmony with nature the result will be a garden. The 2009 work "In Touch", focuses more on the viewer's responsibilities toward the environment. Elements in the greenhouse are more personal – the use of figures, each with a face (including that of the artist) that was made from a life mask, the bright multi-coloured 'plants', and the more intimate spacing of the figures nestled in the greenery. The courtyard presents a more distanced view of nature. The figures are now fragments, one body part stacked on another, or have been reduced to a stick form that may or may not have a body part such as a nose, eye or ear on it. There is also a reduction in the amount of colour used, being limited to white with just a touch of orange on the form that Michener calls a flower and yellow on the three sighting devices. Finally the forms that the artist refers to as rocks, which are situated in the pool, resemble the moulds that are used to reproduce ancient Greek or Roman statues. These rocks (while they are the negative) of a form often appear to be a positive volume, making the viewer question exactly what one is seeing.

'In Touch' is a work focusing in on the senses, primarily sight and ones' ability to comprehend the world around us. For this installation Michener has created her sighting devices – forms that frame and highlight certain aspects of the work. There are three categories of devices. First there are the three white forms. Each of these is based on a simple geometric figure: the square, the circle and the triangle. These three basic geometric forms have always been linked to the arts as symbols of the ideal. They have influenced artists from the ancient Classical world, through the Renaissance all the way to modern art starting with Cezanne. Each of these devices is focused in on a body part of one of the stacked figure columns. The three yellow sighting devices (each one also referencing the square, the circle or the triangle) focus in on an element of the garden – a plant, a leaf or a vine. Finally the orange 'flower' highlights a 'rock' in the pool. To help the viewer, the artist has also provided two stools to sit on, so one can take one's time looking at the installation. These stools are decorated with parts of the face – lips, eyes ears and noses which are from casts of the face of Michelangelo's 'David'. Michener has used plaster casts of David which are used for drawing exercises in art school to create these forms.

A small version of the lips, eye, ear, and nose appears on four of the six stick figures, while a hand reaches out stacked column beside them. Here are the five senses by which we relate to the physical world. But it is not enough; we also have to understand the natural world, other people and the universal body of knowledge to make our way in the world. The sighting devices focuses us in on this, the white ones on our self and others, the yellow on the natural world and the orange on knowledge as represented by art. When one has a grasp of this, one is finally in touch with the wider world and ones place in it.

Jonathan Smith
Permanent Collection Curator



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Burlington Art Centre Hours:
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