

MAY/JUNE 1997

ART PAPERS

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TITLE: Susan Turcot

SOURCE: Art Papers 21 83 My/Je '97

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Galerie Arndt & Partner

Berlin, Germany

February 1 - March 15

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the once eastern and communist section of the city has become a mecca for industrious, adventurous, creative people. Just as New York City drew artists from all over the globe during and after World War II, Berlin offers opportunity, fosters creative freedom, and, on a more practical level, has large, inexpensive studio spaces. Susan Turcot is typical of the international artist found in Berlin now. Born in Montreal, she lived and studied in London for four years and was drawn to Berlin's energy and possibilities in 1991.

A sign of Berlin's burgeoning art world is the massive and well-organized monthly *rundgang* [walk around], in which the galleries in the *Mitte* [the center] simultaneously schedule receptions on a Saturday evening. The atmosphere is similar to the East Village in New York in the 1980s: full of excitement, galleries, and people sporting everything from mink coats to body piercing. Because of the not-yet-gentrified state of the *Mitte*, some of the exhibition spaces are recently renovated, white-walled cubes, while others are converted storefronts. During a recent *rundgang*, when I visited many galleries and saw the work of forty to fifty artists, the work of thirty-year-old Turcot stood out.

Turcot was one of eight artists whom Galerie Arndt & Partner selected from their stable to participate in an unusual project during the 1997 art season. One of the better known and established galleries in Berlin, Arndt & Partner bravely left a conventional, white-walled space in the prestigious Hackesche Höfe [Hackesche Court], and moved temporarily into what used to be the complex's transformer station. It is a small, functional, outer building typical of 1950s East German architecture. Calling it the "transmission room," the gallery has invited each of the artists to mount a one-person project or installation around a given theme and specifically for the space. To quote the gallery, the theme of "Storytellers" was "not conceived as a group show" or with "a traditional narrative format." Rather, it opens the door for artists to work with ideas--lost in our contemporary, analytical times--relating to storytellers as prophets: "the mythology of the individual," "the magic of fiction," and "re-enchanting of the universe."

To date, this is Turcot's most complex solo show (she previously concentrated on drawings or singular figures). In the small, no-frills "transmission room," four figures are

grouped together while another stands alone some eight feet away. Turcot constructs the figures primarily of wood, and then uses a variety of materials (synthetic plastic, latex, fake fur) to "clothe" or finish them. Her figures are part human, part animal (monkey, bird, or insect), creating imaginary characters that seem to be freaks of nature. One can't help but stare, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

As in her previous work, Turcot puts most of her effort and care into the carved wooden heads and faces, leaving the "bodies" or torsos as simple stick-like figures. The facial expressions range from somber and restrained to sad or silly, never melodramatic or revealing. The figure standing separately has duck-like, webbed feet covered with tongue-in-cheek bright yellow plastic "slippers." It has a monkey-like, noble expression and is bent over as if from illness, age, or worry. Of the group of four figures, two are standing, one is leaning, and the fourth is lying on the floor. The two standing figures are wearing homemade-looking garments (neat and simple) that seem to be protecting them from something (the elements, stares from people, etc.). One is clothed in a clear plastic raincoat; the other's frail frame is draped in a heavy, white fur overcoat. The leaning figure, instead of the expected feet, has amputated nubs. The artist covered these two wooden ends with metal caps skillfully, but almost callously, and with a sense of machismo--perhaps as a doctor might professionally and emotionlessly amputate a limb or attach a prosthetic. The harshness of the figure is balanced by "arms" poetically interpreted with gracefully arched wire to resemble insect wings.

The creature with insect wings leans over the most poignant figure in the installation. Dressed in a translucent, white plastic robe or cloak, the monk-like shape lies flat on the floor. The simple design of the robe is reminiscent of religious or pious clothing and the plastic material conjures up ideas of science or laboratories. Turcot carefully carves two lovely hands for this figure, but then ironically encapsulates them in plastic mitts sewn onto the robe. This contrast of warm, natural materials and human-made, synthetic products creates both unsettling and comical results.

Turcot asserts that the intent of this installation is not to be overly narrative or theatrical. However, the structure of the installation and the atmosphere of the space is very stage-like and the construction of the figures is reminiscent of puppets, with a concentration on the heads and faces that de-emphasizes the limp and lifeless bodies. Turcot "dresses" her figures as playfully as a little girl dresses her dolls or as a mother must dress and care for her child.

It is also possible that the artist is dealing with issues of otherness and cultural differences, as she herself is someone living in a foreign culture. In any case, the figures are beautifully crafted and the installation is poignant and thought-provoking. The odd combinations of materials and the hybrid species makes one think of the ageless conflict of nature vs. science, but they also question normality and strangeness. When looking at one of Turcot's duckfooted, monkey-faced figures dressed in synthetic, human clothes, one has to smile at the comedy as well as wince at the character's discomfort of being a "duck out of water," so to speak: a stranger in a foreign land.

Added material

Dana Mouton Cibulski, Paris, France

Susan Turcot, *Strangely Familiar* (detail), 1997, wood, latex, wool, plastic, and metal, dimensions variable (photo courtesy Galerie Arndt & Partner).