

Gwen Curry

UNDER THE RAMP

Gwen Curry: Under the Ramp

BY ROBIN LAURENCE

Artist's Statement (2000)

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By Robin Laurence, 2004

Gwen Curry established her reputation as a printmaker in the late 1970s, then expanded her practice to include sculpture, mixed-media installation and text-based art, as well as large-scale, serial or thematically-linked drawings, often displayed in linear sequences or grids. She has worked in a score of media,

Gwen Curry
Under the Ramp, 1985

charcoal drawing on paper
(119 x 79.5cm)
SAG 1985.09.01
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Photograph by Cameron Heryet



Gwen Curry, *Under the Ramp*, 1985, charcoal drawing on paper (119 x 79.5cm) SAG 1985.09.01 © CARCC 2004 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

including cast bronze, embossed lead, engraved fibreboard, embroidered fabric, and rich and various combinations of oil paint, oil stick, wax, graphite and charcoal on paper.

In the past, Curry has spoken about the integrated nature of her practice through two- and three-dimensional media, pointing out the sculptural aspect of the printmaking process (working on metal plates, passing them through a press) and the rendered aspect of her sculptures. The latter may be seen as a form of drawing in space because of the materials (such as graphite and oil stick) with which Curry treats their surfaces to achieve a particular and evocative patina. Often, too, there is a direct correspondence of form: the sculptures may be three-dimensional realizations of Curry's drawn forms or the drawings may depict sculpture-like objects. Her work also engages in a dialogue between drawing and relief sculpture: in her engraved, embossed or routed surfaces, text takes the place of visual representation and establishes its own formal presence and graphic aesthetic.

Born in Victoria, British Columbia in 1950, Curry completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Victoria, then earned her M.F.A. at the University of Arizona in Phoenix in 1978. Influences on her drawing practice (influences more of methodology and sensibility than of content or style) include Jim Dine, Betty Goodwin and Susan Rothenberg. Curry taught drawing and printmaking at the University of Victoria from 1978 to 1994 before turning to the full-time pursuit of her art. She lives in a semi-rural setting in Brentwood Bay, north of Victoria, and has generated themes and subject matter directly and indirectly from her surroundings.

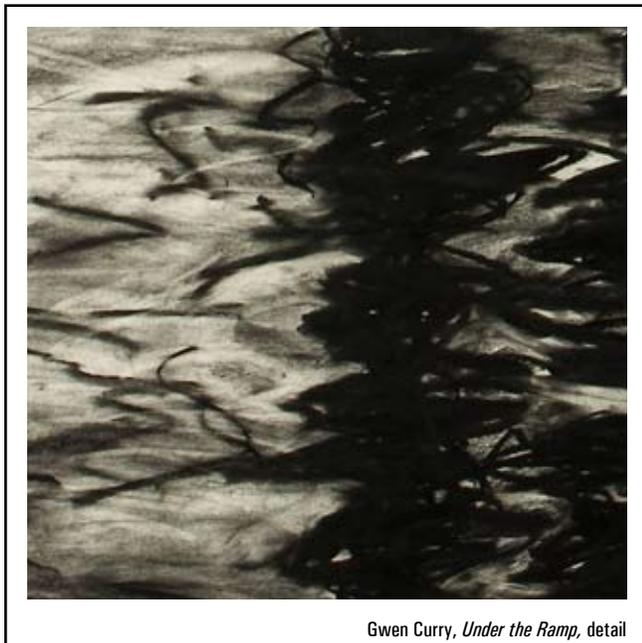
Over the past decade, Curry has examined the human interface with the natural world, focusing on our impulse to control nature through imposed names

and categories (her images and text are juxtaposed in an inventorial rather than narrative fashion), and then shifting to the destructive extremity of our dominion over the natural environment (the extinction of plants and animals as a consequence of our greed, ignorance and callousness). Both forms of listing or inventory -- identifying living species of flora and fauna, naming extinct ones -- suggest a disastrous alienation from the natural world. The progression of Curry's work in the late 1990s suggests that to name is to claim, to claim is to colonize, to colonize is to exploit and exterminate. Her art stands as a marker, both celebratory and mournful, of the richness and diversity of the natural world.

During the 1980s, Curry had been using drawing (and occasionally sculpture) to examine archetypal forms within the built environment, including doors, windows, stairways, arches, gates, and crosses. These she represented in simplified fashion, abstracted from their surroundings and flattened on paper in a way that is both expressive and austere, suggesting how the secular and the sacred interpenetrate and inform each other. She later expanded her repertoire of iconic or archetypal forms to include ladders, piers, pilings, staging towers and wharves, structures particular to the coast and significantly located "on the edge" -- where land meets water. By posing mysterious, mummy-like figures in the landscape, Curry also created an edgy outer region of metaphysical ideas and existential angst. Rather than predicating her art upon critical theory, as occurs in much postmodern practice, Curry worked intuitively, developing modernist images with a strong feeling for place. Yet her work of that period also begins to participate in the critical discourse concerning landscape as a social construction.

Although she didn't consciously understand it at the time, her large charcoal drawing, *Under the Ramp*, 1985, is a significant transitional work. It predicts her shift from the abstracted and simplified forms drawn from her imagination and from her accumulated knowledge of symbol, icon and archetype, to more realistic forms drawn from acute observation of the natural world and, eventually, to text as sign of both presence and absence. It also marks the beginning of her shift from a modernist to postmodernist approach to art making.

On first viewing, *Under the Ramp* has the appearance of a formalist study of shape, line and texture. It is moodily rendered in dusky greys and charry blacks, with an odd discordance created by the slightly skewed perspective of the stepped ramp leading



Gwen Curry, *Under the Ramp*, detail

downward from the upper edge of the composition to the floating dock. The treatment of both ramp and water is smudgy and gestural, and a sense of ominousness is created in the dark passage of water in the right foreground and the equally dark strip of forest across the distant background. There is a

suggestion here of the workings of both the conscious and unconscious minds, the former symbolized by the architectural structures, the latter by the dark, rippling water.

All the architectural forms depicted here -- ramp (which combines stairs and ladder), piling and dock -- conform to images Curry has explored before. In this work, however, which the artist describes as preliminary to a series of large oil-stick drawings, the forms are more realistic, more directly representational of elements in the coastal environment. The drawing was exhibited, along with the series of related but more abstracted and metaphysical works in oil stick, at the Surrey Art Gallery in the spring of 1985. The title of the exhibition, "Observations from the Edge", signified "both a geographic edge and a psychological edge", Curry wrote in 2000 (in her Artist's Statement for the Surrey Art Gallery Permanent Collection).

As *Under the Ramp* seems to predict, the edge might also be between the natural and built environments -- if such a separation actually exists. The thematic possibilities at this interface began to emerge in Curry's subsequent work, culminating in a notable shift to realistic drawing in 1990, when she undertook a series of large-scale "portraits" of birds. Following that, her work evolved through a more inventorial approach to flora and fauna, again employing realistic depictions but with text. In retrospect, Curry has acknowledged the importance to her career of *Under the Ramp*, writing in her Artists' Statement that, "This drawing was a precursor to an interest in my own unvarnished environment as visual and perceptual information." It was also a precursor to her evolving interest in scientific and artistic "morphologies", in knowledge systems, language systems, environmental conditions, and the charged enterprise of representation.

Artist's Statement (2000)

This work was a very interesting choice by the curator, Jane Young. My one-person show included at least 30 large oil stick drawings. All were quite symbolic in the use of forms (water, ladders, simplified human forms, forms of architecture) and dealt with a psychological and intuitive approach. The show was entitled 'Observations from the Edge' as it dealt with both a geographic edge and a psychological edge. Many of the very large works were based on the massive steel and wood forms which are evident at the ferry docks. None of these oil stick drawings, though, could be mistaken for so-called 'realistic' drawings. They were inventions based on natural and man-made forms. This drawing, 'Under the Ramp', was a kind of preliminary drawing done in charcoal that is quite realistic. I thought that it was a strange choice at the time and didn't represent my work that was predominant in the show. Since that time my work has been more aligned with that drawing than with all the other works in the show. This drawing was a precursor to an interest in my own unvarnished environment as visual and perceptual information.

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