

Lori-Ann Latremouille

LOCK AND KEY

Lori-Ann Latremouille and Surrealism

BY ED VARNEY

Artist's Statement (1990)

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By Ed Varney, 2004

As a young girl, Lori-ann Latremouille always enjoyed drawing and in the late 1970s she took a drawing course from Martin Guderna at Emily Carr College of Art and Design. Through Martin, she met the other members of the West Coast Surrealist Group, and she began to visit art galleries. It was these artists - particularly Martin and his father Ladislav Guderna, Ted Kingan, Michael Bullock, Davide Pan, Gregg Simpson, Andrej Somov, and me - who encouraged her and invited her to exhibit with the group. Even then, while she was in her teens, Latremouille's work was accomplished, bold, and seemed to rise out an easy and graceful access to the subconscious to create

Lori-Ann Latremouille
Lock and Key, 1990

oil pastel and charcoal
drawing on paper
(77 x 112.3cm)
SAG 1990.04.01

Photograph by Cameron Heryet

images which were precise and sharp, yet ambiguous and mysterious. Since then, her art has continued to amaze and delight audiences who are attuned to the surreal and to her exquisite draftsmanship. In 1988, she began a commercial relationship with the Augen Gallery in Portland, Oregon, and she has received more support from collectors and galleries in the United States than in Canada. Perhaps it is a case of the prophet having little honour in their own land, or simply that Canadian phenomenon in which an artist has to prove themselves somewhere else before they get any credit in their own country.

Although her formal education was short, she has been significantly influenced by her association with

other artists. She also began to explore art history through books and she was led to Botero, Rousseau, Picasso, Dali and M.C. Escher, all of who intrigued and inspired her.

Latremouille's working method has remained virtually unchanged during the twenty-five years that I have known her. She begins with a pencil sketch, usually of an image drawn from a dream, and then she redraws it on a large sheet of paper. She works mainly in charcoal, preferring the drama of black and white and the subtle toning possible with that medium, to create contrast, a wide tonal range, and a voluptuous rounding of forms. Sometimes colour is used as an accent or to suggest that while the



Lori-Ann Latremouille, *Lock and Key*, 1990, oil pastel and charcoal drawing on paper (77 x 112.3cm) SAG 1990.04.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

images and figures in a drawing can be read as symbols, sometimes an object is just an object. The human figure is central to her work. People embrace each other as well as embracing and flowing into fish, dogs, and birds. The negative spaces between the figures often become animals or fish or birds and often various flora are entwined in the relationship.

Latremouille seems to work intuitively, and speaks of drawing as “diving into the subconscious.” Her drawings evolve as they unfold. New shapes and forms grow naturally into the drawing as she works on it. She says “The image literally blooms on the paper.”¹ Even so, at the end of this process of evolution, each drawing is like a moment in an ongoing narrative that has been caught and illuminated by a single flash of lightning; it reveals the figures in the midst of an unfolding drama of which we can only guess the source and outcome. In person, Latremouille is charming, graceful, warm, and seemingly at peace with herself and the world. It is as if she uses drawing as a process of both exploring her inner world, and dealing with it, leaving her unburdened and free. And through her easy and intuitive access to the subconscious and its projections, she reveals our inseparable bond with the universal archetypes, which writhe and twist through both the natural world and our human lives, shaping and driving them from within.

In dreams, images and events drawn from the particulars of everyday life interweave with the archetypes, which are the roots of a culture. Dreams present constantly changing scenarios in which the personal is transformed into the universal and vice versa. Explicit, yet shifting and ambiguous dramas, conflicting emotions, insecurities and anxieties, and ghosts from the past are brought into a healthy stasis. Most of us forget our dreams upon awakening,

though a particularly potent fragment may hover in the mind, receding down the neural pathways as fast as memory tries to catch up with it.

The Surrealists always saw dreams as an important source for imagery. André Breton, in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* of 1924, wrote that Surrealism was a means of uniting the conscious and the unconscious realms of experience so that the irrationality of the dream and the conscious use of reason would be joined in “an absolute reality, a *surreality*.”² The Surrealists owed a deep debt to Sigmund Freud; like him they saw the unconscious as a source of the imagination, and genius as the ability to access this resource.

In my view, throughout the history of image making, from the Lascaux cave paintings, Egyptian art, medieval painting and manuscript illumination, Bruegel, Bosch and Goya, and in many native traditions such as Northwest Coast Native art, creators have drawn on symbolic archetypes from the subconscious for their imagery.

In the 20th century, the Surrealists, using the insights of psychoanalysis and the conscious use of mental disordering devices such as chance and automatic drawing, strove to create images that would evoke the subconscious causing it to rise to the surface of the consciousness and flash in the sun before it once again sank into the depths. Though Breton’s Surrealism was a history of doctrines, defections, and eventual demise, the psychological essence of surrealism has permeated much of 20th century art - particularly painting with its emphasis on “content”.

Latremouille joined the West Coast Surrealist Group in the late 1970s as a very young woman. This group had no doctrine but it did place an emphasis on content designed to generate, evoke, and manipulate

viewer response, forcing viewers to acknowledge the importance of the irrational, the symbolic, and the archetypal as the basis for culture's biases, motivations, and world view. Latremouille's intuitive and natural access to her subconscious, her drawing skills, her use of black and white (which accesses the subconscious more readily than colour), her ability to dip into her subconsciousness at will, and her equal participation in an "ism", Surrealism, usually restricted to men, all combine to establish her as an important Canadian artist. But in the end, it is the work itself that speaks the loudest. Her work is perhaps the closest we have to a photograph of the subconscious with all the complex intertwining, the transformations, the mystery, the latent eroticism, and the revelation that characterizes what lies below the surface of everyday consciousness.

In 1992, Lori-ann Latremouille's work was included with three other *women* artists (Marie Kennedy, Davida Kidd, and Sheri-D Wilson) in an exhibition titled *Women and Surrealism: Contemporary Art Practice in BC* at the Surrey Art Gallery. The drawing, "Lock and Key", was included in the exhibition which focused on women who, while working in their own unique and individual art practice, referenced surrealist imagery or working techniques.

Latremouille explains that the original impulse for "Lock and Key" came from a dream. There are a number of unsettling images and transformations in the work. The keyhole, for instance, seems to burrow its way into the naked woman's neck twisting her head around in an unnatural angle. Her right thigh has morphed into a fish, as have her left arm and hand. Above her, a large flower blossom contains an eye which is attached to a spiral horn. There are other visual tricks and transformations as well. The dog's spots are like camouflage, concealing as they reveal.

Above the dog, a bird flies into a plant and merges with the leaves. The chair at the left dovetails with a large goose which has a human eye, and a key floats in the foreground.

Although the image of the reclining nude - a naked woman reclining on a couch or divan - is a common one in art history, we can also read the drawing as a self-portrait. The tip of the woman's fingers just barely touch the key as if she knows that the key will open up something but she hasn't been able to grasp it. There is a black cloud above her head, but the rest of the clouds are blue in a black sky.

The meaning of the drawing is not clear nor is it intended to be. The meaning is mysteriously ambiguous; it is only hinted at and, like the key, can't be grasped. There are erotic and sexual overtones but they are evoked and hinted at, not explicit. It is as if the artist has relied on her subconscious to present a psychological narrative of the intertwined relationship between the natural and the human worlds, revealing connections by metaphor and suggestion, rather than by a logical process of "figuring it out".

I see a distinct connection with not only European Surrealism but also with North West Coast Native art in Latremouille's work. The predominant use of the transformative figure, the morphing of an animal or human into another animal or bird or fish, the sparing use of colour and the drama of black and white, and the use of psychological symbolism all underlie her affinity with art from the First Nations of the North West Coast. In fact, this drawing is very much like a totem figure and its story, *and* like the story of a totem, can be more easily felt emotionally than it can be told in words.

Footnotes:

1. http://www3.telus.net/latremouille_bungay/statemnt.html
2. André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, originally published in Paris in 1924, and in Richard. Seaver and Helen.R. Lane in *André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Michigan, 1969, p. 14.

Artist's Statement (1990)

My drawings emerge from the subconscious. Shapes and forms evoking and revealing one another. While I draw I'm absorbed by the rich and varied texture, tones and contrast the charcoal and pastel produce. The figurative/narrative qualities are developed by serendipity. Like dreams, the works are open to personal interpretation.

We are such stuff

As dreams are made on; and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep.

William Shakespeare
Tempest - Act IV, Scene I

Artist's Statement (2006)

Drawing is like diving into the subconscious. Unfettered by the chains of reason, line and form are free to unfold. The initial lines surface, creating positive and negative spaces, which in turn evolve into forms. Within these forms new shapes emerge and metamorphose. The image literally blooms on the paper. Figures, half animal and half human, fish, birds, flora and fauna all intertwine and interlock. The drawing reveals a kind of figurative language that dictates its own narrative. Charcoal and pastel provide the sensuous black and white tones which give the work a certain strength and vitality. My artwork is not easily categorized. One can see in it both our ancient ancestors and the multiracial villagers of our future.

The work tries to display our inseparable bond with nature and all universal forms. Even in the most alien and clinical state, humankind cannot truly break this link. With or without intention, we will always return to earth. To a certain extent we have lost touch with this reality. In some way, I hope my artwork can serve to remind people, even just for an instance, of this vital connection.

http://www3.telus.net/latremouille_bungay/statemnt.html,
accessed August 2006

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