

# Monika Napier

## SWARM

Monika Napier

BY KIRSTIE LANG

Artist's Statement

MONIKA NAPIER



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By Kirstie Lang, 2001

Monika Napier is a sculptor and installation artist currently living in Saskatoon. She began her fine arts education with a BFA in Contemporary Dance at Concordia University (1988), followed by a Diploma in Fine Arts at Emily Carr College of Art and Design (1992). She then completed her MFA at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1998. Napier is currently Assistant Professor of Sculpture in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Saskatchewan.

She works primarily with the process of casting, creating moulds into which materials such as plaster,

Monika Napier  
*Swarm*, 1995

mixed media sculpture  
SAG 1996.01.01  
acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art Gallery Association  
and the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition  
Assistance program/et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux  
acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada

Photograph by Cameron Heryet



Monika Napier *Swarm*, 1995 mixed media sculpture SAG 1996.01.01 Acquired with the assistance of the Surrey Art Gallery Association and the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program/ et avec l'aide du programme d'aide aux acquisitions du Conseil des Arts du Canada. Photograph by Cameron Heryet.

soap, concrete and aluminium are poured, set into formed objects, and removed. The forms are replicated in multiples, and arranged in installations (large, multi-media works that are typically made in response to the size, qualities and purposes of the exhibition space). Such work has appeared in exhibition spaces in Nova Scotia - HX: Halifax Exhibition of International Contemporary Art (2000); the Cumberland County Museum in Amhurst (1998); TUNS Architecture Exhibition Space in Halifax (1997) - as well as earlier exhibitions at galleries in Vancouver and Ontario. She also incorporates additional processes into her exhibition displays, such that objects are altered, broken, or reconstituted over time. These exhibitions include *Hôpital* (2001) at the Hôpital Bellechasse in Montreal, *Poise* (1998) at the Anna Leonowens Gallery in Halifax, and *Lost & Found: Re-memembering the Body* (1996) at the Surrey Art Gallery.

She has work in private collections in Canada as well as at the Surrey Art Gallery. She has exhibited internationally at the Media Arts Festival in Mulheim, Germany (1998), in the International Exhibition Project (1998) at Chateau La Flechere, Vanzy, France, and in *Beyond Circumstance* (1995) at the Hunter College Art Gallery in New York City.

Monika Napier fills her installations with multiples. The same object, repeated over and over again in space, draws attention to itself as well as the gallery room that contains it. Some of her objects are suggestive, erotic; clusters of tiny body parts fill crevices in walls, cracks in the floor, as seen in *Influx* (1997). Made of materials that match the structure of the surrounding architecture, such as plaster or concrete or aluminium, they could be crawling out of fault lines, or creeping toward them. Such actions are highly disruptive in gallery spaces that traditionally are meant to be visually and philosophically neutral,

so that the artwork may be highlighted and separated from daily life in order to be fully appreciated.

Other works by her in multiples embody the nostalgic (articles of clothing, old cups and saucers, wall-length braids of simulated hair, vases whose shapes emulate the body in its stages of grieving). These challenge the viewer to confront his or her own limits in sentiment. Do we feel the same tenderness towards a timeworn, men's dress shirt, when behind it hangs a procession of them? The question becomes more pressing when the ravaging of time is a process built right into the work. Set against (and acting upon) items of cherishment are forces that change them. In *Found* (1996) a funnel of salt is filled with ice cubes and placed above a child's pair of school shoes. Over time the ice turns to water, the water to saline solution, the solution merging with the shoe leather. The shoes become saturated, then dry out, their porous surfaces encrusted with giant granules of salt mixed with the bodily residues of the feet that once wore those shoes. The visual effect is halting, as if the meanings we ascribe to once-loved objects have attached themselves to their outer surface, shimmering like fresh snow. The conceptual effect, however, is haunting, a former life leached out and suspended in time by a purely chemical process. This is a contradiction between the seen and the known, the comforting and the disturbing, which is strangely unsettling. This is a quality characteristic of the work of Monika Napier.

Her work is informed by studies in performance art. In performative work the process of making it, or destroying it, is the artwork itself. Thus Napier's most recent pieces saw shelving units made of wood and ice send hand-cast vases hurtling to the ground and shattering to pieces, unit by unit, over the duration of the exhibition. In the case of *Poise*

(1998), the artist's actions were incorporated into the installation each day, gluing together the fragments of broken ceramic. In the show *Hôpital* (2001) her role was replaced, the viewers themselves invited to put together the pieces and integrate their processes with hers. Works such as these negate the idea that the object on display is isolated from the world, the artist, and its own means of production. Instead it is grounded in a realm of day-to-day transitions. This opens up access to understanding art, making explicit the notion that the viewer's interpretation will always inform, or complete, the meaning of a given artwork at any moment in its history.

Napier also works with themes of power structures, personal control (and its loss), and domestic labour, often seen in feminist art of the previous three

decades such as that by American Judy Chicago, and Canadians Joyce Wieland and Evelyn Roth. In the work *Found* (1996), part of the exhibition *Lost & Found: Re-membering the Body* at the Surrey Art Gallery, her thirty-six foot long "curtain of hair" was meant as a disruption and occupation of space by aspects of the feminine body. Behind the curtain hung multiples of handmade forms, shaped like female genitalia, and made of soap. Both parts of *Found* required extensive time to make and install. Floor-to-ceiling strands of embroidery thread were affixed to the gallery in the thousands. She also cast hundreds of forms from soap she made from her own recipe of boiling water, lye, and beef tallow. Issues of repetitive labour, female objects of fetish, cleanliness and shame were evident in this work and others by



Monika Napier *Swarm*, 1995 mixed media sculpture SAG 1996.01.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

Napier, reminiscent of the work of Germaine Koh, Teresa Marshall and Jana Sterbak. Napier's work embodies both halves of many binary oppositions, such as order and chaos, mind and body, fear and pleasure.

*Swarm* (1996) is a piece that represents a moment of transition for the artist. Napier's installations consistently address themes of power and oppression, attraction and repulsion, from her early work as a student through to that most recently created. However, she found that her work of the mid-1990's had escalated in scale and psychological effect, which began to weigh heavily on the mind, psyche and physical strength of the artist. Napier wondered more intently about the role of pleasure in her art (Napier 2001). Taking the moulds for the soap forms in *Found* (1996), she started to cast in plaster multiples of these small, erotic forms. She then gave them "casings" - red fabric covers that slip over them like a cosy sits on top of a teapot. The cosies are playful and multi-pronged, like the hat of a jester. What emerges from their beaded openings are primal, plaster lips that seem exposed, furtively displayed. *Swarm* emerged as sixty-three of these objects, created and assembled as a new installation piece, placed together in a pile. Swarming.

The differences from her previous work immediately leap out to the viewer. The action in *Swarm* is of an implied nature, not literal. In its display nothing will crash violently to the ground, or burrow slowly upwards and crystallise. Its parts won't be mended or reconstituted, by the artist, visitors, or gallery staff. It is un-tended. As a result of this creative departure, as well as the animated choice of title, Monika Napier likes to think that "if you turn away, it might move," all by itself. This must be liberating for an artist who traditionally has supervised her work. A swarm is

self-sufficient, focused, and almost anarchic in its devouring potential. Napier has said that at that time she was interested in "presence" versus "display" (Napier 2001). One could wonder if the presence at the heart of *Swarm* is whatever imagined item or identity is at the bottom of the pile, in the process of being consumed.

Swarms are typically loud. Locusts swarm. Bees swarm. And as Winnipeg artist Aganetha Dyck has shown us, what can result from hoards of creeping, many-winged and -legged creatures are things of astonishing craft and sensitivity. Napier's *Swarm* holds a tension that arouses neither phobia nor a sense of the sublime, but rather an amusing "prurience that collides with inhibition" (Napier 2001). Her "entities" are made of smooth plaster and polar fleece, textures that comfort, eliciting memories of craft stores and slippers. And they are comical. The casings curl up like wizards' shoes and elf hats, creatures of benign fantasy that are small and ingenious. They display their plaster lips rudely, but passively, like a herd of young baboons. They are cartoon-like, and inspire laughter, the way works by Vancouver's Myfanwy MacLeod use humour to "be critical without being strident" (Laurence 2001). And like monkeys or insects, they do have the potential to be loud - each peaked form in the polar fleece casings bears a tiny bell.

The artist has said she feels most comfortable with the characterisation of her work as "Post-Minimalist Feminist Sculpture" (Napier 2001). And yet perhaps because of its humour, it stands slightly apart from this genre. *Swarm* is unlike the work of a contemporary such as Spring Hurlbut, whose plaster pieces aim to re-connect nature and the body with aspects of architecture, or Ruth Scheuing's sculptures of armoured women's dresses, and

deconstructed men's suits (one of which is in the Surrey Art Gallery's collection). *Swarm* works with similar opposing forces, but not in a solemn act of feminism. The fragmentation of the female form, for instance, is an issue with a history of heated debate and much artistic exploration; here it is pushed to the absurd. Napier explains that the *vagina dentata*, the fearful, many-toothed genitalia that Freud in his study of psychoanalysis saw as a symbol of female revenge against the male, appears in miniature as a slightly threatening, but slightly smiling, creature (Napier 2001).

There are, of course, elements of continuity between *Swarm* and Napier's larger body of work. The "strangely unsettling" is a quality she describes to be an ongoing interest for her. In addition to the objects themselves, what also unsettles is the gap between expectation and result. Specifically, Napier's installation disrupts what might be expected from a traditional gallery exhibition: the uses of craft or domestic materials instead of paint and bronze, humour rather than austerity, sexual innuendo versus gender theory, and multiples instead of the singular object. The presence of each quality suggests the absence of the other. Napier maintains she has always worked with binaries, polar opposites in states of tension or mutual reflection. In fact, it became apparent to her at the time of creating *Swarm* that the process of casting, making positive objects from negative moulds, could be no more physical an embodiment of this theme (Napier 2001).

What appears to be the transformative nature of *Swarm* resides in issues of power - in the object, and in the act of making. Whereas earlier works by Napier addressed monolithic, large-scale powers such as conflicts between genders, socio-economic classes, and institutional structures, she shows us instead

the cumulative power of the many, the seemingly innocuous, innocent little things. For herself, *Swarm* marked a moment in her process when she found resonance in the act of self-permission: to know when to create something so reactively, yet appropriately, playful.

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## Artist's Statement

This piece was produced in the spring and summer of 1995, and represents a moment of transition in my work: while a concern with occupying/activating/ disrupting space and spaces continues to shape my practice as a visual artist, *swarm* marks the beginnings of a shift from the nostalgic to the fantastic as an impetus for image-making. Where I had previously worked with processes occurring in real time, involving actual or recognizable objects, *swarm* was an experiment in implied action, suggested movement, and the creation of more ambiguous, not-quite-referential forms. Implicit in the work is an interrogation of notions of subjectivity, pleasure, and "presence" as opposed to "display".

Monica Napier

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### An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection  
ISSN 1910-1392 ISBN 978-0-92018-???-? Published 2007



13750-88 Avenue  
Surrey, BC V3W 3L1  
Phone: 604-501-5566  
artgallery@surrey.ca  
www.arts.surrey.ca  
www.surreytechlab.ca



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