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## Dewdney, Christopher. (Concordat Proviso Ascendant) // Review

Patton, Andy

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our expectations of what needlework should be: pretty yet vacant decoration. As well, these labour-intensive demonstrations of care are, in process, diametrically opposed to the immediate, mass-produced news-wire image. The tiny stitches, intricate patterns and evident commitment of time cause us to stop, examine and ponder Whiten's images rather than quickly scanning them, as we do the front page of the newspaper. Whiten intentionally inverts our conditioned response to the needlework and the news-wire image. Traditionally, needlework lacks authority and news imagery signals it. Our signals have been purposely crossed.

It should be noted that needlework has served historically as a silent voice for women, who used it for centuries to document community and family histories. By recalling this silent voice in 1992, Whiten reminds us that women's voices have been ignored by the media until very recently.

Five small needlepoint works are each positioned in the centre of a large piece of finely woven linen. These shroud-like cloths are then draped over five chest-high steel armatures, which stand in a row. Over each podium hangs a small, solitary lamp. This formal presentation elevates the news-wire image to the status of a unique art object. Hotly lit, the needleworks become ghostly images that appear to be sacred, fragile

and precious pieces of history. They are not. On the adjoining wall, Whiten presents us with eight coded patterns for needleworks, some of which we see complete in the installation. They, like their originals, the news-wire images, can be mass-produced, albeit slowly – slowly enough to alter the purpose and meaning of the images they mimic.

"New Needleworks" offers a multi-layered exposé of our relationship to mass media. We are led through a series of discoveries regarding not only the presence (or absence) of women in media but the

power of the mediated image itself. Perhaps, as individuals, we should engage in the exercise Whiten so strategically sets out for us and monitor and analyse our responses to the images we welcome into our homes every day. Colette Whiten's "New Needleworks" insinuates that perhaps McLuhan's warning of a collective amnesia was not far from the truth.

Nancy Campbell

Source material for this review includes "Prince Charming and the Associated Press: The Needlepoint Work of Colette Whiten," by Elke Town in *Descant* 59, Winter 1987.



COLLETTE WHITEN  
*Palestinians Remembered* (1991). Cloth & embroidery thread, 8.3x10.5 cm

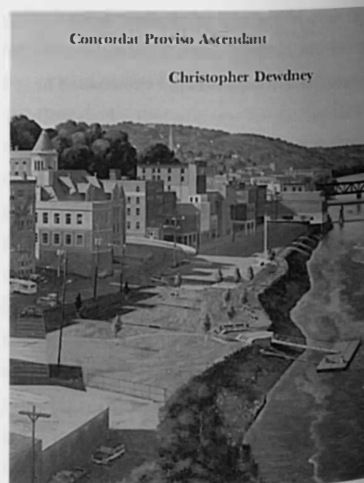
## CHRISTOPHER DEWDNEY

*Concordat Proviso Ascendant*, The Figures Press, GREAT BARRINGTON, MA

By some strange accident of fate, Christopher Dewdney seems to have become the contemporary Canadian poet best known in the Toronto art community. This puzzles me since his poetry can't really be described as "accessible." But perhaps that's a little simple, a consequence of the habit of conceiving of access as some sort of easy entry to meaning, a penetration into the writing. It may well be that Dewdney's poetry is, in fact, accessible but that our access is less to the

realm of meaning than to the gleaming surface of the writing. It makes sense – to me anyway – that this would be attractive to artists, who are habitually involved in the production of objects – things – with a material side that resists an easy translation into "meaning."

*Concordat Proviso Ascendant* (1991) is a slim volume of 51 pages and the third instalment of a continuing large work, *A Natural History of Southwestern Ontario*. The first book of the *Natural History* was



*Spring Trances in the Control Emerald Night* (1978); the second, *The Cenozoic Asylum* (1982). A note found at the back of *Concordat* describes each section of the *Natural History* as a "ritual text ... each book has to be preceded by the first-hand account of someone who has been inside a tornado." The reading of these accounts functions as a way of orienting the reader toward what Dewdney calls nature's "cruelty without malice ... primal, sacred." It also stitches his own writing into the surviving of cataclysmic moments.

It's no surprise then that the *Concordat* itself, if not the whole of the *Natural History*, can be described as an erotic poem – but only if our sexuality is understood as something shattering, a moment when all the lines dividing us from the other blur, when all the adhesives of the self let go. "Our clothes sullen layers of skin. Our giant bodies a glistening electric surface continuous with the forest.... Our orgasm an embodied mutual description." This last snippet makes it clear, however, that this erotic shattering doesn't lead us beyond form – it is a different organizing principle.

The first poem, "Litany of Attributes" – in itself a lovely grammatical notion – names and rehearses the body of the beloved. "First let me name the miracles." And through this adoration of the physical – "your hair, obsidian mane / jet arborescence purple by sunlight. A sumerian flowerhead, / heavenly raiment of darkness..." runs the electric current of language experienced as intimate connection to the physical world, a product of the same evolution. This fascinates me – that the poetry embodies so much faith in language. Here, language is much more than adequate – it is an umbilical cord running between the lovers and the world, the relation between words and things so much more than the product of convention. "There is a language to predicate the adoration" says Dewdney and the entire poem enacts that faith "a vowel away from the discrete crystals wherein her rude beauty gives way to angels."

So our entrance into the book is pre-

pared by the "Litany" and begins to draw us into a comprehension that is liturgical, erotic and technical. Dewdney's vocabulary extends far into technical domains – geological epochs, flora and fauna, biochemistry, neurology, mineralogy – and this colours the whole surface of his writing. But it is more than the traditional calisthenic stretching of a poet's vocabulary – just as the poem is more than a description of the human animal shattering itself for a moment in its mating. It is a series of sentences, each of which invokes different plants or animals or regional weather conditions or geological epochs or an erotic moment or a blaze of perception – and none of these is given priority over the others. A de-filtering is going on, an enormous work of de-categorization. And similarly, the sentences don't self-assemble into conventional groupings – paragraphs or stanzas where one subject matter at a time is dealt with. Everything jumbles together; all the pieces of the puzzle are dumped on the floor at once. But that's not quite right, if I've given the impression of a lack of order. What occurs is not without order but has an entirely different order no longer reliant on distinctions between humankind and nature, natural and artificial. "A path is a mnemonic calisthenics, a sequence of responses which every traveller not only recounts but alters slightly with their passing.... Seminal blue electric glow of the waterfall.... The forest roots a semiology we can just barely comprehend." The world is shattered and carefully jumbled; attributes that, by convention, we impart only to certain categories of things and experiences are now pasted down on what used to be foreign terrain. The impression is less of something chaotic than of a reading, like the rotating of some complex crystalline formation in your hand. First one facet is revealed, then the next – so different from the first that it could not have been predicted.

"Alive with self-representation the forest is a temple of compliance amongst the protective emblems of the natural

kingdom." This work of de-categorization is insistent on the cleansing of perception. "Take command of the senses." Language itself takes part directly in the adoration; in Dewdney's poetry, there is little interest in maintaining the self as a membrane dividing our private physical and mental interiors from the world: "You are all that you see." Our sensory array is an avenue for overcoming the dualities of mind and body, self and world. As he wrote in the *Cenozoic Asylum*, "The body is assembled around the perceptions." Through its insistence on perception jumbling categories dizzily, confusing things together and transforming them endlessly, the poetry is "an explosion, the end of the illusion of the world as representation" as Montale once put it. It's a curious yet convincing vision, eccentric to our current orbit. We're so used to thinking of language as that which mediates experience, proof that there can be no "raw" unmediated perception. Yet, in Dewdney's writing, language itself is perception and it is language that appears with so much force that it seems to be unmediated. Can language, which seems to mediate all experience, itself be said to be mediated? If not, then language itself is unmediated and can be unleashed.

I could describe the poetry as early Chomskian – it feels to me as though the syntax is generated first and then lies waiting for lexical insertions to be made into it. A generated pattern of sentences with simplified syntax: generally, a repetitive series of objects and attributes without predicates – nouns and adjectives, but no verbs. "Toronto interglacial overcast, a temperate deciduous freshwater marine light. Metal at high speed. White clay bluffs & summer interiors burgundy & dusty pale green. Purple stone. Wood smoke an evening mist the water pellucid jelly. Moiré of ripples an inverse solution to the equation of the shoreline..." Dewdney's poetry fascinates by sheer naming, revivifying the force of whatever it is that allows us to call things. And allied to this, though not identical, is the text's mining of the stored capacity in

adjectives to call out the quality of things. "Piscine features.... Pyritized mother of pearl.... Awkward mammalian blossoms." These noun and adjectival capacities are amplified by the relative absence of verbs. In a universe without verbs, time is stalled – only our verbs have tenses. For miles at a time, the only verb is an understood "is," which goes unsaid and therefore is placed in a domain beyond modification.

Verbless universe. Only names and attributes, things and their aspects. These sentences in rows, their vocabulary inlaid in the syntax like bits of ceramic or mineral deposits, are like exclamations in that exclamations are the only grammatical form normally permissible without verbs. But Dewdney's appear without exclamation points, without that rising voice as the sentence ends. They are a litany of low-key exclamations, an incessant rustling of appreciation for the world.

And these nouns and their adjectives stranded without verbs are not syntactically abandoned in some desert of time. The easiest way to avoid having to sort out time in Dewdney's poetry would be to fall back onto the tired notion of an "eternal present." But Dewdney's hugely dilated moment is not that. It feels more like a temporal cacophony – all times occurring at once, a great compression of times, like a cake of many layers wherein all the strata, all the different geological epochs and all their flavours are released at once onto the temporal palate. By comparison, the sense of time in

which we live day-to-day seems anaemic, shamefully conventional.

What strikes me particularly about Dewdney's poetry is its crunchy sonics. "The ammonoid's nacreous lustre, iridescent stage lights in a cretaceous theatre." Reading his poetry is like impossibly bright fragments of a smashed stained-glass window crunching underfoot. In part, this is because of Dewdney's fascination with a technical vocabulary – the names of rocks and species, scientific terminology inlaid throughout. These necessarily involve the extensive use of words of Latin origin, which creates a strange, somewhat non-Anglo-Saxon sound pattern – hard or lapidary to a WASP ear like my own – and oddly, ties the poetry to John Milton and Robert Lowell who, in the height of a manic moment, believed he was Milton. This sonic pattern is something salient, an auditory spear to jolt us from our perceptual sleep.

I'm left with the impression of a perceptual circuitry that's wide open, so little being filtered out. When I read Dewdney's poetry, I often think of an experience from my university days which, for the most part, doesn't seem to have a place in any schema and so it gets called up only by reading Dewdney. I took part in an experiment in sensory deprivation. (Years later, to my political chagrin, I heard that the results were put to use in breaking Irish political prisoners.) For a week, I lived blindfolded in a light-fast room. Each day my hearing was tested. (I

gather that my perceptions didn't act as they were supposed to since one day the person administering the auditory tests told me angrily to "Pay attention!") After a week, when the blindfold was finally lifted off, the door was opened slowly, just a crack. Light roared in. The door slightly opened was a body of light walking in. Later, I was allowed to leave, my part in the experiment over. I tottered down the tunnel from the psychology building to my college and the tunnel, with its insipid supergraphics, was candied. I could feel my neural pathways on fire. I had an enormous headache. I couldn't seem to cut down the amount of light to a manageable level. My optical nerves were in flood. I think Dewdney's poetry is like that: a steady continuous perceptual overdosing.

In this overdose, there is little of the continuous shuttling back and forth between thought and perception – or to say it another way, between surface and depth – that distinguishes modernist poetry. Dewdney's poetry seems to be all surface and relentless in that. (Is the sublime always monotonous in its own way?) But face-to-face with a genuine vision, all you can do is seize it whole or turn away. A vision has no componentry; it can't be modified or disassembled. And Dewdney's writing is genuinely visionary.

And the content of that vision? This place, this light, this body, this geography: this language is the only paradise we will ever have. In paradise, perception rains.

Andy Patton

## CAREL MOISEIWITSCH

Simon Fraser Gallery, BURNABY, BC

Carel Moiseiwitsch remembers nothing of the first three years of her life, spent in North London during the Blitz. Yet, violent images of winged beings and airplanes, of avenging angels and flying death-machines, of bullets, bombs, missiles and other phallo-symbolic weapons of war have recurred in her work for years – even in those projects most com-

mitedly investigating female archetypes. *Border Crossings*, an installation of large-scale drawings originally produced for Toronto's Mercer Union and remounted at the Simon Fraser Gallery in Burnaby, is the first of Moiseiwitsch's undertakings to directly confront the primal terror and mythic fascination of war waged from the sky.

Through five sequential triptychs,

each 9x13 feet and each worked in dense charcoal with fugitive flicks and smudges of day-glo pink, orange and yellow pastel, Moiseiwitsch elaborates a theme of liminality in which archaic or tribal rites of passage are analogized to contemporary experiences of crossing political boundaries. In both processes, she argues, individuals surrender their identity and status (sometimes suffering fear and humilia-