



Faculty of Art

2018

## Michelle Forsyth: Footnotes

Michelle, Forsyth and Law, Jenn

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# MICHELLE FORSYTH

Footnotes

June 15 - July 14, 2018

Opening Reception  
Friday, June 15  
6:30 - 8:30 pm



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# FOOTNOTES: MICHELLE FORSYTH

BY JENN LAW

“‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’ – but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?”<sup>1</sup>

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

When artist Michelle Forsyth was eight years old, she had to sell most of her belongings when her parents decided to move to a sailboat. She had a bunk, one shelf for her remaining possessions, and a single drawer for her clothes. Their family lived on the boat for six years, moored in a British Columbia marina during the school year, and setting sail on various adventures in the summer months. It was a formative experience that has shaped the artist’s relationship to material things and her concept of home. If objects create a sense of being at home in the world, reflecting us back to ourselves, then, as Martin Heidegger tells it, the experience of being *unhoused* inevitably evokes angst in the individual.<sup>2</sup> In this, “what remains is a subject whose objects have abandoned it.”<sup>3</sup> To the artist, however, such angst is productive, even necessary—allowing her to see the world as it truly is, in order to open up new possibilities.

Home is the starting point for *Footnotes*, both literally and conceptually. Forsyth’s current abode, a compact basement apartment in Toronto, functions as a fluid live/work space. To visit is to enter a domestic archive, everything methodically curated and displayed. Forsyth’s space is full without feeling claustrophobic, as she takes great care to ensure that everything may be seamlessly tucked away. Things are routinely arranged and rearranged, wrapped and unwrapped, and occasionally given away. In the artist’s collection, every object is relevant. Home, for Forsyth, is not a fixed place in time and space; it is a process in the constant throes of reinvention.

The impulse to make work from her surroundings was fortified when Forsyth was first diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in 2009. That year, she decided to focus on what was going on immediately around her, rather than responding to external social issues.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, however, the artist’s work moves beyond a mere concern with the domestic sphere, probing deeper ontological questions concerning what it is to exist in the world. Forsyth’s first body of work from this period



consisted of paintings of her then-husband's plaid shirts. Mimetic exercises in abstraction and repetition, these works are studies in intimacy and loss, each shirt copied and distilled to its essential formal elements, marking a desire to create meaning through pattern in an indexical way. Employing wide-ranging strategies of copying in her practice, her work has evolved over time into sumptuous, *trompe l'oeil* creations, layering multiple objects and processes into carefully staged compositions.

In *Footnotes*, each piece begins as a sculptural assemblage composed of individually hand-crafted copies created through diverse means, including hand-woven textiles, lithographs, screenprints, paintings, papier maché, and textual anecdotes. Through the variable copy, the artist reiterates the object's originality over and over, its singularity amplified in being reproduced, not diminished or subsumed. Each copy represents a close reading of the object, a focused exercise in understanding. Learning new mimetic processes has become, for Forsyth, a means of accessing the object from varied perspectives and coming to know it through multiple points of re-inception.

Though the final versions are presented as photographs, photography is merely the concluding act in an elaborate production. Forsyth edits the final layered image, adding in false backgrounds or shadows and screenprinting on top of the photograph in order to play with dimensionality and manipulate the viewer's perception of proximity/distance. Consciously employed as both a conceptual and technical method of flattening the image plane, photography is a mediating tool, allowing the artist to push the opticality of the image while

simultaneously creating a further layer of separation between the viewer and the work.

This photographic veil likewise obscures the evidence of the artist's hand embedded within the image. Yet, the body and its labour remain central to these pieces. Several of the cloth bundles are dresses hand-made by the artist, many of which she can no longer wear as Parkinson's takes its toll on her body. Other bundles are made from clothing gifted to the artist by friends, the only clues to their original corporeal functions found in anecdotal texts accompanying the work. In more recent pieces, Forsyth references the body more overtly. In *Old Jokes* (2017), for example, a hole is cut into a painting through which a hand-sewn plaid glove reaches out, filled with the artist's hand grasping a crumpled plaid paper bundle.

Many of the bundles contain hidden messages tucked deep within their cores like secrets. Forsyth similarly wraps and unwraps cherished items in her home—childhood photographs, books, and other items of personal value. There are some things so precious, so vibrant to behold, that we must turn away our gaze. It is a quality, of course, not inherent to the things themselves, but the access those things grant us to some part of ourselves and our history that may otherwise remain inaccessible. The object here simultaneously functions as corporeal weapon and wound, recalling Joseph Beuys' 1979 sculpture of a knife bound in gauze, *When you cut your finger, bandage the knife*.

In the language of still life, the body itself becomes a thing among things. For Forsyth, this work in part bears witness to the struggles of the body; the labour invested in its meticulous making, a triumph over the disease.<sup>5</sup> As Elaine Scarry writes, "what is quite literally at stake in the body in pain, is the making and unmaking of the world."<sup>6</sup> While Parkinson's does not define Forsyth's work, it informs her practice in intimate ways that remain largely invisible to the viewer.

"'Like' and 'like' and 'like,'"<sup>7</sup> writes Virginia Woolf, but can we ever dig deep enough beneath the simulacra of the thing to reach its essence? The thing can never speak to the full profundity and mystery of human experience, to its joys and its suffering. Yet it can serve as a footnote to a life unfolding, filling out and embellishing its hidden depths in ornate, spectacular detail. In the end, perhaps, semblance is enough, for it is here, in the material enchantment of likeness and affinity, that sympathy is revealed. Home, after all, is repetition.

## Artist Bio

### MICHELLE FORSYTH

Michelle Forsyth holds an MFA from Rutgers University (New Brunswick, NJ); and a BFA from the University of Victoria (Victoria, BC). Her work has been included in exhibitions at venues such as: Mulherin + Pollard, (New York, NY); Zaum Projects (Lisbon, Portugal); The BRIC Arts Media House (Brooklyn, NY); Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (Doha, Qatar); Pentimenti Gallery (Philadelphia, PA); Auxiliary Projects (Brooklyn, NY); The Hunterdon Museum of Art (Clinton, NJ); The Luminary Center for the Arts (St. Louis, MO); The Charleston Heights Arts Center (Las Vegas, NV); Deluge Contemporary Art (Victoria, BC); and Mercer Union (Toronto, ON). She has received grants from the Canada Council (Ottawa, ON), Artist Trust (Seattle, WA), and was awarded the Larry Sommers Memorial Fellowship (Seattle Print Arts, WA). She has participated in residencies at the Banff Centre (Banff, AB), and The Frans Masereel Centrum (Kasterlee, Belgium). Michelle Forsyth currently teaches at OCAD University (Toronto, ON).

## Author Bio

### JENN LAW

Jenn Law is an artist, writer, and researcher living in Toronto. She holds a PhD in Anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, England, a BA in Anthropology from McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, and a BFA from Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. She has exhibited her work internationally and has worked as a lecturer, curator, and editor in Canada, the UK, and South Africa, publishing on contemporary art and print culture. Law is the co-editor, with Tara Cooper, of *Printopolis*, published in 2016 by Open Studio. She co-founded Arts + Letters Press with Penelope Stewart in 2017.

## Images

Cover: *Grey Objects with Stripes*, 2017-18, Inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper with screenprint<sup>1</sup>, paper size: 26" x 26", image size: 20" x 20", variable edition of 5.

Interior: *Black & White Stack*, 2018, Inkjet print on Hahnemühle paper<sup>2</sup>, paper size: 30" x 30" inches, image size: 24" x 24", edition of 5.

<sup>1</sup> Grey clothing I can no longer wear, screen print and a hand-woven cloth I gave to David.

<sup>2</sup> A chartreuse satin sits nestled amongst a voluptuous cacophony of black-and-white woven patterns. I found the acid green a-line dress on a sale rack containing mostly dull browns and greys. The arrangement, I assume, was designed to catch my eye.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 95.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Schwenger, Peter. *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 69-70.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>4</sup> Forsyth, Michelle. Interview with Jenn Law, February 21st, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Woolf, op cit.

<sup>9</sup> Schwenger, 2006, 6.

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