

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Visual arts

Paper, scissors, mock

By turns whimsical, impertinent and disdainful, an intriguing exhibition of photocollages created by middle-class Victorian women reveals a barely hidden contempt for patriarchy and power

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Some exhibitions are so crammed with information, a writer is advised to bring in technical assistants – wingwomen – to help navigate all the layers. Art-bothering can be such a lonely profession.

The Art Gallery of Ontario's Playing With Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage is just such a show, and then some. A collection of cut-and-paste works made by middle-class Victorian ladies, the show reminds the viewer how much of our current appropriation-based culture comes out of the 19th century.

A century and a half before we had any popular dialogue around multiculturalism, *détournement*, deconstruction, relational aesthetics – or any terminology that describes transferring images into a new (and thus altering) context – Victorian women armed with scissors, glue and a handful of family snapshots were busy creating photocollages. Theirs was a brand-new media world in which the stability and reliability of the recorded moment, and of the captured image itself, were up for grabs.

To help me unravel this back-and-forth dialogue between 100-year-old works and the very contemporary practices they prefigured, I brought along two artists mining similarly rich veins. Natalie Wood is a Toronto-based multimedia and video artist currently preparing for an exhibition at Ontario's Art Gallery of Peterborough. Stephanie Rogerson is a writer and collagist co-curating an upcoming show of historical and contemporary lesbian art. I should always be so well-governed.

All three of us immediately noticed several things going on in the photocollages: patterns that made us want to know more about the lives of the individual artists. The works convey intense anxiety about the patriarchal family order.

No matter what the settings built around the cut-out photographs (photos were placed inside illustrations of perfect drawing rooms, or on watercolour street corners, or in the baskets of flying balloons drawn in ink), a paterfamilias almost always takes centre stage, often standing over a seated woman and/or children. In only a few of the works were women positioned in the centre or the top half of the image. However, within these neatly ordered patriarchies, disruptive elements are at play.

"I have a deep interest in the birth of popular culture," Rogerson tells me after our promenade through the AGO. "I found that the women used collage, and the new industry of photography, to insert

themselves into popular culture. It was a way for them to be part of the industrial boom.

“There is also a disposability to the works – the photos were relatively cheap at the time, and one could collect them or dispose of them. Isn’t that always ‘women’s work’ – gathering and disposing? There are certainly a lot of power games here that maybe we can’t totally unpack, at this distance. There are family issues going on here that we can never fully understand.

“The idea of women’s work being nimble, being done by hand, from scratch, like quilting, is also here, along with the women’s role of being the family archivist, running the social world of the family.

“And,” Rogerson adds, smiling, “there are also some gentle perversions going on, perhaps unconscious sexualities being explored – especially in the more fantastic works, the fairyland pieces.” In one of those, men dressed in what might be cricket uniforms are lounging atop a water lily.

This tension, between re-enforcing societal codes and the need to mock them, is glaringly palpable in several of the more surreal works – such as one in which a family is displayed on the fanned-out feathers of a turkey, or another that shows a family being tossed to the ground, like crop seeds, by a court-jester figure. The forces of order battle the artists’ distrust of, even disdain for, the accepted order – push-pulling the works in deliciously conflicted directions.

What’s the real message?

“I had a hard time at first,” Wood acknowledges. “Then, I started to look at how they applied their paints to create new backgrounds for their photographs, and I found a mental context: You can see the whimsy in them, the poking fun at the families, and you can definitely see the questions around power.

“And I did see some references to England’s place in the world, the colonial experience represented – I’m from Trinidad, a former colony – and these references are, interestingly, in the background of the works.” In one collage, for example, a well-off white family, complete with pets, is inserted into what appears to be a Middle Eastern ruin.

“I found my way into these works less by the people than by the situations the people are put into,” continues Wood. “Because some of the works use chinoiserie, putting white men’s heads on ‘Chinese’ bodies, I also wondered if there was a whole set of minstrel works that perhaps it was decided not to show, because people find them offensive now. And if those works exist, who removed them – the curators or the families?”

The various social anxieties embedded in the collages appear to stem, in part, from social aspiration. In one image, a set of family heads is arrayed on the fronts of delicate paintings of serving dishes and [china](#) plates – as if the artist were announcing her family’s arrival “at the table” of the upper class. It’s the game of Happy Families, fixed forever in a paint, pencil and albumen *tableau vivant*.

“There is definitely a performative element to these works,” Rogerson notes.

And, adds Wood, “a lot of parlour games, dress-up and charades, being enacted, which is charming and sort of nervous-making at the same time.”

Lest you think the exhibition is all neurotic acting-out on paper, both Rogerson and Wood were keen to point out how playful most of the works are, and how the Victorian love of novelty (another legacy that informs our current up-to-the-second culture) allowed the artists to engage in an impertinence

perhaps denied them in their public lives.

Do either Rogerson or Wood see anything from their own practices reflected here? Do they see their foremothers?

“How these women presented their family histories, sometimes as fantasy stories,” says Wood, “relates to how I often bring in historical information. We share a desire to document, to say who is who.”

Says Rogerson: “When I use iconography from popular culture and twist it, give it new meanings in my collages, I think there’s definitely a connection with these works; but when I think about the lives of these women, such enclosed lives, mostly, I find a lot of the work kind of ominous, almost a coping strategy.

“It’s not a world I would ever have survived!”

Playing With Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage runs to Sept. 5 at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 317 Dundas St. W., Toronto.