



## Montréal To Touch Words

Karen Trask, *Living Language Live*, at La Centrale, Galerie Powerhouse *Cette nuit, Défaire*, January 18 — February 10, 2008; and the Galerie d'art d'Outremont, *Où vont les mots*, March 6 — 30, 2008.

It was early dusk and through the gallery window one could see a remarkable apparition. A woman, sitting in profile just within the window, spun and wove relentlessly on what looked like a large loom. Here was a most welcome and haunting sight that reminded me of

a Mayan Indian woman I had once seen spinning wool in San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, Mexico.

In the Mayan Quiché mythology, *Ixchel* (pronounced "ee-shell"), Goddess of the Moon, presided over the art of weaving. She was usually depicted sitting in profile, with one end of her loom tied around her waist and the other around the trunk of a tree. Mayan women still weave textiles in the same way today and each weaves narrative fragments of her own life history and embroiders imbroglios of her own philosophy like the torn boughs of trees into the garment. It thus becomes a singularly eloquent palimpsest of the inner life.

Similarly, artist Karen Trask, seen through that window on one evening of a three week *in situ* bravura performance, wove and spun. But it was no ordinary fabric she was weaving. It was the spoken word. Voice recorded on magnetic tape, using a modified reel-to-reel tape player, was at once material and loom. Here was a powerfully moving rendition, a spoken word re-reading of that masterwork, *Ulysses*, by James Joyce.

Here was an invocation of the Greek myth of Penelope who, as a strategy for stopping time, wove every day and unwove every night as she anticipated with longing the return of her spouse Ulysses from his voyages. As one stood before the tape player, turning the hand crank that allowed one to forward the recorded tape, the hushed voice came alive in slow, measured cadences that sent a real chill up the spine.

In a statement accompanying the La Centrale, Galerie Powerhouse show, Trask wrote:

"A friend and colleague had been diagnosed with cancer. Bedridden for days at a time following chemotherapy, we looked for ways to divert our thoughts and to spend time together. Both of us had always wanted to read the elusive and difficult *Ulysses*, by James Joyce. We discovered a rhythm and sound at the heart of

his writing that must be spoken or heard for it to be fully appreciated. Chapter by chapter, day after day, my friend read out loud; I listened and wrote and together we taped over 1000 pages in some fifteen hours. Time was extended by a mingling of the flow of Joyce's amazing text and the sound of a voice stumbling with the awkwardness of speaking words never before read, our laughter, and the numerous interruptions by cat, phone, daughter and doorbell. All of this conspired to ward off our fears and to prolong and enrich the experience of that moment together."

In this remarkable testimony, Trask speaks of the taping as though it were a curative exercise, or perhaps a way of stopping time, even as time is still passing, or at least a way of slowing it down. Here, too, is an impossible mourning that is also a palpable act of faith- and friendship. Here the listener weaves his or her own narrative sequences together with the narrative of the spoken cadences, incantatory in a way and possessing something of the hypnotic clarity of prayer. The words carried one along, as though caught in a down river current, helpless to resist the undertow. In Trask's *Cette nuit, Défaire* the spoken voice of Penelope stakes a claim on the listener that is hard to shake off.

Trask speaks intimately of her practice. She wants to touch words, literally and metaphorically, and open up the liminal spaces between them. For her, the word becomes tactile. She says: "A love-hate relationship to the written word was born out of loss. When I was 6 years old, my mother died in a car accident. Learning to read and to write coincided with death. Each word absorbed was a step in recreating myself without her and a placing of words between my body and hers. This marked the beginning of a dialogue with absence that I have been exploring, breathing, falling into and ultimately searching for words to describe. Paper, normally the invisible and ignored support material, is one of the materials I use to create this presence of absence." Drawn to the tactility of the text, she speaks to absence, presence, and, unavoidably, liminality.

These remarks have an equal bearing on both the works shown at La Centrale, Galerie Powerhouse and those at the Galerie d'art d'Outremont.







Karen Trask, *Cette nuit, Défaire*, 2008. Location: La Centrale, Montreal. Photo: Paul Litherland.









Karen Trask, *Wordfield* (wall) et *Où vont les mots* (sculpture) vue d'installation, 2008. Location: Galerie d'art d'Outremont, Montréal. Photo: Paul Litherland.





In the latter, entitled *Où vont les mots*, Trask has physically disbound hundreds of dictionaries and literally spun tens of thousands of shredded entries into a remarkable series of sculptures and one giant mural. The printed page was either torn and recycled into new paper sheets or effectively regurgitated through spinning into long paper threads. Trask is realising a desire to undermine the authority of certain kinds of printed texts and to shed light on the printed text as a medium of material expression.

Karen Trask is an artist who lives language. In this respect, her creative history is pristine, and gathers momentum and eloquence from exhibition to exhibition, performance to performance. For her, language is a living thing, not the product of a dead hand. Her archive is vast and is expanding in an exponen-

tial way. In a sense, her linguistic cosmology has no point of arrival. It trembles on the threshold of infinity.

She is enamoured of the living changes that words undergo in spoken languages, not just in tenor and idiom but in sense and signification. She treats the vast veil of words as she would an archaeological dig, sifting through it tirelessly and methodically, in order to unearth hidden veins of meaning and saying, and strange treasures that suddenly see the light of day. She excavates the *extra linguistic* in making printed and spoken text her materiality.

Trask unveils the liminality latent in language, the unseen plenum that swells spoken and written words into a universe of signification that represents something more and less than the sum of their literal meanings and their graphic expressions





on the printed page. Words here are the supple materials for a weaving we might well otherworldly (if it were not so quintessentially the product of humankind's powers of expression); her textile is itself linguistic. In transforming the liminal into the material and back again, she finds her true meaning—and, arguably, the true measure of all human beings blessed with this thing we call language.

In terms of the work exhibited at the Outremont, we should invoke again *Ixchel*, the Mayan goddess of childbirth and healing. *Ixchel* was also known by another term, and that was *World-Weaver*—a term which enjoys a particularly poetic resonance for her globes which are literally woven out of words. Trask's loom spins words into the supple fabric of a material that speaks humbly to its origins while looking ahead ambitiously to the future

and, like the Mayan back strap weaver, although in a different way, she becomes intimately connected to the nature of all language and becomes one with her art.

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