



COLETTE WHITEN

Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto

by LEAH MODIGLIANI

Colette Whiten's new exhibition at Susan Hobbs Gallery is beautifully delicate and whip-smart, a diverse combination of images and references that should engage a wide variety of viewers. After many years, Whiten has returned to the plaster-casting of her yes figurative work, like *Untitled (September, 1975)*, but unlike the originals, these new casts are intimately scaled and continue some of the themes prevalent in her more recent embroidery and bead works.

The exhibition consists of five white photosnapshot-sized relief casts made of polymerized gypsum that have each been set carefully inside one of the white gallery walls, appearing to emerge seamlessly out of the drywall. The exhibition thus has a serene, sparse look that calls to mind the minimalist interventions on spatial contexts prevalent in the 60s and early 70s. On the ground level there are three works: *Watermark*, *Boundaries* and *Possessed*, while upstairs one encounters *Negotiation* and *Nose to Nose* (all 2009). Each consists of a scene of family life (primarily children playing alone or with each other) rendered within the apparent self-imposed boundary of four by five inches, as though the artist had created a carving based directly on album-sized family photos.

Watermark sets the tone of the exhibition as it's the first work you see on the left upon entering. A toddler wearing a large sun hat and sunglasses floats in an inner tube with his or her arms outstretched. This small image is roughly centered on the long gallery wall about five or six feet above the floor. The relief has been inset into the wall under a kind of knife-cut ledge about ten feet long, which appears to have been created by building up plaster on the wall with drywall tools and then a crisp edge at the bottom cut into it to create a straight line. This has the effect of a long glacial gash across the flat surface that suggests a number of interesting thoughts in relation to the figurative image.

On the one hand, this ledge-line appears to represent a wave or line of water that threatens to overtake the child's inner tube. On the other hand, it does not appear to belong to the piece, since no other obvious wall interventions are made in the other four works on display. This thought is amplified by the unavoidable but distracting effects of an existing wall closet door and door to the basement near the gallery's front entrance, which, while shut, retain the cracked outlines of their voids in the walls of the lower gallery. Whether conscious or not, these openings, along with the aforementioned ledge, form lines across the expanse of white wall that reference 70s minimalist pieces by artists like Fred Sandback and others. These slight alterations to such a vast white space recall the accusation levelled at some minimalist artworks and their museums (particularly Dia:Beacon) by recent theorists of conceptual art that such works and spaces are tomb-like. In the contemplative but still commercial space of the gallery, the family snapshots seem to assert themselves as memorials to private memories that are both unique to the artist and universal to the viewer.

Also downstairs, *Boundaries* depicts a small girl in pigtails standing precipitously on what looks like some stairs. She is clutching a toy in her hand. *Possessed* shows a slightly older boy strapped into a stroller (or a car seat) surrounded by the accoutrements of play: a funny hat, a skateboard and a tricycle in the background. Upstairs, two girls are pictured in a bathtub (or possibly a sandbox) playing with toys, one with her back to the viewer (camera), one looking away. This is called *Negotiation*, an apt title for anyone who has ever spent time with two small children playing together. The last sculpture, *Nose to Nose*, is a tender portrait of a baby reaching up to grasp the nose of the older man on whose lap he or she is sitting. The children seem constrained by both the limits of their respective photographs and the limits of their own physiological development, situated inside things to which they must either give in or risk injury: the inner tube, the stroller, the lap, the bathtub, the stairs.

All of these scenes are carefully carved before casting and are placed at about the height of a viewer's line of vision in the centre, or off-centre, on one of the gallery's walls. Each one is cast in an edition of three, and will be installed in the collector's home if purchased. As such they represent a peculiar kind of spatial intervention: the personal and the private memories of an individual (there is no way to know if this is Whiten's family) re-

assigned to the context of several collectors' homes, where these works might symbolize a generalized or universal concept of personal space. The fact that they are cast editions places them firmly in the context of Whiten's photo-based work from the 90S, in which mass-produced imagery from sources like newspapers served as inspiration for labour-intensive craft processes like beading and embroidery, which she rendered in an almost miniature scale. The choice of gypsum relief sculpture combined with Whiten's history of playing public and private images off of each other through scale and spatial context rendered for private and public viewing (she also has created numerous public artworks employing figurative elements), suggests another less obvious historical reference: that of classical Roman sculpture. In particular, I am thinking of one of the masterpieces of western art, Augustus' *Ara Pads*, an altar to peace and prosperity built in 9 B.C. Consisting of marble relief carvings, the *Ara Pads* is notable for, amongst other things, its unusual depiction of women and children, an inclusion some historians suggest promoted the importance of family and childbearing at a time of low birth rates. It is interesting to think of Whiten's domestically scaled and largely un-monumental relief carving in the context of this monumental and propagandistic historical precedent.

Finally, without becoming didactic, the exhibition stands out for being satisfying on a number of levels: the excellent craftsmanship of the reliefs, the thoughtful consideration of how each piece is installed in the gallery context, the subject matter of family and its representation in private and public media and the diverse art-historical and popular references that Whiten brings to bear on her work. As such, the exhibition is a relief from much recent sculpture that reveals itself as hastily considered and/or constructed, and is an argument in favour of a slower approach to artistic production.

C Magazine 104, Winter 2009, p. 49-50.