

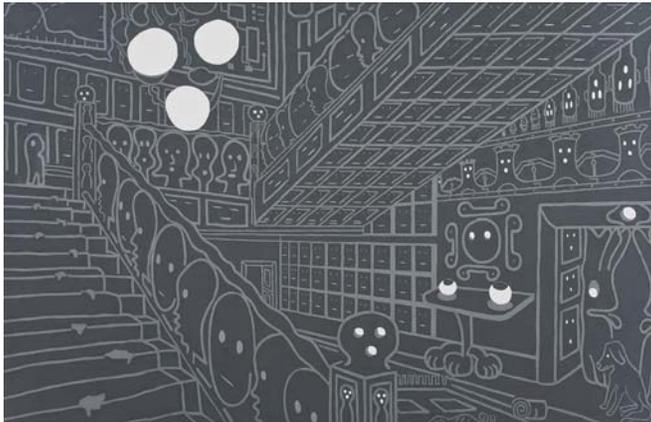
THE WRITING SHED (IN THE WOODS)

FOR NOTES/ESSAYS/ARTICLES/REVIEWS

Sandra Meigs at The National Gallery of Canada

THURSDAY, APRIL 7, 2011

BY KIM NEUDORF



What the Inside Sees 2007

Acrylic on linen

194 cm × 305.3 × 4.2 cm

Purchased by The National Gallery of Canada in 2008

The following is a collection of notes taken during a recent visit to Ottawa:

Sandra Meigs' painting 'What the Inside Sees' is originally from the exhibition "Sandra Meigs: Strange Loop," curated by Diana Nemiroff, and exhibited at the Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, in 2009. The painting has been most recently shown in the exhibition of new acquisitions "It Is What It Is", at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.

"Strange Loop", as written about by Nemiroff, started with "an invitation from the National Arts Centre to participate in BC Scene, a city-wide festival of music, theatre, and visual art celebrating the arts in British Columbia." In 'Strange Loop', "it is human nature that provides Meigs with her enduring subject. When it appears in her work, landscape is imagined as a psychic place, an embodiment of states of consciousness...Her world, superficially comic, plumbs the unconscious for primitive themes of love and death, innocence and sexuality, reverie and nightmare." (7)

Meigs is well connected in the Canadian art scene through her exhibition history, and she's particularly connected to two of the three curators of 'It is What it Is': Andrea Kunard and Josée Drouin-Brisebois. And, as I already mentioned, she also has a connection to former National Gallery curator Diana Nemiroff.

Nemiroff curated and wrote the catalogue essay for Meigs' 'Strange Loop' exhibition in 2009,

Andrea Kunard, curator for National Gallery-affiliated Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography wrote about Meigs' work in C Magazine in 1990, and Josée Drouin-Brisebois, Curator and Head of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery reviewed her 'Strange Loop' exhibition for Border Crossings magazine in 2009.

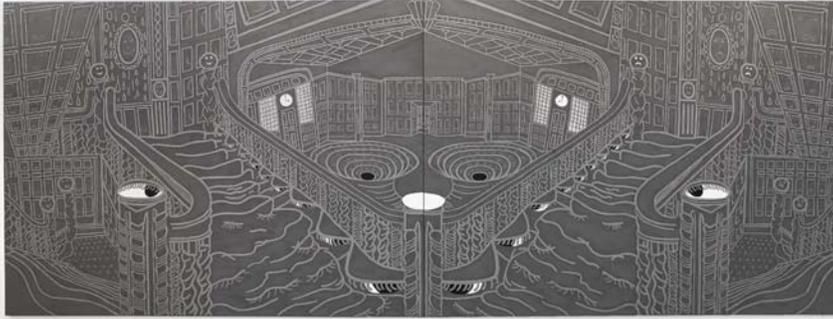
Drouin-Brisebois reviews her work in 'Strange Loop' with expectedly generic, superficial language like: "Meigs's ornate interiors become the stage where this game between the public and private self is played out, where the viewer is at once drawn into the work, as in a maze, and kept out by its formal qualities and flat surface, effectively becoming caught in a strange loop."

Nemiroff goes into detail about the exhibition's theoretical and site-specific background. Meigs made trips to Newport, Rhode Island, and Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York to visit several 19th century American Shingle Style houses. Her painting 'What the Inside Sees' specifically depicts the lobby and grand staircase of the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York City. Meigs made many drawings of the interiors, and translated the drawings to large-scale paintings. Her history of flat paint handling is used in the majority of the works in the exhibition, although less sculpturally and more in keeping with the schematic look of her original drawings, although her usual cartoony faces and eyes are still there.

The title and concept for this exhibition comes from the book 'I Am A Strange Loop' (2007) by cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter. In his book he writes: "...the self...is an epiphenomenon, a "large-scale illusion created by the collusion of many small and undisputedly non-illusory events."...[the] 'I'...is an "abstract, locked-in loop" within our brains...a "strange" loop...a paradoxical structure, cycling from one level of abstraction to the next, yet always returning to the point where it started: in short, a "level-crossing feedback loop." (13) Meigs has written: "The idea of this loop around the microcosm that we understand as the 'self' and the macrocosm that is the world is an important realm for the artist to explore. I believe that, within this loop, the imagination takes form..." Meigs herself writes in the catalogue of an experience of near-fainting, wherein her "cellular structure melded with the microscopic structure" of her surroundings, which she found articulated in Douglas Hofstadter's writing.

Meigs is a painter who has, in her own way, played with painting as sculpture, so I'm a bit surprised by her choice to depict large-scale conventional painting using this repeating cartoony-schematic style of flat white on grey. Nemiroff writes: "Grey feels like the right colour for such internal spaces, whose firm architectural framework seems softer and more porous than the objective world, ready to yield and absorb us at the first sign of complicity...the solipsistic universe of the imagination" (12)

Nemiroff continually glosses over Meigs' work in the catalogue, using words like *imagination* and *unconscious* more poetically, vague, or clichéd than critically, saying things like "As we let ourselves be drawn into the metaphors for consciousness that Meigs has created in Strange Loop, the paradoxical loop between outside and inside pulls us into the maelstrom." (23) And "it is the function of the stairs to transport us from one level of consciousness to another." (26)



The cartoony eyes, faces, tongues and brains in these paintings, according to Nemiroff, can be associated with the id, ego and super-ego. “the face pulls us into the painting, making us part of its ‘strange loop.’” (26)

Since I haven’t seen any of the paintings in ‘Strange Loop’ in person aside from 'What the Inside Sees', my visit to the exhibition 'It is what it is' in Ottawa was an experiment in testing all claims of the works' complex psychic looping despite its flat, 2-D content.

Entering the exhibition "It Is What It Is" at the National Gallery, immediately I wasn't impressed with the tunnel-like, rooms-within-rooms exhibition format of the show, and I was surprised by how fragile and defused many of the works operated in person, from the visible duct taped scalp of Valerie Blass's furry creature to Tim Lee's sterile photographs, to the leached and pristine male choir version of Madonna's 'Live To Tell' by Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, which covered the first few rooms with its dull ache.

Also in this first room, a wall text promised works which are all “tackling the world's larger social and political issues...choosing modes of self-expression to transcend traditional categories, materials, and genres. These works document and offer alternatives to colonial narratives and environmental crises, challenge notions of identity and representations of the body, and question our culture of media-driven consumption...offering a gentle critique of a perceived general state of complacency in modern society.” Which is specific and vague enough to cover the 70+ works without suggesting how or why they will tackle and offer and challenge.

Just a few brief examples of other work that made an impression: I passed David Altmejd's flat-toned installation 'The Holes', squished into one room, wherein drawn lines and spray-painted stains on the mint plinth were more successful than any of the overkill werewolf-as-crystalline growth (which has been more successful in the past with his smaller works). I passed Stephen Andrews' work, which I was disappointed with, as it appeared to be painted by a computer, and was in its own way as vacant as Roxy Paine's “manufactured” sculptural “paintings” in another part of the NGC. Wanda Koop's installation of paintings successfully made them ineffective and merely decorative. Her larger works, including her solo show in another part of the NGC, were masterful grey landscapes blocked violently and needlessly by loudly-coloured, cold, monolith-shapes.

Sounds from Steven Shearer's huge PVC-pipe sculpture covered most of the remaining exhibition with a much-needed layer of alarmingly loud and physical dread that was like construction noise mixed with movie monsters broadcast through IMAX speakers. Once in front of the piece, you could follow the sound as it moved through the pipes, while feeling it in your stomach and feet. In a wall text, Shearer claimed wanting to “[absorb] social discord,

then trying to digest it”.

In a nearby room were works by Gareth Moore, Alex Morrison, Mary Anne Barkhouse, Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky, and Sandra Meigs. Meigs' single painting 'What The Inside Sees' was stranded on the left corner of the room, wherein the work could be linked formally to the surrounding pieces, but still appeared to be alienated from the other works because of its cornered placement. The exhibition text fails to come up with an interesting alternative reading of the room's installation, saying “these works are all animated somehow by the presence of incongruous elements...and a fascination with materials, objects, and stories.” Up close, Meigs' painting's application is flat yet not slick: mapped but not sharp; what I thought Koop's greyness might be doing without its token monoliths was happening in Meigs' work, but used more optically; the painting is a segment from a series, so looks a bit interrupted and weak in this context. Spending some time with the piece and thinking about it beyond paint handling, I could imagine myself in the painting's grey, schematic room, not blacklight, not Tron, not Avatar, but as if my body and sense of space had become 2-D and grey. What does it mean to become 2-D and grey? I would merge with my surroundings too easily. Personal bodily space/constitution would be breached. Boundaries are gone. I would become invisible. Since these observations were made before reading Nemiroff's text on 'Strange Loop', it was interesting to think about the similarities between my connections and Meigs' interest in phenomenological and psychic space. The painting's placement was in a spot not meant to be an un-interrupted or central look, so spending time with the painting was a constantly compromised process, as I had to make room for people moving between rooms.

I started to compare Meigs' work with other works in the show, including Jeff Wall's photograph 'Cold Storage', which appeared in person so static and humorless in comparison, and Etienne Zack's more crowd-pleasingly illustrational painting "Heads". Meigs' painting, in contrast to many of the other 2-D works in the exhibition, had a complexity that would eventually override its immediate surface. The placement of Meigs' painting in the exhibition prevents this kind of close-reading that would otherwise have survived being seen in person, as the exhibition seemed to have done with the majority of the work crammed into its cave-like rooms, like so many flat, stranded fetishes of what the show claims are “the best and most innovative works being made in Canada today.”

Is the exhibition, and Meigs' painting in particular, a good fit with what Droun-Brisebois claims is indicative of “the strength of art created in Canada today”? When works are given enough room to breathe, such as many of the videos, Rodney Latourelle's large sculpture, Shary Boyle's installation, Susan Turcot's drawings, and Sarah Anne Johnson's work, this could potentially make sense. 'It Is What It Is', a show of recent NGC acquisitions, is apparently a Canadian Biennial show. If so, I'm not convinced that its cop-out, noncommittal-toned theme 'It Is What It Is' is a believably critical and serious theme for a Biennial.

Reid Shier, who also challenged the exhibition during the related 2-day exhibition panel, wrote aptly for Canadian art:

"The exhibition proposes to “take the pulse” of Canadian contemporary art by provocatively suggesting that what the NGC buys is, de facto, representative of what is most important now in art across the country. The failure of this proposition undercuts the exhibition's core strengths, which are significant, and frames a real need for the gallery to mount two shows in place of this one—a collection survey and a national biennial. It also poses the question about how a biennial in 2012, should there be one, (and there should be one), might be shaped."

these notes were collected for a Grad Seminar class assignment in April, 2011

<http://writingshedcollected.blogspot.ca/2011/04/sandra-meigs-at-national-gallery-of.html>