



February, 2005

Beth Campell: Make Belief

SALA DIAZ, THROUGH FEBRUARY 20, 2005
by Stevan Zivadinovic

I had broken into the gallery the morning before the opening, while the show was still being assembled ("*while*" being a loose term here, since the gallery was locked at the time and devoid of life).



Beth Campell
Make Belief
2004
Installation view

The pamphlet pimping *Make Belief* says that Beth Campbell takes over an art space, makes it feel lived-in, then builds her narrative around and within this lived-in quality of said space. I broke in knowing this. *Sala Diaz* is a converted wing of a duplex and as such the perfect place for this exhibit — it is meant to be lived in, it just happens to be a gallery. This made my breaking and entry feel extra weird, as if I was entering someone's home just to admire the placement of the furniture, junk mail, toiletries and like miscellanea.

The show that is open to the public is more sterile than the early version I helped myself to. I don't mean that to sound like a bad thing. Having removed some of the clutter, Beth makes the message of the exhibit cleaner, more finely tuned, more direct — and yet not at all devoid of deviousness inherent in the turning of the gallery into someone's living quarters and the spectator into a trespasser, a voyeur.

Entering the gallery one comes upon the centrepiece of the exhibit, a Beth Campbell trademark, a flowchart entitled "a potential future based on present circumstances" — where each potential future is more tepid than the previous one. The whole house is arranged as if kowtowing around this poster; "I live alone" stands as the very first premise on the flowchart. Backing away to take in the big, branching diagram as a whole, one trips over an inconveniently thick rug and wonders if he has just disturbed the sanctity of a composition.

In the far end of the room, facing the flowchart is an armchair with some shoes thrown off next to it for good measure. A side table is adorned with mail, a bottle of painkiller, some other junk that escapes me, and a telephone blaring answering machine messages from hell. Well, maybe not from hell, but from the disenchanting, superficial dystopia that we call home.

Through two doorways, around a corner, we come upon the bedroom. In it, five lamps glow next to five bedside tables with five hairbrushes, five jewellery boxes, five makeup kits, five copies of the same *New Woman* magazine, five pill bottles and five glasses of water, five trash cans with five popped pill tabs and five kissed handkerchiefs within — on the whole there stand huddled five identical and aesthetically pleasing setups — identical in all aspects except for the bottle of *Proactive revitalizing toner*, which diminishes gradually from table to table until it's depleted on the last. The simple twin bed, off in the corner, is occupied by an invisible woman who leaves her sad mark on the world in the sheets she occupies.

The fact that everything is so full of meaning is offset by the fact that it is not at first apparent where the show lies. Hip people walk through the gallery, ignoring furniture as much as possible, gravitating towards the drawings on the wall — drawings that act as convex mirrors, metaphorically speaking, reflecting at the viewer the reality of the room in which they hang. Above the answering machine we have a drawing of a bathroom with an accentuated mirror. Above the five bedside tables we have an excerpt from an obituary which at first read-though doesn't sound too obituarious. Above the bed is a drawing of a spectral silhouette looking through a window. In the same room there is a drawing of a diffuse flock of birds spelling out "you".... And everything is dancing a grim jig around that *flowchart-to-end-all-flowcharts* in the first room.

It would've been all the more fascinating if Beth had managed to, for example, make an exhibition from the perspective of a Victorian housewife sitting resolutely in the hapless moment and looking forward towards whatever kind of future was fashionable at the time (be it optimistic, gloomy, indifferent, dainty, rugged, quaint, whatever). But the show is very much a product of its time. I guess we make into art what we're familiar with; in this case, Beth gives us a peek at one day in the existential crisis of a generation of Twinkies painfully lacking their cream filler.



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