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Libby Hague: The Thread That We Follow

"A well-thought-out story doesn't need to resemble real life. Life itself tries with all its might to resemble a well-crafted story."[i]

Libby Hague created *Be Brave! We Are in This Together* over the course of an eleven-week residency at YYZ Artists Outlet. The installation encompasses the space, covering, as it does, the four walls of the room; it also spreads into the volume of the gallery. Comprised of woodcut prints, shaped and pleated paper elements, and puppets that the audience is invited to move around via a system of wire tracks, the impression conveyed by the installation is of a story that both unfolds as a narrative around the perimeter – thus implying the progression of time – while it also exists as an absorbing and immersive experience in the present moment. The base of each wall is bordered with strips of paper printed with repeating, abstract patterns – bands of red, dark blue and pink, are soon joined by a fourth in sky blue. Out of this foundation emerges imagery that hovers between the figurative and the abstract, with representations of flowers, chain-link fence and coils of barbed wire, or a cascade of curling hair becoming apparent here and there. In other instances, the prints and shaped and folded paper are combined so as to create three-dimensional scenery – what could be read as a nursery, a bedroom, a church, a hospital – that serve as settings for both current experiences and past events.

We construct a narrative for ourselves, and that's the thread that we follow from one day to the next. People who disintegrate as personalities are the ones who lose that thread.[ii]

In the northeast corner a puppet baby rests in a hanging basket. Two boxy figures with accordion-fold bodies and limbs hold each other on the other side of the room, and closer inspection reveals that a select cast of humanoid and creatural paper marionettes made of similar paper elements inhabits the entire installation. Hague's wall-mounted imagery conveys a tension between the animate and the inanimate; this opposition is further amplified in these puppets. They read as viable, they have appendages that we interpret as heads or arms or legs, and Hague has equipped them with leads and

tethers so that we can encourage their movement. They inhabit the space and narrative even when we are not there, and make evident the fact that what we are seeing is a story with particular characters. Sharing the space with them, they are dependent on us for life. However, try as we might to we cannot coax much more than the smallest hint of activity into them. By their very design they are awkward and imperfect perambulators. They are the life forms in this paper universe, and we are drawn to them, but they are inevitably limited as beings.

"…narrative, like lyric or dance, is not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by artists to control, manipulate or order experience, but as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life."[iii]

Storytelling has been an ongoing element of Hague's production. In 2011, in an installation entitled *Sympathetic Connections* created for the Art Gallery of Ontario, Hague explored the problematic relationship between human endeavour and the natural environment. As is so often the case in her work, the imagery in that project too appeared light-hearted, at least at first, for closer observation revealed the impending disaster of a nuclear power plant quietly looming on the landscape's horizon. The year prior, 2010, Hague created *Tiens-moi très fort (Hold Me Tight)* at La Centrale in Montreal, an installation that also examined the inevitable connections between tragedy and hope, taking as it did the then current global financial crisis as its subject. Hague's room-sized tidal wave of woven paper and stacked piles of imitation cartons of food functioned both as metaphorical allusions to the economic disaster and the greed and over-consumption that led to it. However, at the same time that Hague's imagery expressed cataclysm, the boxes of food also could be read, arguably, as the sustenance that would see humanity through the aftermath of the disaster, and the plaited paper groundswell as a raft-like form that would ferry survivors to safety.

We are lonesome animals. We spend all our life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say -- and to feel -- Yes, that's the way it is, or at least that's the way I feel it. You're not as alone as you thought.[iv]

The beauty of *Be Brave!* – its purposeful intent, even – is that Hague's imagery reads not only as a document of one life – her life – but as an exploration of the interconnectedness of many. The potential to see oneself in her expression became remarkably evident in the series of performances that Hague organized over the course of her exhibition. Building on her proclivity toward performance and

collaboration, Hague scheduled a series of "Brave Interventions," inviting local cultural producers to develop performative responses to her installation. The series of events launched with Philip Anisman's reading from *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, and continued with a movement-based sound performance by Catherine Carmichael, vocal explorations by Erica Iris and Andrea Cerswell, a dance-based performance by Zoja Smutny, and a performance with vocal exploration by Maeve Beaty. From Anisman's particular choice of passage from Foster Wallace's futuristic, multi-layered fiction, to Beaty's examination of her own recent life events within the framework of Hague's images, the collaborator-performers all responded to the installation by acknowledging the particular, personal details of the imagery. However, they each also took the opportunity to add their own individual experiences and memories into Hague's narrative, or to find their own particular language for expressing the universal themes inherent in her imagery.

Every exhibition can provide a formal clarity and distance which furthers self understanding. Interventions are distancing filters, which connect us to another creative mind in the short window of our availability. The format layers rather than blends ideas so that each contributing flavour stays visible, distinct, and delicious.[v]

As with much of Hague's work, the assemblage gives physical form to a fictional world that both imitates and transforms our reality; in this instance, more overtly than in past installations, the world depicted is one that was created with the intention of representing the unfolding of the artist's life. Hague has called *Be Brave!* a psychological self-portrait: the installation considers her own life events, her responses to them, and how they have influenced her. It also examines how the effects of these experiences manifest themselves on both Hague's creative life and private life. Here, the themes that have so often appeared in Hague's work – human action and apathy, responsibility and dependency, vulnerability and rescue, and risk and luck – and that have, in past work, been expressed as examinations of universal events, are linked, more overtly than before, to the artist's biography: the birth of her brother, the impulsivity of her teen years, finding love, and the recent death of her father are amongst the moments and occasions marked in the installation. Despite the direct expression of her life lived, *Be Brave!* is as much a portrayal of shared experience as Hague's past work. While her life's events are palpable in the imagery, they are not overt or didactic. Rather, they are convened softly, as subtly cited life episodes to which we can all relate.

[i] Isaac Babel, "My First Fee," *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* (New York: Norton, 2002), 478.
[ii] Paul Auster, cited in Robert Fulford, *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture* (Toronto : House of Anansi Press, 1999), 13.
[iii] Barbara Hardy, "Towards a Poetics of Fiction: 3) An Approach Through Narrative," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn, 1968), 5.
[iv] John Steinbeck, "In Awe of Words," *The Exonian,* Exeter University, 1930, quoted in "Steinbeck," in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 182-183.
[v] Libby Hague, retrieved July 9, 2012 from http://www.yyzartistsoutlet.org/event/exhibition-libby-hague/.