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New kind of beauty in bloom

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The bloom is far from being off the rose for senior Canadian artist Suzy Lake. With international showings surging and a big survey about to open in Toronto, the Detroit-raised artist talks with Leah Sandals about art scars, avatars and the advantages of age.

Q Over the years, you've shifted from dramatic gestures -such as makeup masks -to subtle ones, like breathing. Why?

A The contrast between aggressive movement and quiet movement is definitely there. In 1976's *Choreographed Puppet*, I was investigating power dynamics, so the puppet was the perfect metaphor for control being in the hands of someone else. I was suspended enough off the ground that I was completely subservient to how they were pulling those straps. I did have some art scars! Since the mid-1990s, I've been working with an older body and recognizing that maturity has value. So I wanted to look at some very quiet ways to celebrate the body. Originally I did that by standing and breathing for an extended period of time -usually an hour. I chose to work in landscape or my garden because I wanted a very positive context: something lush, something beautiful. Then my printer got an über-scanner, which is eight feet long. I started scanning myself for seven to 12 minutes; the only movement was blinking, breathing, crying or coughing -some simple bodily function. I was expecting hyperrealism, but I look frozen, like my own avatar. That makes it especially wonderful to see the discrete movement. It's sign of life, a relief.

Q Since the 1970s, you've highlighted women's bodyimage issues. How have societal standards changed?

A I think barometers of beauty will always be here, but they're different now. When I was young, beauty was basically makeup and items of enhancement. Now you can really enhance yourself beyond what you can buy at the makeup counter! The idea of beauty through construct has really escalated. Yet I find, now that I'm older ... life is just so rich! It's not as frontal as I thought it was when I was younger. There's so much more pleasure, so why not celebrate this experience? Granted, you've got to work against the assumption that "I'm old enough, I should roll over and die, I've said what I've said." But really, it just keeps on getting better.

Q What about flowers in your art? They evoke beauty and maturity, too.

A Peonies and the Lido features double peonies from my garden. Peony blooms last such a short period of time, and once they open, a double peony is so heavy that the stem can't sustain the bloom. So for me the peony was that idea of ideal beauty being a construct. It's really an assisted beauty. The November after shooting the peonies, I noticed that my roses were still trying to bloom after we'd had our first frost. I started looking at how beautiful they were: not just surviving, but prevailing; not lush, but heroic. So I started photographing them as a different beauty.

Q Your early artworks resemble those of Cindy Sherman, who started later and went on to worldwide fame. How do you feel about that?

A Oh, the Suzy-Cindy thing? Well, it's almost like a market question, although it's probably not intended to be. Cindy has always, right from the very beginning, gone out of her way to give Eleanor Antin and I credit as being her influences. The thing is, Cindy as a person and as an artist is one thing, but Cindy as a commodity in the art market is a different thing. People don't want to know that there's a precedent to her, because of her value. I went to New York too early: My work that influenced her was thought of as being narcissistic and uninteresting -"women's work" as an accusation, not an adjective. So timing is everything. Ultimately, my work and her work are more different than people assume. And sure, sitting in Canada you always wonder, "How far could I have gone if I didn't go to Canada?" But those questions are irrelevant; they come up on a bad day when you're feeling sorry for yourself. I was teaching, I had a family, I loved making work. And now that I've taken early retirement to be in the studio full time, it's like, well, timing is everything, you know? All of a sudden people are interested in seeing what happened between then and now, and I couldn't be busier. So I think I'm a lucky duck, really.

Suzy Lake: Political Poetics runs May 3 to June 25 at University of Toronto Art Centre.

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