

"Noise Ghost"

by Terence Dick

More through circumstance than intent, I have been experiencing extremes of sleep deprivation lately. The most evident psychological effect has been an inability to distinguish between



waking and dreaming. I remember reading somewhere (or perhaps I only dreamt it?) that Laurie Anderson would stay up for days at a time as an aid to her creative process. For me, the results are far less productive. My thinking has been rendered less than cogent, muddled by uncertain impressions, vague memories and incoherent judgments. The one upside to having my signals increasingly crossed is that I've been led to consider the connection between noise and the unconscious. Once weakened, the dike that keeps my dream life at bay has sprung leaks and flooded my waking life. I've lost authoritative certainty and instead drift, free floating in the sign system that rushes noisily past me.

The unconscious is clearly a kind of noise we turn down in order to think straight. Straight thinking, however, is not always the desired path. There are those who are bent, who find solace, comfort or refuge in discord. Or simply reside there. Noise, a site of unregulated experience, is a place of exploration, transgression and creation. Itinerant Canadian artist Shary Boyle (currently residing in Toronto) has long traded on the noisome imagery of the unconscious or, better said, *our* unconscious with her fairy tale creatures and mythical beings. Even the formal qualities of her work, her witchcraft with light and shadow, bring about a certain disorientation. Two large wall drawings layered with occasionally projected landscapes and assorted shadow play, recently installed at the University of Toronto's Justina M Barnicke Gallery as part of "Noise Ghost," a curated duet between Boyle and Cape Dorset artist Shuvina Ashoona, best represent

the confusion of impressions that remain with us when the lights come up and we desperately try to make sense of a fading dream.

Boyle has always followed a dream logic in her depictions of the body, folding associations into one another. A drawing of a girl with elemental forces bursting out of her captures the shift from unnatural to supernatural that brings to mind the peculiar situation of the not-entirely-corporeal figure of fantasy (and I use that word not simply as a stylistic term but also with reference to its fundamental meaning). Despite their refusal to deny the body in all its truths (biological, sexual, mythical), Boyle's characters always have an aspect of ethereality. They are, after all, only drawings and, as such, the merest whiff of a real thing. But like a spirit come back to haunt us, they are a reminder that the body can't be left behind.

The real "noise ghost" (at least according to the Internet) is an Inuit poltergeist (which translates literally from the German to "noise ghost") that Ashoona inverts into "ghost noise" in Marcia Connolly's short film portrait of the artist (also showing in the gallery) and then uses as an excuse to riff on the source of her imagery. It's something to listen to but to be wary of, something scary but in the end just a drawing on a page. Ashoona defers to the pictures that come through her but, for a southerner like myself, this leaves them wrapped in another layer of noise: the static of long distances, both geographical and cultural. At risk of colonizing these mythical monsters with my own hang-ups and raising an entirely other set of ghosts, I abandon myself to confusion and leave the depicted narratives—the

communing of animals and humans, their commingling and attempts at communication—unresolved. Instead, I wonder at the bestiary and leave questions that require more cogency, such as how to make sense of Ashoona's instances of self-reflection (the drawn characters holding drawings) or her flirtation with abstraction in her more extreme accounts of the supernatural, particularly in parallel with my own assumptions about Boyle's lack of a similar inward turn, for another day. ■

"Noise Ghost," curated by Nancy Campbell and featuring a film by Marcia Connolly, was exhibited at the Justina M Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, from May 28 to August 23, 2009.

Terence Dick is a writer who lives in Toronto. He is the Toronto correspondent and editor for www.akimbo.ca.