IN/TANGIBLE PRESENCE
Hannah Claus: In / Tangible Presence
Tyler Art Gallery, SUNY Oswego
September 7 - October 6, 2012
Exhibition Organized by
Michael Flanagan, Assistant Director, Tyler Art Gallery
Lisa Roberts Seppi, Assistant Professor of Art History
State University of New York at Oswego
This exhibition is made possible with funds from
The New York State Council on the Arts Decentralization Grant Program,
a State Agency and the Cultural Resources Council, a Regional Arts Council
Additional support provided by
ARTSwego and the Student Association / Student Art Exhibition Committee
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Acknowledgements

The exhibition and catalog, *Hannah Claus: In / Tangible Presence*, was made possible with the assistance from many individuals and organizations. There are several whose contributions merit special thanks. I would especially like to extend my sincere gratitude to Michael Flanagan, Assistant Director of Tyler Art Gallery, for his tireless work and support of the project. The project has benefited greatly from his encouragement and counsel. During the planning phases he optimistically kept things on track and moving forward, he expeditiously handled all the shipping arrangements, and he expertly guided the installation team through the complex installation requirements for Claus’s work. I also wish to thank Stephanie Gamboa, Carrie Gregg, and Linda Paris for their assistance with the installation.

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Most of all, my deepest appreciation and heartfelt thanks go to Hannah Claus for her unwavering commitment to the exhibition, her professionalism and patience through the many emails discussing details of the project, and most of all, for her willingness to share her artwork and insight with us all.

Dr. Lisa Roberts Seppi, Curator
Hannah Claus:
In / Tangible Presence

“Every identity is placed, positioned, in a culture, a history. . . Every statement comes from somewhere, from somebody in particular. It insists on specificity, on conjecture. But it is not necessarily armor-plated against other identities. It is not tied to fixed, permanent, unalterable positions.”

Our identities and histories are intertwined with those of other people, other cultures from the past and present. Identity is not fixed; it has no essential, pure core. History is not a seamless, linear, coherent narrative; its meaning changes. We come to know the world and ourselves through specific constructs – both individual and collective – and through an engagement with our surroundings all of which are mobile. Coming from a mixed heritage, Hannah Claus knows this only too well and has engaged with these ideas in her work for over a decade. In her mixed media installations and sculptures Claus merges traditional art forms such as beadwork and encaustic painting with new media like photography, digital imagery, and video in order to rethink the cultural, historical, and personal boundaries that define one’s sense of self. In her work Claus combines materials ranging from interfacing, quilts, and seed beads to fiber optics, graphite, and reprography film along with arduous, repetitive processes in order to underscore the tenuous and fluctuating relationship between memory, the body, place, and identity.

Born in 1969 in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, Claus was raised in nearby Saint John by her European-Canadian mother and Tyendinaga Mohawk father. A member of the Bay of Quinte Mohawks, Claus completed her Masters of Fine Arts in Studio Arts at Concordia University in Montreal in 2004. In 1997 she received her Associate of the Ontario College of Art and Design Diploma with Honours in Fine Arts from the OCAD in Toronto. In that same year she produced her first installation, dialogue-complicité [Figure 1], exploring the idea of cross-cultural communication. Claus was raised to think of herself as Mohawk and European. In producing dialogue-complicité Claus responded to multiculturalism’s interest in diversity as well as postmodern theories of identity current at the time, both of which fostered investigations into individual experience.

Using the physical attributes and formal aesthetic of post-minimalism, dialogue-complicité is comprised of four hanging rectangular latex panels containing photo transfer images of teacups and saucers with rocks scattered about the floor. The size and shape of the suspended panels

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correspond to the human body while the luminous, tactile qualities of latex relates to skin.

The teacups are her mothers (which she inherited from Claus’s grandmother). They are personal items that bring back childhood memories for Claus of having to match cups with saucers of different patterns for use in the family home. As such the teacups reference social gatherings and the culturally specific protocols, codes of conduct, rituals, or customs that often accompany such meetings. The teacups also hark back to traditional gender roles in the home and the British tradition of afternoon tea emulated by children playing with tea sets. In this work Claus acknowledges the play of gender on subjectivity but also the extent to which gender is a cultural construct in the way mother’s, for example, teach their children cultural traditions as well as social mores.

Claus’s mother is European while her father is Mohawk. Mohawk culture is matrilineal therefore one’s status and clan affiliation descends from the female line. Although Claus does not explicitly treat her Mohawk heritage in this work, the stones strewn about the floor might be read as symbolic of cultural memory in general or pertaining to indigenous cultures specifically. Many indigenous peoples cultural customs are founded upon a close connection with place and reverence for nature and land. The rocks are enduring and of the earth. They hold memories of the earth’s history in the same way that people, through the act of remembering, insure the ongoing existence of their cultural heritage. The rocks suggest permanence whereas the latex panels are non-permanent and indeed fragile to conditions of time and environment. Despite their material permanence, the stones are not fixed but rather they are held in place by gravity. They impede the viewer’s ability to move easily around the panels, even barring one from achieving a closer inspection of the work. At the same time one could ignore the rocks and carelessly kick them out of the way. In a similar respect cultural traditions provide a firm foundation for identity. They can also hinder communication, making it difficult for individuals from different cultural backgrounds from fully understanding one another.

Claus’s work embraces the more positive view of hybrid identity offered by postmodernism and the postcolonial view of transcultural interaction as one of negotiation and exchange. Her work also eschews the cultural baggage experienced by many First Nations artists born and raised on reservations and reserves, whose upbringing in a traditional cultural context typically exposes them to conditions of poverty and racism. Nonetheless, the title of this work harbors more threatening connotations as dialogue suggests an open exchange with all the informality and harmlessness of a conversation between equals or at least between individuals unconcerned with status and power relations.

Complicité, however, suggests something different as it also denotes corruption or collusion. The literal French translation refers to one’s involvement in a questionable activity or crime, suggesting that the dialogue between cultures (or the cultural constructs that code our identity) are never neutral.

Figure 1: dialogue - complicité, 1997

Figure 3: les plaies, 1999
correspond to the human body while the luminous, tactile qualities of latex relates to skin.ii The teacups are her mothers (which she inherited from Claus’s grandmother). They are personal items that bring back childhood memories for Claus of having to match cups with saucers of different patterns for use in the family home. As such the teacups reference social gatherings and the culturally specific protocols, codes of conduct, rituals, or customs that often accompany such meetings. The teacups also hark back to traditional gender roles in the home and the British tradition of afternoon tea emulated by children playing with tea sets. In this work Claus acknowledges the play of gender on subjectivity but also the extent to which gender is a cultural construct in the way mother’s, for example, teach their children cultural traditions as well as social mores.

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ii Hannah Claus, interview with author, August 1, 2011.
iii Hannah Claus, e-mail message to author, July 17, 2012.
In a later work, skystrip, from 2006, Claus uses stones to convey similar ideas about the delicate and difficult nature of communication. Skystrip is comprised of a twenty-foot long banner digitally printed with photographs of clouds with threads attached from the banner to stones lying on the floor. The individual threads are tied around the stones, creating a complex web that does not become visible until one is very close. Although the threads do not touch each other they cross one another, creating a barrier between the viewer's body and the clouds. The threads are sewn into the banner, becoming physically part of the cloud-sky image. They also pull to lift it from the wall and in doing so dimensionally animate the clouds.

The pattern created by the various types of clouds portrayed in the banner is meant to suggest an Iroquois or Haudenosaunee wampum belt. The term wampum refers to white and purple disk-shaped or cylindrical beads made from marine shell. These beads were often woven into long belts or collars used to mark significant cultural events. For example, the unification of the original five Iroquois nations, leading to the creation of the League of the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Confederacy, finds its original visual expression in the Hiawatha belt, an historic wampum belt that contains graphic symbols for each nation (Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Onondaga) connected by a single line. Another well-known wampum belt is the Two Row wampum comprised of two parallel lines, which records the first peace treaty between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch government in upstate New York in 1613. Although Claus's cloud pattern doesn't emulate a particular wampum belt exactly, it is meant to suggest the underlying principle of harmonious co-existence and mutual respect between sovereign nations / two cultures signified by both of these historic examples.

The horizontal arrangement of the cloud-sky image reads as a horizon line, suggesting open and infinite space. Equated with images of nature or land, this sky-earth image also conveys timelessness and that which is enduring. Humanities role in maintaining the earth, thus ensuring its continuation, is a responsibility just as each party addressed by the Two Row wampum must play a part if the negotiated agreement and relationship is to continue. The invisible threads (invisible from a distance) metaphorically speak to the idea of mutual dependence, the ties that bind us all, and the fragility of that bond-connection if ignored (if our responsibility as caretakers is ignored). The taut guides lines that animate the clouds also tether them, meaning if a line breaks a portion of the clouds will become inanimate, lifeless and inert. Claus's visible/invisible lines are connectors between space and matter. They metaphorically speak to the delicate balance that exists between all things (some obvious, some not) and serve as subtle reminders that humanity must always be cognizant of its connection to all animate and inanimate things. The rocks used in skystrip are local to the installation site, furthering illustrating the connection between place and people.

In another work titled les plaies from 1999, Claus continues to use her medium, motifs and process to suggest the body (and investigate...
In a later work, *skystrip*, from 2006 [Figures 2.1-2.2], Claus uses stones to convey similar ideas about the delicate and difficult nature of communication. *Skystrip* is comprised of a twenty-foot long banner digitally printed with photographs of clouds with threads attached from the banner to stones lying on the floor. The individual threads are tied around the stones, creating a complex web that does not become visible until one is very close. Although the threads do not touch each other they cross one another, creating a barrier between the viewer's body and the clouds. The threads are sewn into the banner, becoming physically part of the cloud-sky image. They also pull to lift it from the wall and in doing so dimensionally animate the clouds.

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In another work titled *les plaies* from 1999 [Figure 3], Claus continues to use her medium, motifs and process to suggest the body (and investigate
cultural and gender identity). Les plaies is a series of four two-foot square panels (only two are exhibited here) comprised of uneven layers of unpigmented beeswax built up around imprinted doily patterns, which are based upon crocheted doilies. The color and translucent properties of beeswax combine with the dark red abstracted, organic motifs to suggest exterior and interior views of the human body, as if one were viewing cells under a microscope or looking at bloody scabs or lesions upon the flesh. The raised and repeating surface bumps are juxtaposed against the relatively smooth skin-colored background creating tension and a dialogue between inside and outside, tactile and visual, geometry and free form, unsightliness and beauty, which is reminiscent of the post-minimal work of Eva Hess, Jackie Ferrera, Hannah Wilke, Michelle Stuart, and Dorthea Rockburne.

In dialogue-complicité the teacups represent civilized culture and gender writ large upon the latex bodies. They speak directly to the way our identities are socially mapped upon our skins so to speak. In les plaies the mapping of Victorian doilies upon beeswax skin contains hints of aggression. Doilies are crocheted mats used to protect and decorate furniture. Here, however, they bear the marks of an injury to the flesh as the title literally translates “wound.” For some, including Claus, this wound is a “colonial wound” and the reference to European doilies addresses the colonization process entailing the forced assimilation and acculturation of indigenous people across the globe by European and American nations.iii

There are other gendered readings one might think of as well. Traditionally European women crocheted doilies for use in the family home and as such they signify ideal domesticity and feminine productivity. At the peak of their popularity these seemingly innocuous hand-crafted objects spoke to decorative tastes, values, and ambitions -- in other words their cultural meaning lies in their ability to function as markers of social class. Now valued more as family keepsakes than works of art, they also speak to the devalued artistry of Victorian women and decorative art in general. Through Claus’s use of domestic themes and techniques she examines family life and the home as one aspect of the female experience (Louise Bourgeois did this by merging the female body with the house itself in Femme Maison). In foregrounding stereotypically “feminine” techniques like crocheting for the purpose of producing aesthetically pleasing utilitarian objects for the home, Claus also confronts the dichotomy between the public realms of high or fine art (long considered the province of men) and the private realm of domestic culture where the creative work of women is degraded as craft, decorative, or low art (which, incidentally, is the same attitude historically applied to the art of indigenous peoples). Here, however, Claus merges the two so that the low or decorative art forms relegated to the sphere of women intersects with the public, male dominated realm of high art -- modern abstract painting.

In a series of works made from 2000-2004 Claus references Colonial history, expressed through domestic design, and Haudenosaunee or Iroquois beadwork patterns in order to explicitly explore the areas of overlap and
transformation in relation to her dual heritage. Here the confluence of European and Haudenosaunee textile arts continue to serve as aesthetic signifiers of language, gender, and culture, expressing the desire to be part of a community as well as communicate one’s individual identity.

*He didn’t know her name* [Figure 4.1-4.2] from 2000 was made to honor Claus’s paternal great-grandmother, the last full-blooded Mohawk woman in her family. According to the Mohawk matrilineal clan system, one’s status is passed on through the mother’s lineage as opposed to the European patriarchal system favoring the father’s family line. *He didn’t know her name* marks Claus’s attempt to reconnect with and reclaim her Mohawk heritage by researching her family genealogy. The title refers to the realities of her upbringing; removed from a traditional Mohawk context and raised by a non-Native mother and Mohawk father who knew little of his family, including his great grandmother’s name, Claus’s work speaks to knowledge lost through the colonization process – names, history, and culture.

*He didn’t know her name* is comprised of a woman’s shirt made of paper adorned with pinpricked motifs along the lower edge and dried Queen Ann’s Lace flowers suspended inside. The shirt is based upon a pattern of an Iroquois woman’s blouse from around 1870 and the pierced motifs reference traditional Iroquois beadwork. Beaded clothing designs have always communicated Iroquois identity and fundamental values related to the environment, cosmology, and cultural affiliations. Claus’s curvilinear dot patterns are reminiscent of the Iroquois sky dome and tree of life motifs found on traditional and contemporary beaded clothing. Half-circles, which represent the sky dome or upper world in Iroquois cosmology, are a common iconographic symbol that incorporates the universe as a whole. The upper universe or sky dome surrounds the earth and provides it with light and life. From the centers of half-circles often project double curve motifs or the Great Tree of Peace, a symbol denoting the guiding principles of righteousness, justice and health or “the power of the good mind.”

According to Claus she chose to make her blouse from paper because she learned about her heritage through books, not oral teachings or first hand experience with Mohawk cultural traditions. In a similar vein the pierced dot patterns replace real beads, marking their absence while simultaneously asserting their presence. The pierced holes are physically tangible, while the beads are not. The holes are reminders or place markers for what should be there; they metaphorically reference loss. And yet, in their emphatic implied presence they reaffirm the importance of beadwork and the role Iroquois women play in maintaining cultural identity. Among the Iroquois beadwork was typically the prerogative of women. It aligned them and their ability to bring into existence another cycle of life with the cyclical patterns of all life -- past, present, and future. Beadwork techniques, like cultural knowledge, are passed down generationally. In lieu of real beads Claus, who is not a bead worker, undertakes the time-consuming, repetitive and delicate process of piercing paper, creating a

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he didn't know her name, 2000 - 2001
language from her Braille-like dot patterns. Beadwork patterns in an Iroquois context are a visual language and Claus has stated, “I think of pattern as language. It is something that surrounds us, creating multiple networks of meaning through repetition, shape and line.”

In another work titled *contract* (2000-2001) [Figure 5.1-5.2], Claus creates an organic or vegetal design using red seed beads against a charcoal grey background of interfacing. Above exists a looped video of the artist’s hands beading the long scroll like panel that extends below. In this work we see Claus attempting to forge and define an historical connection to her heritage in her own terms. According to Claus, “interfacing usually provides reinforcement to collars and seams, hidden under or within the surface of a garment. On its own, its fragility is exposed by the collective accumulated weight of the individual seed beads. As a person of mixed heritage, I wondered what sort of authentic pattern could come from my hands. The looped video of my hands beading records the never-ending process.”

Throughout her work Claus addresses the idea of “reinterpretation and personal understanding of culture and language” gained through connections made between “past and present,” but also through the activity of creation, process, and pattern. She also reaffirms the postmodern notion of identity as mobile -- as always in process or a state of becoming -- through the metaphor of endless beading. In *contract* Claus invented the design for the beaded portion and in the final work we see the irregular distortions of the hand-drawn line. The hand-drawn quality of the beaded forms conveys the artist’s presence, but it is shaky and tenuous. The beaded lines appear tentative bearing the mark of uncertainty and/or inexperience with the technique as opposed to the brilliant luster of the red seed beads. The looped video of the artist’s hands beading conveys, through repetition, her desire to insert herself into this history and culture despite the lack of experience or knowledge to ground her. The timid or hesitant quality of the red lines is echoed by the fragility and translucence of the interfacing to which the beads are attached. According to Claus she uses translucent materials “to express a loss, as well as to make a tenuous claim over past histories.”

In *contract* Claus designed her own beaded pattern as a way to enter into a dialogue with her Mohawk ancestry, in *my house that I had*, 2004 [Figure 6.1-6.2], she appropriates the visual language of European interior design and Haudenosaunee beadwork to further explore and critique the areas of overlap between different cultures. In this work fifteen small houses that read as generic European-American style houses are covered in paper screen printed with three wallpaper patterns based upon preexisting patterns belonging to the collection of Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England (Owen Jones, c. 1852-1874, lace produced by Cole and Sons (Wallpapers) Ltd, as part of their “Bardfield” series, c. 1938, and pattern of leaves and flowers produced by Arthur Sanderson and Sons Ltd., from the series “Wallpaper for the small home”, c. 1950).

v Robert Houle, Hannah Claus, Bonnie Devine: adjacent, nonlinear = contigu, non linéaire (Gatineau, Quebec: Indian and Inuit Art Gallery, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2004), n.p.
vii Hannah Claus, e-mail message to author, July 30, 2011.
viii Houle, Hannah Claus, Bonnie Devine, n.p.
my house
that I had,
2004

my house
that I had,
2004

credit: Lawrence Cook
The houses are dimly lit from within and lined up horizontally upon a shallow wooden shelf. The linear arrangement along with their diminutive scale causes them to read like souvenirs or trinkets on display. The repeating line of patterned houses with their soft, glowing internal lights also suggest a sense of community, vaguely reminiscent of tract housing in 1950s-60s suburbia, and conformity or the desire to belong and fit in. The houses Claus has constructed are similar to the Victorian brick house she grew up in. They are also similar to the type of houses commonly found on reservations throughout North America, both of which were instituted by Canadian and American governments to “civilize” the indigenous populations. As such the implied community of single-family western style homes radically contrasts with the multiple-family dwelling of the Haudenosaunee longhouse and the basic cultural values upon which it is based. In western culture home ownership signifies the wealth and status of the individual whereas in many Native cultures one’s contributions to the community at large are more important than individual success.

Upon closer inspection one notices another pattern barely visible through the busy wallpaper prints, a pattern comprised of pinpricked dots based upon Iroquois beadwork patterns. The faint Iroquois patterns must compete for visual attention against the busy western wallpaper prints covering the exterior surfaces, which continually threatens to consume them. As with les plaies, here too we see a tension between interior and exterior. That which is normally reserved for the interior, for lining the walls of traditional Victorian homes, is used to wrap the outer body of the families protective shell, the home, while the Iroquois inspired pinpricks tenaciously resist complete absorption. Through the juxtaposition of western wallpaper prints with Iroquois beadwork patterns Claus continues to examine the cross-cultural dialogue between native and non-native and the extent to which their identities/histories are mutually constitutive. She also investigates the body and home (familial and cultural) as sites of intervention and resistance within those identities/histories.

In recent work like Blue Nordic: reflection on river rock [Figure 7], cloud, untitled (winter), or question de temps [Figure 9.1-9.2], identified as “sensorial landscapes,” Claus articulates the psychological and physical connections between nature, place or space and people’s sense of self. This work is characterized by an engagement with sensory experiences of the body and mobility, thus underscoring the delicate balance between our identities and our surroundings. In Blue Nordic: reflection on river rock, viewer’s look upon a circular bed of rocks, roughly five foot in diameter, upon which is projected the J & G Meakin chinaware pattern known as “Blue Nordic.” Blue Nordic is a blue on white pattern comprised of floral, leaf and vine motifs. As viewer’s gaze upon the patterned rocks they hear the sound of dripping water, and with each water droplet the china pattern is visually disrupted as is the otherwise silent room. Through sound, movement and scale Claus transforms the gallery space into a contemplative site of physical sensations.
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In recent work like Blue Nordic: reflection on river rock [Figure 7], cloud, untitled (winter) [Figure 8.1-9.2], identified as “sensorial landscapes,” Claus articulates the psychological and physical connections between nature, place or space and people’s sense of self. This work is characterized by an engagement with sensory experiences of the body and mobility, thus underscoring the delicate balance between our identities and our surroundings. In Blue Nordic: reflection on river rock, viewer’s look upon a circular bed of rocks, roughly five foot in diameter, upon which is projected the J & G Meakin chinaware pattern known as “Blue Nordic.” Blue Nordic is a blue on white pattern comprised of floral, leaf and vine motifs. As viewer’s gaze upon the patterned rocks they hear the sound of dripping water, and with each water droplet the china pattern is visually disrupted as is the otherwise silent room. Through sound, movement and scale Claus transforms the gallery space into a contemplative site of physical sensations.
Although *Blue Nordic* subtly continues Claus’s theme of intercultural dialogue with the stones and western domestic design, the work also contends with themes of nature and space. Here stones are brought inside to encourage contemplation of the natural world that exists outside the artificial space of the gallery in a manner reminiscent of Robert Smithson’s “Non-sites” from the late 1960s. This same idea informs the use of local rocks in *skystrip*. Viewers are meant to think about nature in general as well as their local environment specifically. As viewers contemplate the rocks (their solidity, enduring presence, sense of geological history) the quiet ambience and tranquility of the work and the space, which encourages a reflective, meditative mood, is regularly interrupted by the sound of dripping water that is actually water dripping from a broken faucet.

Like a public fountain or small waterfall sculptures marketed for the home, there is a visual and aural tension at play in this work that underscores the irony of composing artificial garden landscapes to replace or replicate real contact with our natural surroundings. *Blue Nordic* directly confronts the relationship between people and space, inside and outside, and artificial and natural environments. Many want to feel as though they are surrounded by nature, but a pristine, manicured nature where the grass and garden are bug and weed free. Moreover, in today’s digitally dominated world one cannot help but think about virtual reality. Are there significant differences between reproducing nature for urban settings and the simulated worlds of reality TV or cyberspace? In the 1950s and 60s artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol, along with critics like Jean Baudrillard, pointed out that our sense of reality and our experiences with the world were mediated by consumer culture. Visual images were constructing our reality, not the other way around. This was said to usher in the postmodern condition.

The circular formation of stones in *Blue Nordic* is related to the overall gestalt of elliptical shapes compromising *untitled (winter)* of 2011 (Figure 8) and *question de temps* from 2012. The multisensory components in *Blue Nordic* heighten our awareness of our perceiving bodies in relation to the surrounding physical space. At the same time we are made aware of barriers – the physical barriers of the gallery, the work, and even our own bodies. In *untitled (winter)*, stones have been transformed into repeating oval shapes that appear to float against the wall. The variously sized, flat, grey ovals are adhered to pins individually mounted to a blank background (originally shown without its current glass frame). At first the metallic surface sheen confuses – what reads like metal disks is actually graphite covered reprography film. Intrigued by the process of fabrication, the material conditions/physicality of the work compels our attention. The shimmering, reflective surfaces would seem to cancel the illusionism of one-point perspective much like the use of gold leaf backgrounds found in Byzantine and Renaissance altarpieces. Here, however, shimmering disks are dimensionally mounted on the wall, projecting into and engaging the viewer’s space. Depending upon the viewers location and how the light
Although Blue Nordic subtly continues Claus's theme of intercultural dialogue with the stones and western domestic design, the work also contends with themes of nature and space. Here stones are brought inside to encourage contemplation of the natural world that exists outside the artificial space of the gallery in a manner reminiscent of Robert Smithson's "Non-sites" from the late 1960s. This same idea informs the use of local rocks in skystrip. Viewers are meant to think about nature in general as well as their local environment specifically. As viewers contemplate the rocks (their solidity, enduring presence, sense of geological history) the quiet ambience and tranquility of the work and the space, which encourages a reflective, meditative mood, is regularly interrupted by the sound of dripping water that is actually water dripping from a broken faucet.

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The circular formation of stones in Blue Nordic is related to the overall gestalt of elliptical shapes compromising untitled (winter) of 2011 [Figure 8] and question de temps from 2012. The multisensory components in Blue Nordic heighten our awareness of our perceiving bodies in relation to the surrounding physical space. At the same time we are made aware of barriers – the physical barriers of the gallery, the work, and even our own bodies. In untitled (winter), stones have been transformed into repeating oval shapes that appear to float against the wall. The variously sized, flat, grey oval shapes are adhered to pins individually mounted to a blank background (originally shown without its current glass frame). At first the metallic surface sheen confuses – what reads like metal disks is actually graphite covered reprography film. Intrigued by the process of fabrication, the material conditions/physicality of the work compels our attention. The shimmering, reflective surfaces would seem to cancel the illusionism of one-point perspective much like the use of gold leaf backgrounds found in Byzantine and Renaissance altarpieces. Here, however, shimmering disks are dimensionally mounted on the wall, projecting into and engaging the viewer's space. Depending upon the viewers location and how the light [Figure 9.2] (detail) question de temps, 2012

[Figure 9.1] question de temps, 2012

credit: Guy L’Heureux
catches the surfaces, the ovals can appear as flat, dark shapes or gleaming, shimmering orbs – the one punctures space, recedes, and absorbs light while the other refracts light and advances in space. The result is a work that underscores its own tangible, material presence while simultaneously undermining it, suggesting that which is intangible or imperceptible.

If taken literally the title compels reflection about the qualities of winter ranging from the quiet, cool, dreary, stillness of its grey skies to its sparkling, ice-covered surfaces and bright, glistening fresh snow. But there is more to it than this. Claus’s work explores how the microscopic relates to and underpins the macrocosm. Her work is informed by this interest in looking at the tiniest of elements from the abstract cell forms in les plaies to the conceptual water droplets in variations, cloud, untitled (winter), and question de temps. As the artist states, “Clouds are basically masses of suspended drops of water in the sky, constantly shifting. I’m interested in the idea of these microscopic individual elements that come together to form a whole: the patterns, shapes and forms they create.”x In focusing on basic, fundamental elements – rendered as simple, single units in complex arrangements – she conceptually and metaphorically addresses the elaborate interconnectedness of all things. “I have been working with the oval shape in installations and drawings. Its form retains my interest in that it suggests something microscopic and intangible, such as molecules of water or air as well as something solid, enduring and present, like a stone. These elements complete each other.”xii

The hundreds of white ovals vertically suspended on strings to create the enigmatic cloud-like work titled cloud (2010) become, in the graphite covered examples used in question de temps, storm clouds. The experience of these two works is dynamic; they demand interaction and mobility. Both cloud and question de temps are constructed of hundreds of ovals cut from reprography film that are adhered with glue to hundreds of strings suspended from the ceiling. The strings move with wind currents and the individual ovals may move as well, as they are not permanently affixed to the strings upon which they hang. Viewing distance also makes a tremendous impact upon one’s conceptual and perceptual experience of the work. Much like a rain cloud seen off in the distance, we see vertical striations of rain in the sky before we experience its effects. In a less literal reading the strings form a complex network that holds it all together, despite appearing to be physically precarious, and also erects a teasing barrier for the viewer.

Claus’s interest in expressing sensory experiences rooted in the physical body positions her within a large contingency of installations artists and sculptors whose work embraces the phenomenological ideas expressed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In opposition to the mind-body split cherished by Cartesian dualism, along with its celebration of vision as the superior sight, Merleau-Ponty argued that the body was the seat of all perception. The body is the condition and the context through which we engage the world. Merleau-Ponty also argued that one does not rely on a single sense.

Our senses are imbricated; they work together simultaneously and are mutually comprehensive. For him the body was an active body using all of its senses at the same time. In these later works of art, Claus replaces the more intellectually driven investigations into identity with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied experience, exploring the physical, emotional, and psychological as well as conceptual parameters of subjectivity.

Through Claus’s reference to oral narratives, historical documents, and visual art, she identifies and utilizes multiple language systems through which meaning is conveyed. Although much of her work stems from personal history, the mix of cultural meanings and motifs is meant to broaden interpretive possibilities and connections for the viewer, ultimately inviting us to contemplate our shared histories. She reminds us that our perceptions, knowledge, memories and identities are contingent upon so many factors – past and present – that they are fleeting and therefore things are not always what they seem to be. Increasingly her work has focused more on natural phenomenon such as water, stones, clouds, and sky in order to shift the emphasis from examining the dialogue between cultures to questions dealing with the broader relationship between people and their world. Although some of these motifs have culturally specific meanings, the goal is to treat them as “basic components of our atmosphere and physical world,” which form a “part of everyone’s daily existence.” She uses elements like stones and clouds because they address basic repeating forms found in nature. They are known physical entities that suggest permanence and yet, a cloud is really just a collection of air and water molecules that temporarily come together. It is ephemeral. Hence, whether we are looking at circular beads, pierced holes, rocks, crocheted doilies, cells, water molecules, or an oval shape, they function as mnemonic devices that engage us in a metaphysical dialogue about our own physical being and the shifting nature of that existence.

Dr. Lisa Roberts Seppi,

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State University of New York at Oswego

xiii Unpublished artist statement, April 2012.
Exhibition checklist:


For Hannah Claus’s exhibition and award history please visit her blog. http://hannahclaus.blogspot.com
Exhibition checklist:


4. he didn't know her name, 2001. Mixed media on paper, 37 x 23 ½ x 8 inches. Collection of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Canada.


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