

# Ardent Spaces, Formidable Environments

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## Invocations

One long take: a broken bowl in the middle of the frame encircled by hands. One sound: the grind of broken pieces fitted back together by fingers. The scraping sound both grating and reassuring—you must listen closely to its jagged, insistent rhythms that intone the puzzle of chards of pottery. These sounds notate thinking through performing, figuring it out through piecing it together.

No face.

No body.

No identity.

No location.

Only hands.

Encircled.

Enfolded.

The only place that matters is the bowl in front of the camera. A bowl, half-shattered, half-whole, its roundness both real and implied, broken and whole, round and jagged. An endless cycle: assembled, taken apart, and fit together again, cradled in a woman's hands, holding together an object that can fall apart within a larger world beyond the screen.

This film, Dana Claxton's *Hope* (2007), emblemizes what is at stake in the Canadian feminist experimental film and video work in *Fierce*: hands around pieces to open up spaces for a relational location, an empathetic practice, an ardent public address, a newly landscaped ecosystem.



**Dana Claxton**  
*Hope*, 2007  
(9:51 min; video)

**Dana Claxton**  
*Buffalo Bone China*,  
1997–ongoing  
Multi-media installation  
Installation detail  
Photo: Don Hall

Sharp edges.

New sounds.

Spaces between.

Spaces inside.

Space connected.

Invocations.

The established media artists showcased in *Fierce: Women's Hot-Blooded Film/Video*—Dana Claxton, b.h. Yael, Maureen Bradley, and Allyson Mitchell—peel open how international feminist media practices have utterly transformed. New vectors and new interrogations have sprouted out of the compost of identity politics and legacy forms.

For example, with its long continuous take in extreme close up of a naked woman's back, Bradley's *Birthday Suit Management* (2001) generates a new cartography of the body. It layers four gazes: the medical gaze of chiropractors, massage therapists, physiotherapists, acupuncturists, and doctors; the probing gaze of the camera evoking aerial shots of landscape; the spectator's contradictory voyeurism of a desexualized body inscribed by long sensuous camera movements; and a woman's autobiographical retelling of medical interventions after an accident.

Legacy forms of feminist media practices mobilized multiple bodies of evidence, ranging from amateur film, interviews, animation, formal interventions, and voice-overs to speak through silence, and, as a result, created hybridized forms that combined genres. Inserting images to absences, these

legacy modes refuted logocentrism with heterogeneity.

In contrast, the works in *Fierce* move beyond the text as an index for identity formation and identification: invocations of a relational politics, they summon spectators into flexible environments. The mix of screenings, installations, loops, and viewing stations of this exhibition emblemize this conceptual movement into fluidities and sensualities.

The myriad genres traversed in this exhibition—experimental, documentary, performative, hybrid, popular

**Maureen Bradley**

*Birthday Suit Management: a  
21C Homage to Lisa Steele*, 2001  
(10 min; digital video)





culture, found footage, hand processing, installation—torque how we think through and enter into feminist aesthetics and politics. They unsettle a singular, easy-to-label feminist media practice. Their pluralities of address crack open the liminal zones between the public and the private. Their transversals between the regional, the local, the national, and the global disconnect space from geography.

A visual zen koan, Mitchell's *Melty Kitty* (2006) condenses these pluralities and transversals: a candle in the shape of a cat burns and melts while sweetly lilting voices sing "Suicide is Painless," the theme song from the movie and television series *M\*A\*S\*H*. The image suggests candles lit in Catholic churches to remember the dead, but also invoke the private, the pop, the public, the pun.

## Polyphonies

In most narrative cinemas around the globe, music shores up the phallogentric narrative drive: an undercurrent, it expresses emotion beyond the verbal. It feels for us. It fills in the unknown spaces between action and character with excesses never spoken.

Music enters the body but is, ultimately, disembodied.

The works in this exhibition fiercely reverse the function of music, thwarting instrumental directionality. Alluding to popular culture, music video, and opera, the works align music with discourse, with description, with declarations, with analytics.

*precious little tiny love* (2003), by Allyson Mitchell, suggests this polyphonic form with its one continuous take of the image broken into four quadrants, each with a statuette of a plastic lamb, a pig, a rabbit, or deer in the billowing prairie. A woman's voice sings about what she eats, "I wish I didn't eat animals 'cause they don't eat me," and "I don't eat white flour, white sugar makes you rot." The animal figurines contrast with the natural setting. The song adds another layer to the image, moving beyond this binary of natural/unnatural with a languishing indie rock aria about food consumption.

In these works, music invites the spectator into a participatory relation by offering an opening, a passage, a dialogic interaction. Layered with other images, these works generate polyphonic structures.

Electronic dance music pounds through Claxton's *I Want To Know Why* (1994) over iconic, clichéd Western images of First Nations people and landscapes made more abstract through reduction to black and white pixels. The images function as motifs for new fugal structures, where two images flank another or are laid down in a strip alongside another image. The electronic dance music mixes with a voice describing the racism and poverty: "My grandmother died of alcohol poisoning in a skid row hotel room ... I want to know why," and "My mother OD'd at the age of 37 and I want to know why." This piece interrogates the idea that image is evidence; it proposes fugal recombinations to prompt new understandings and knowledges.

The sound no longer serves the image, narrative temporal advancement, or emotion. In a postmodern sense, the sounds no longer create ironies through disjunctures. Rather, the sound designs in these pieces build new structures out of layers with different melodic lines intersecting, crossing, doubling.

This relational politics sustains the polyphonic epistemology of Claxton's *Buffalo Bone China* (1997). It offers an empathic ritual to contemplate the First Nations loss of the buffalo and the transformation of buffalo bones into china. With slow motion shots of stampeding buffalo, a First Nations man screaming, a pink set of china edged with gold, long black hair dragged over the plates, and superimposed frames of buffalo skulls, this piece suggests the rites of the dead. The non-directional electronic soundscape inaugurates suspended temporalities of contemplation and participation.

The pieces in *Fierce* revamp image and sound relationships. They compose new feminist fugues in different keys.

Minor.

Major.

Pianissimo.

Forte.

Exercises.

Exorcisms.

## Microterritories

The public and the private, the local and the global, the garden and the environmental coil into each other in these works. These comminglings and crossings sustain and define a feminist environmental politics located in the tactile and the sensual, the reconfigured and the reconceptualized. This exhibition maps how feminist media politics have moved in new directions, beyond their legacy formations in the 1970s and 1980s. With its backward home movie images of a parade with floats of women, platform divers spiraling into a lake, and pulsating trance music, Claxton's *Anwolek Regatta City* (2005) probes the colonization of First Nation space by pageantry and public parades. Locations are imagined differently, with many fluid, intersecting layers in constant relational and interconnected movement.

At first, Mitchell's *My Life in 5 Minutes* (2000) reads like a simple feminist queer autobiography: it jettisons the confines of the heterosexual nuclear family and weight-watching for the liberations of lesbian collective identity and full bodiedness. Punning the feminist autobiographical trope, *My Life* is composed almost entirely from family snapshots. However, in contrast to earlier feminist works, *My Life* constructs a microterritory of a more complexly queered identity with the addition of folk-art-like drawings of a woman's face with words



delineating traumas such as lost control, bulimia, ill-wishers, and cellulite. Rather than a diary-like voice-over speaking that which is not spoken, the filmmaker sings a ballad about her life history—"Traveled around a lot and now I'm gay"—that challenges the idea of pathos embedded in the "voice" of documentary.

*What I Remember* (1998) and *Stranded* (2004), by Maureen Bradley, engage the environment even more explicitly. With shots of insects in bowls montaged with home-movie-inflected imagery of a young girl, *What I Remember* graphs the parallels between childhood visual memories, the natural, and queer identities. The voice-over—or is it a performance or a parable or a put-on or a fantasy?—tells how a young woman met her first girlfriend.

In *Stranded*, a woman's voice describes Charlotte, a young woman repulsed by her dead hair cells. Underwater shots of various sea life in aquariums and aboveground shots of grasses and trees sustain a microterritory of dead and living cells. While the voice-over suggests phobias and obsessions, the images engage a bigger world beyond the human, teeming with life emerging from wreckage or encasement.

Arab/Jewish partnerships, walls, and the blurred domains between public and private convergences in Palestine and Israel form another microterritory in b.h. Yael's *a hot sandfilled wind* (2005). This winding together of separate domains is visualized by the layering of images of Israeli street scenes, the rubble of destroyed homes, a public market, and traveling shots through city streets. Women in Black demonstrators against the Israeli occupation hold up "This Wall Must Fall" signs. A group of Israelis work with Palestinians to rebuild a bulldozed home. The film ends at a swimming hole, where people laugh while swimming in the water. Throughout, intertitles cascade through the frame in both Hebrew and Arabic, doubling each other and the voice-over, embedding a verbal microterritory of peace into the images themselves. "In this land, the ground is haunted, and each wind has a name," intones the voice-over, based on a poem by Nadia Habib. "We have nothing else without the other."

These works figure the environment as an in-between zone engendering active manipulation, sensuous engagement, and incessant negotiation with war, genocide, health, identities, histories, sexualities, disabilities, autobiographies, land, sea, borders. These works posit outposts from the larger, more hierarchical—and destructive—constructs of nations and fixed identities. They also insist that the quotidian, the discarded, and the handicraft are neglected feminist environments, microterritories of dialogic relation where the private and the political curl into each other.

### Ardent Space

The feminist project in *Fierce* converts the linear, forward drive of the temporal into an open horizontal space. These works cluster together different ideas, image sources, modes. They blend—but do not blur—elements, politics, spaces, positions, discourses, and aesthetics into endless unfoldings and enfoldings.



**b.h. Yael**  
*a hot sandfilled wind*, 2006  
 (13 min; digital video)

The moving camera in Yael's *(of)fences* (2001) visually refutes the spatial limitations of the metal fences erected to block demonstrators from the Québec City FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) meetings. With slowed-down images of protesters with large Xs over their mouths, helmeted police with shields, and complex electronic sound, *(of)fences* winds together action and contemplation. An incantation and critique, text superimposes on the image: "fences require martial forces, inequities ... maintain elites ... deny access." The piece ends with: "fences preclude listening ... fences enter my dreams."

Against the sensationalism, spectacle, and emotional excess of the melodrama and action genres, these works insist upon the tangible politics of everyday objects: bowls, rugs, plates, home movies, walls, fences, vegetables in markets, candles, grass, water, snapshots.

These works figure the hand, the handmade, and the hand-held as tactile interfaces, a constant refusal to accept the world as it is. They remake the world through blending, weaving, superimposing, folding. An anti-war homage to Canadian feminist filmmaker Joyce Wieland, *Afghanimation* (2008), by Allyson Mitchell, features a tableau shot of a rug woven by an anonymous Afghan woman in a refugee camp. Grenades and tanks in each corner surround a veiled woman. In stop motion, a woman covers the rug by hand with colorful pieces of crochet and then, over that, tapes pages from *The Toronto Star*.

In *Fierce*, media work blends discourses, practices, and spectators, enfolding the polarizations, oppositions, and contradictions of earlier feminist works. A complex video essay on global warming, environmental degradation, secularism, apocalyptic visions, and disaster, Yael's *Trading the Future* (2008) enacts a layered open space, a new ecosystem with mobile, multilayered relations ignoring national, epistemological, or material boundaries.

Throughout the works in *Fierce*, metaphors for fluidity and its generative engagements abound: moving cameras, water, superimpositions, meltings, layered sound designs, slow motion images, dissolves, scrolling words.

These ardent spaces offer new cinematic ecosystems where what is

fierce and necessary,  
visceral and conceptual,  
tactile and relational,  
layered and open,  
formidable and inviting,  
bursts through.

**b.h. Yael**  
*(of)fences*, 2001  
(5:30 min; digital video)