

White, Peter, in *A Bed is a Boat*, an installation of quilts and drawings by Barbara Todd, The Library & Gallery, Cambridge, Ontario, 1997.

Between a Rescuing Coast and a Drifting Boat

Over the past decade questions of security and mortality have been key themes of Barbara Todd's art. Figured with specific reference to the body of the child - "awkward, sentimental and frighteningly vulnerable" Todd's 'security blankets' and 'coffin quilts' (1986-1993) offered disturbing testament to links between Cold War politics and postmodern culture, between technology and our very notions of life and death.¹ The particular point of departure for these works was the threat posed by the world's nuclear arsenals considered from Todd's perspective as mother/artist/feminist, a concatenation that itself is constantly challenged by the same predominantly patriarchal culture that offers up these weapons in the name of peace.

Important and heart-felt issues of subjectivity are integral to these works. Counterpoised to our desire for wholeness and completion is an awareness that a fulfilled or resolved subjectivity is not attainable in the modern world. Our situation, wrote Heidegger, "is not that of a rescuing coast; it is a leap into a drifting boat".² It is to some of the implications of security raised here that Todd has turned in her recent installation, *A Bed is a Boat*.³ However, whereas Heidegger has pictured a grim, rather hopeless struggle between self and Other, Todd has approached the issue, its framing opposition and principal metaphor in rather different terms.

*I was trying not to cry but it was controlling my body.
A little bit of water controlling my whole body.*⁴

In the hand-quilted bedcovers of Todd's previous body of work, the shapes and silhouettes of military aircraft, nuclear bombs and missiles figured prominently. Among the sources for these images were *Janes Weapon Systems* and *Technology Review*. With *A Bed is a Boat*, however, Todd has moved from reading military journals to poetry. The installation brings together fragments of text and poetry by Muriel Rukeyser, Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan, among others, with quilts with simplified, what might once have been termed gestalt images, and a number of large brush line drawings painted directly on the wall of beds, boats and birds based on those of children. Contemplative and dream-like, the installation has a conscious relationship to aspects of the poetry of Celan (1920-1970), a survivor of the Holocaust who is regarded as one of the major modern poets of the German language in a lineage that goes back to Rilke and Hölderlin. Referring to Celan's difficult, late poems, Katharine Washburn, one of his English translators, has written:

Sleep is still the irrational realm in which truth can be perceived anew. Sleeping, dreaming - the dream, like a lattice, filters waking experience, creates a mesh of word-play, association, and memory through which we drift and fall and rise once more.⁵

The notion of mesh is especially fitting here, for it is as an installation that brings its components together as a highly allusive but never quite definitive, never quite certain whole that *A Bed is a Boat* operates, something that also distinguishes it from the earlier quiltwork.

A Bed is a Boat also marks a relocation. In 1993, Todd and her family moved to Montreal following thirteen years during which she had lived in Banff, married, had her two sons and established her art practice. Although the security blankets were referenced specifically to the continuing proliferation and increasing sophistication of arms during these years, these works also seem to express a generalized, almost ominous sense of threat and perceived insecurity about her situation.

It is tempting to refer Todd's perspective to Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of nomadology, which has enjoyed considerable theoretical as well as popular cachet in recent years.⁶ Responsive to both the increasing personal and intellectual mobility that characterizes contemporary life, the nomad has been seen as occupying a tangential position from which the fixed and dominant structures of the modern, institutionalized world can be investigated and critiqued. Especially compelling is the potential this position would appear to hold for cultural negotiation and the development and migration of new forms of knowledge. When the nomad is situated in the realm of everyday life, however, a somewhat different picture may emerge. Not only can cultural negotiation carry with it immense risk, exacerbating an already existing marginality, but the nomad cannot escape either the enormous responsibilities and pressures of real life experience or the demands of subjectivity. In invoking the concept of nomad in connection with Todd, then, it must be with a clear awareness of the very questions of personal security and vulnerability that are also implied.

*My eye cried and woke me.*⁷

The quilt *Adams Boat* from the installation echoes the shape of the blanket covering the three sleeping figures in "Dream of the Wisemen", a sculpture by the twelfth-century artist Giselbertus from Cathedral Saint-Lazare in Autun, France. Pictured under the protection of an angel, the blanket is a kind of liminal zone upon and through which connection is literally made between heavenly and earthly realms. In the religious context of the sculpture, this is a deeply reassuring image, for it augurs wisdom and has given rise to the sweet dream of salvation or peace in a less than certain or comforting world. In some ways the sculpture is paradigmatic for the installation, representing an idea of wholeness while also aligning it with the world of sleep where all things become not only possible but linked.

Todd has noted that she wanted "to blur the line between wakefulness and sleep, the passage between conscious and unconscious...slipping out of consciousness can be a way to let go, to fly, to leave the confines of the body and of ones own head". Yet, as she comments, this "can also open the way to terror".⁸ Examining this predicament as a continuum rather than an opposition, Todd's installation is a place "where meanings are uncertain - where a boat is a moon is a bed is a hole, a ditch or a grave,"⁹ where a

shape can equivocate, as in the quilt *Pelt*, between the image of an animal skin and an F-15 fighter jet, and where adulthood is subject to the powerful impressions and sensitivities of the child. Located in a deeply imaginary register where the self interacts with a range of deep-seated cultural representations, the installation articulates "the fragile balance we all try to maintain"¹⁰ in the ongoing process of securing identity.

*At night
I don't need
to put out the light.*¹¹

In part, Todd was attracted to the poetry of Paul Celan because of its strongly physical quality. If not concrete poetry, Celan's poems surely function at the limits of language.¹² For Celan, this was balast not only to the vagaries of language but also to questions of speech, indeed life, in the wake of the Holocaust.¹⁴ Alluding to Demosthenes, the great orator from classical antiquity who filled his mouth with stones in order to cure his stammering, Celan thought of a mouth filled with stones as an image for poetic utterance. Todd has visualized this conundrum in the quilt *a mouthful of stones*, a forceful image that represents a field of large, black shapes on a deep royal blue ground. Perhaps not so paradoxically, *A Bed is a Boat* is similarly marked as an installation by its remarkable composure and solidity. Allusive like Celan's poetry, if not as dark, it is a kind of indivisible whole in which the bold quilts moor and interact with the enlarged drawings and text.¹² This too may be imaginary, but it is a compellingly thoughtful gesture that represents with remarkable sensitivity and tenderness our location somewhere between a rescuing coast and a drifting boat.

*You
you teach
you teach your hands
you teach your hands you teach
you teach your hands
to sleep.*¹⁵

Peter White

Notes

1. Please see Bruce Grenville's essay *Death and Deterrence*, in *Barbara Todd: Security Blankets* (Lethbridge: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1993), p. 24-27, for a sensitive and deeply insightful reading of these works.
2. Martin Heidegger, cited in Rob Lapsley, "Mainly in Cities and at Night: some notes on cities and film", in David B. Clarke, ed., *The Cinematic City* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 186.
3. When the first version of this installation was shown in early 1996 at

the Whyte Museum in Banff, Alberta, it was called *Night Sky*. The installation was subsequently reworked and renamed *A Bed is a Boat* when shown later that year at Galerie Oboro in Montreal.

4. Adam, age 6. This quote by Barbara Todd's son Adam Century is one of a number of texts that accompany the installation.

5. Katharine Washburn, Introduction, in Washburn and Margret Guillemin, trans., *Paul Celan: Last Poems* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), p. xx. Celan is regarded as one of the most modern poets of German language in a lineage that goes back to Rilke and Holderlin.

6. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, (trans. Brian Massumi), *Nomadology: The War Machine*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1986.

7. From *The Night* by Al-Khansa (translated from Arabic by Willis Barnstone). This text accompanies the installation.

8. Barbara Todd, notes for Galerie Oboro exhibition, July 1996.

9. Ibid.

10. Barbara Todd in conversation with the author, April 2, 1997.

11. From *Anthology poem* by Petra von Morstein (translated from German by Rosemarie Waldrop). This text accompanies the installation.

12. Washburn, *ibid*.

13. Celan committed suicide by drowning himself in the Seine in Paris.

14. The author viewed the installation when it was exhibited at Galerie Oboro in Montreal in the fall of 1996. Todd had spent the summer working in the gallery as a studio, concentrating primarily on the disposition of the different elements in the installation in relation to each other.

15. Paul Celan, *Matière de Bretagne* (translated from German by Katharine Washburn and Margret Guillemin). This text accompanies the installation.