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Barbara Todd <<

Dream Boats

An exhibition locale sometimes sheds unexpected light on an artist's work. But who would have thought that showing Barbara Todd's quilts and drawings at Toronto's Textile Museum would so beautifully illuminate the complex interface of Todd's connections as a quiltmaker to domestic textile traditions and her practice as a feminist conceptual artist? The artist understood the potential for expressing her feelings about her medium in this setting. Her response was more a site-specific intercession than site-specific intervention.

The show's core elements - five blue-and-black quilts, three wall works based on children's drawings and a few lines of poetry - have been shown before as an installation, *A Bed is a Boat*. To that ensemble, Todd added new works. *To the Lighthouse* was made specifically for the museum. A simple stack of folded textiles, it contained three coverlets from the historical collection as well as a new nine-patch quilt by the artist, placed anonymously as "a gesture of intimacy" among the other bed covers. Beside the stack were Todd's handwritten, museum research notes and lines, reproduced in silver letters, from Virginia Woolf's novel of the same name: ". . . for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language. . . . but intimacy itself, which is knowledge . . . "

On the facing wall Todd mounted two rows of studio drawings, made of graphite, cut papers and tracing vellum, that searched out the shapes of her blue-and-black quilts. From boat, to bird, to heart, pelt, fish and stones, these *Quilt Studies* fused the conceptual connections between the quilter's patterns and the draftswoman's art.

It was impossible not to think of working hands and the physical, material aspects of Todd's art, which speaks so directly to the body and its life. Two photographs, *Young Boy With His Grandfather* and *Sumerian Worshipper* (a detail of an ancient alabaster sculpture) actually show images of hands poised in echoing gestures. In a photograph of an important source image - *The Dream of the Wisemen* by the medieval sculptor Gislebertus - three men sleep under a coverlet which finds a shape like a child's drawing of a boat as it falls across them.

Todd's inspirations seem to flow in alternating cycles from the intimacies of domestic life to the rituals of art, from the rituals of domestic life to art's most intimate revelations. Her vision integrates life and art. The ways in which she attends the body's allusive presence invoke the whole being and its welfare. It is any wonder that at the heart of *A Bed is a Boat* she unfolds in the blue and black quilts a profound and apt metaphor? Sleep as a journey: taken under the cloak of night, from wakefulness to dream and back again - sleep as a restorative dream state, a space of fantasy, an escape from death and, in Todd's hands, a creative well.