

Post Script is a new initiative of Artspeak, designed to encourage the development of innovative critical writing about the visual arts by Vancouver writers, to provide critical feedback to emerging and mid-career artists and to further enhance cross fertilization of ideas between the visual art and writing community.

Information about this exhibition is available on-line at www.artspeak.ca

Robin Arseneault
here you should read (that something is awry)

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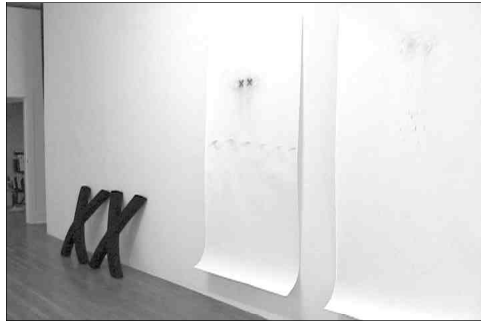
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**Kathy Slade on
Robin Arseneault**

*here you should read
(that something is awry)*



"Days heap upon us. All plain. All clouds except a narrow opening at the top of the sky. All cloudy except a narrow opening at the bottom of the sky with others smaller. All cloudy except a narrow opening at the bottom of the sky. All cloudy except a narrow opening at the top of the sky. All cloudy. All cloudy. All cloudy."

— Lisa Robertson from "Tuesday" in *The Weather*

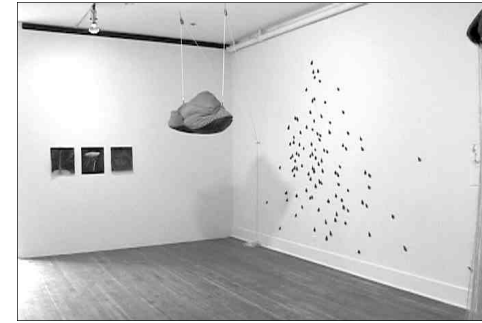
The mundane and practically universal subject of the weather has, it seems, always been topical. Recently it has emerged as a point of critical departure for many Vancouver artists and writers. Think of Mina Totino's cloud drawings, printed on small ephemeral slips of tracing paper and tucked into a recent issue of *Public*, or Erin O'Brien's large scale cloud paintings meticulously made of layers of luminous glazing that produce a subtle atmospheric effect. Shep Steiner's most excellent essay "It Must Be the Weather", published in *Afterall*, and Lisa Robertson's profoundly ornamental long poem "The Weather", represent two diverse approaches that employ meteorology as a trope to grapple with the historical, political and personal implications of the weather.

As we enter Calgary artist Robin Arseneault's exhibition at Artspeak Gallery, we are greeted by a drawing of a rain cloud cut into the shape of a



raindrop. Below it drip curious pairs of black Xs rendered out of electrical tape. We are instructed by the exhibition's title: *here you should read (that something is awry)*. Taking Arseneault's hint, which comes from Roland Barthes' *The Lover's Discourse*, excerpted from the short chapter titled "Clouds" and in its original context referring to temper or bad humor, we know these clouds are intended to be read as indices of emotion. A series of cartoon-like images, clouds, raindrops and double Xs, rhythmically repeat in a variety of media. They form a vocabulary of signs, (or indices of signs), that Arseneault uses in her inquiry into what can, by definition of its ephemeral nature, never be fixed in meaning.

Several small pencil, ink and watercolour sketches on tracing paper are creased and puckered from the effects of water used in their production. The theme of excess wetness continues with two large grey clouds, sewn from fabric and stuffed, hanging heavy from the ceiling at opposite ends of the gallery. One, a grey and blue cotton cloud, appears saturated, on the verge of raining. The other, a grey flannel cloud, has burst. Its rain shower is made of light blue and grey fuzzy wool, each strand of mohair is carefully pin-curved to the cloud in a clever ornamental gesture. Behind the suspended clouds another shower stretches across the room in the form of one hundred grey flannel drops



individually pinned to a long wall. Two stuffed Xs made of black felt stand thigh-high on the floor, leaning against a wall. Beside them, two large drawings on watercolour paper made from softly smudged graphite and pale white paint depict the established imagery — water, clouds, rain and Xs. One of these drawings, however, bears an unreadable word situated inside a cloud — there are four letters: a white 'd', then two black Xs, followed by another white 'd'. As in forecasting the weather, we may make educated guesses based on context and available data (dead? dyad? deed?) but we can never be certain of the word. Other than the exhibition title, it is the only text in the gallery and it literally blocks the reading of clouds.

Informed by *A Lover's Discourse*, mundane clichés of emotional instability mingle with the weather represented via a series of decorative, ornamental gestures. These gestures reconfigure Arseneault's chosen vocabulary in various combinations and suggest meaning. While we can get an overall sense of melancholy from Barthes' text and can recognize the well-documented historical metaphor of wetness as it refers to instability and the feminine, any meaning we can make is temporal. Like Robertson's poem we are given gorgeous phrases, fleeting ideas and transitory notions offering meaning that quickly and radically dissolves.



To reinforce the radical potential for artists who work in this vein, I will close with a quote from Steiner. Here he points to the need for a criticism that is meteorologically aware:

"We require a kind of criticism that is sensitive to the atmosphere that is produced by the weather and ever vigilant with regard to the fictions it in turn produces, as well as how these fictions reflect shifts in the barometric pressure of the current weather. In sum, we need a criticism which is not blind to the knowledge that the production of meaning is structured on a model of sublimation homologous to the evolution of clouds, themselves involved in a constant process of convection from low to high and vice-versa."

Kathy Slade

19/04/02

Works cited:

Lisa Robertson, *The Weather*, Reality Street Editions, London, England, 2001, 18

Sheppard Steiner, "It Must be the Weather: Today's Forecast: Again Mainly Capitalism", *Afterall*, Issue 11, London, England, Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design, 2000, 77

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, London, England, Penguin Books Ltd., 1990, 169-170