Diana Thorneycroft A People's History
September 1 to October 8, 2011

Artist's Biography
Diana Thorneycroft is a Winnipeg artist who has shown various bodies of work across Canada, the United States and Europe, as well as in Moscow, Tokyo and Sydney. Although best known for her staged tableaux photography, she also does sculptural installation and has had numerous exhibitions of her drawings. Thorneycroft’s work is often infused with dark humour and examines issues around identity and the body in pain. She is the recipient of many awards and has gallery representation in Montreal, Toronto and Los Angeles.
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Diana Thorneycroft plays with dolls. And she has them do things that are far from innocent but not far from childhood. Child’s play routinely contains scenes of humiliation and violence; but also acts of kindness and altruism. Children imitate what they see as a means of physical comprehension. They also play to express and learn how to control the emotions rolling within. Play is the imaginative—yet also real—safe space where kids act out possible ways of being. They play to discover how these options feel, how they operate and what their consequences might be. These private sessions include displays of rage, jealousy, meanness and degradation, but also laughter and empathy. Dramatic and symbolic play is an amoral means to develop a moral sense.

Adults rarely engage in such open-ended play outside of the space of our minds. We fear that what our play-selves do or say could have negative consequences back in the adult world. Well, some adults do engage this sort of expression and research artists. And when they do this play-work in public they often cause discomfort, even offense.

Diana Thorneycroft’s photographs are excoriating. They are beautiful instruments designed to cause pain. Her child-like play is tainted by a sinister adult knowingness. Her seductive, richly coloured scenes meticulously contrived with dolls, toys, miniatures and backdrops from “Group of Seven” paintings are reminiscent of photo-illustrated storybooks. But the stories they tell are horrific events from Canadian history. These are not tales of the ‘Mad-Trapper,’ train robbers, runaways or other rogues whose crimes times rendered into colourful legend. These are our national shames that many would rather bury and forget. Thorneycroft memorializes historic tragedies such as ‘Africville’—an African Canadian community destroyed by Halifax officials (1964-7); the deportation of the Dionne quintuplets in the 1930s; and the hanging of Louis Riel (1885). But most are private serial crimes only recently coming to light. The depth of harm done to Aboriginal children in residential schools is intimated through the cutting off and burning of braids. The sexual exploitation of children by priests and other trusted officials is suggested by the death of Neal Stonechild at the hands of police in Saskatoon, and the child-brides of Bountiful are also evoked. Vancouver’s Eastside, the recent murders by Russell Williams, the death of Neal Stonechild at the hands of police in Saskatchewan, and the child-brides of Bountiful are also evoked. Diana Thorneycroft’s reconstructions show both the soon-to-be victim and the perpetrator. Part of our disgust is due to the implied invitation that we not be bystanders but in fact be accomplices. These photographs are a call to arms.

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Thorneycroft explains that her images depict “crimes committed against our most vulnerable citizens, the disadvantaged, the uneducated and the young. At the time of each violation the victims were ignored, disbelieved, or considered expendable. …Research coupled with my imagination directed me to consider what conditions were at play that allowed these atrocities to occur. This work focuses on crimes that occurred in Canada, a country that views itself, and is viewed by others, as inherently ‘good.’ One of the goals of this series is to challenge this myth.”

Political artists of the past and present wanted their viewers to be scandalized. They designed their art to be a lens through which malevolence could be seen in sharp focus. They wanted audiences to have their consciences stimulated. But often their publics found it more convenient to be repelled by the messenger’s methods than to attend to the reality behind the message. I mentioned earlier that most of us only know of these events from a distance. But, of course, this is not true for everyone, not for survivors of residential schools, the internment camps, the destruction of Africville, the abused, the dead, and their families and descendants. I imagine that pictures like these might seem to trivialize these experiences.

Every picture is a lie. Representations stand in and threaten to replace or hide what they represent. People may be distracted from the real and the unimaginable by the image. On the other hand, pictures like these were never meant to tell the whole story, only to call up the events and draw us to learn more.

I am particularly concerned about Thorneycroft’s residential school scenes. Some survivors might argue, as one—upon hearing about this exhibition—already has, ‘It’s too soon!’ It is too soon and not soon enough. It is too soon to seal these wounds with images. But we should have been picturing these events in the national consciousness long ago. The broken silence and sooner acknowledged and aided the survivors. We are only beginning to hear their stories. I do not think that Thorneycroft’s pictures disturb these efforts. Residential schools, Japanese internment camps, Africville, these are not only the experiences of Aboriginal people, Japanese Canadians and African Canadians, they tell the story of us all. Canadians did these things to other Canadians. It is about time non-Indigenous artists, for example, engage these histories and learn of their full implication and cultural inheritance.

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