

Diana Thorneycroft *A People's History*

September 1 to October 8, 2011

Diana Thorneycroft *A People's History*

September 1 to October 8, 2011

ART GALLERY OF REGINA

©Art Gallery of Regina Inc.
Neil Balkwill Civic Arts Centre
2420 Elphinstone Street, PO Box 1790,
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3C8

ISBN # 978-1-896432-95-3

Director/Curator: Karen Schoonover
Guest Curator: David Garneau
Design: Steve McDonnell: Dalek Design @ www.dalek.ca

Sponsored by:



The Art Gallery of Regina gratefully acknowledges the support of the City of Regina Arts Funding Program, the Saskatchewan Arts Board, Saskatchewan Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture, & Recreation, SaskCulture, SaskTel, SaskEnergy, Terrie Dunand RE/MAX Crown Real Estate Ltd., Saskatchewan Credit Unions, Greystone Managed Investments, and the Cathedral Free House,




Art Gallery of Regina

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.



"A People's History (Louis Riel)", digital chromogenic print, 37.5" x 50", 2010

Cover: "A People's History (burning braids)", digital chromogenic print, 50" x 36.6", 2008

Diana Thorneycroft *A People's History*

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 roiling 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, rumrunners or other rogues whose crimes time renders 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 Japanese internment camps of World War II; the exploitation 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 scenes whose real meanings are revealed by telling titles. The murdered and missing women in Vancouver's Eastside, the recent murders by Russell Williams, the death of Neal Stonechild at the hands of police in Saskatoon, and the child-brides of Bountiful are also evoked.

Thorneycroft makes each set and image with great care and emotional investment. Her serious play is an absorbing effort to inhabit these scenes that most of us only know from a distance. Only a few of the images are explicit. Most present a moment just before the crime. Our imaginations and memories create the rest. Thorneycroft wants to engage our empathy, stir our sense of justice and encourage action.

Dramatic irony is when the viewer knows something that one of the members of the scene does not. It is the theatrical device that compels us to want to pull the child from the man's lap. We know something that the little girl or boy does not. And, because this is fiction, a representation, we can do nothing. Even so, the picture makes us feel complicit: Why were we blind to the telltale signs? Did we tacitly approve of residential schools by willing ignorance? Would we intern 'citizen foreigners' again? What are the social mechanisms that enable men to violate women and children?

Géricault painted "The Raft of the Medusa" (1819) to proclaim his outrage with slavery. Goya, Daumier, Grosz, Rebecca Belmore, and countless other artists, used their art to witness the large and small injustices of their times. They wanted to show what was happening and to wonder aloud, 'Why did we allow this; why does this to continue?'

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 re-present. 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 direct 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 so that we could have broken the 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.

Most of 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 imaginatively inhabit the bodies of each. We are asked to consider both sides in the interval between the picture and the criminal act. 'What could have been done to avoid this?'

Thorneycroft has a history of working with dolls. Much of her work concerns the sexualizing and abuse of children. Her pictorial revelations are not designed to titillate but to warn, to break the silence. Secrets shield predators. Perhaps if children were not as protected from adult designs they might be better able to recognize, avoid or call out abusers. I think that Thorneycroft makes these images in a storybook style not to trivialize these events but as a literal model for future story and history books. These are reasonably palatable portals to indigestible realities that children need to know something about in order to protect themselves. Canadians also need to know the fullness of their country's stories if history is not to repeat itself.

David Garneau

August 2011



"A People's History (Quintland)"; digital chromogenic print, 40" x 50"; 2010.



"A People's History (girl bride, Bountiful, BC), C print, 24 x 30"; 2011