

Looking at Jane

Bernard LAMARCHE

I am covering fresh ground by treading old paths

Bonnie Baxter

*Now when this is over, over and through
And all them changes have come and passed
I wanna meet you in the big sky country
Just wanna prove, mama, love can last*

Chris Whitley

Bonnie Baxter's digital prints produced to date for her series *Jane's Journey*, exhibited in its entirety for the first time, has already generated critical interest. Five essays in two exhibition catalogues, *Jane au Jardin des délices* and *L'Amérique de Jane*¹ in particular, have examined this body of work and its looking-back-on-life quality. Apart from a study of the possible meaning of the red employed in the artist's compositions, the topic the authors of these texts have discussed is the sometimes odd quality of these compositions (their colour palette has been described as "surreal") and the questions of identity they raise through the use of the popular figures Dick and Jane. Other issues have emerged, from feminine psychology to Jane's appearance and the sense of belonging, especially to the west coast of the United States, that land of dreams. The list of topics that have been discussed also includes these works' murky temporality. This aspect makes it possible to consider their biographical quality and to define the parameters of the self-fictional dynamic running through it.

Despite the broad range of topics discussed in relation to *Jane's Journey*, it may be that one of the keys to interpreting the series lies buried in one of Baxter's earlier series. The retrospective *Rewind*, a bountiful exhibition organised in 2005 by the Musée d'art contemporain des Laurentides in Saint-Jérôme, presented several digital self-portraits on paper or canvas of the artist with her head shaved. Looking today at works such as the staggering

Interference (2004) or the gripping, dream-like *Poisson rouge* (2004), it is almost impossible, in retrospect, not to see the omnipresent wig-adorned head of *Jane's Journey* as a response, covering up the stigmata of the cancer that the artist once battled, even though a single work of hers, the woodcut *Mutations* (1989), addresses the subject head-on.² This episode is something of a blind spot in the reception of Baxter's recent work—a taboo, perhaps. Although belonging to the self-portrait genre, these works and others such as *Bleu Room Suite* (2003) or *The Fish Room*, are not, properly speaking, autobiographical in nature. They do not use biography to hit their target; they impress, rather, because they create a hermetic space capable of conveying affect. *Jane's Journey*, on the contrary, contains narrative effects more than anything else, as the sequence it is arranged in demonstrates. It reads as if it were a travel diary.

In the face of these images of Jane and the older, more suffocating images of Baxter bald, an observation takes hold. At the beginning of her journey, the artist puts a blond wig, thus showing her in a completely different light than with her head shaved. This prompts us to read *Jane's Journey* as the story of a healing journey. It goes



Interference, 2004, oeuvre numérique, 76.20 X 203.20 cm

without saying that, far from being a road trip in the classical sense of the term, this tour resembles a mission, in the same spirit as the photographic missions of the nineteenth century. Indeed it is not the route itself that these images document, but the sites visited once the destination is reached: Paris, Italy, the west coast, the sea, the forest, the shore, the end of the world. The series brings to the fore the halts and pauses that blonde Jane, seen from behind, omnipresent and static, is set against. For photographers of the nineteenth century it was a question of covering ground and bringing back traces of an elsewhere, or even of colonising through images. With *Jane's Journey*, we



The Fish Room, 2003, oeuvre numérique, 76.20 X 101.60 cm

are not in the presence of pictures of a journey of self-discovery or wanderings³, but well and truly of images of a journey of recognition: to become familiar again with what had been known at an earlier date. No more is needed for Jane's story to become both a mission and a re-mission.

The artist appears in this work with a new identity, and through the eyes of her alter ego she returns to the places of her past and walks the grounds of her present home, merging the traces of past and present. The images of the artist carry the signature of suspended time. The character's immobility in the places she visits contributes to this impression, which is accentuated by

the silent atmosphere of the images and the colours added to them. The blond wig also suggests an earlier time in the artist's life, when she was healing. At the same time, it establishes the reference to the schoolbook Jane. A close look at the colour illustrations of Dick and Jane's family shows that the little girl in impeccable dresses has the same colour hair and same hairstyle as her mother. This similarity brings out the family relation between mother and daughter. In addition to the identical hair colour of Jane and her mother, the fact that the cut of their hair is basically the same rules out any difference between them. Once again, although this time less flagrantly, a lack of difference suggests the fusion of two eras. The mother does not age, and Jane already has her features. This is an even more troubling aspect of the suspension of difference implied by the uniformity of the two characters, as if the little girl had no hopes of having her own identity and was impervious to the implicit evolution of passing time. Everything suggests, in fact, that no possibility of distance or evolution as the years pass is allowed.

Jane's wig suggests a reference to Marilyn or, given the "film noir" quality of some of the images, to the films of Alfred Hitchcock. More important for our purposes, it becomes the symbol of the crossing and joining of childhood with the world of adults. It suggests a refusal to age and demonstrates the suspension of any upsetting event. The wig also indicates, twice over, the unchanging nature it embodies: through its repetition from one image to the next and through the telescoping of unsuspected temporalities.

The strategies employed around the 1950's starlet wig indicate that it functions as a site marker. In Baxter's earlier work, as critics have pointed out, the chi-chi dog fulfilled this function of talisman, marker and fetish object. References have been made to the connections between the chi-chi dog, a small toy Chihuahua, and the garden

gnome from the film *The Fabulous Destiny of Amelie Poulain*, photographed in different places while on a voyage around the world. This perspective would seem to be just as productive when applied to the series *Jane's Journey* and its voyage in six chapters. As a fetish object, the chi-chi dog is endowed with stand-in values which heighten its symbolic nature with respect to the subject. It is also a figure of repetition, returning from one image to the next, one place to the next. And it becomes the only reassuring element in these compositions, like the wig, with which we end up identifying and which becomes a rallying commonplace, a kind of *captatio benevolentiae*, a rhetorical figure seeking to gain the viewer's good will⁴.

It may not be surprising that several of the pictures in the series cleverly adopt a strategy used in the past by the Romantics, for which the painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) by Caspar David Friedrich is something of a model. Like the walker standing before the vast mountains in Friedrich's work, Jane most often stands in the extreme foreground, or is in any event the focal point of the image, for example when she walks through the snow in the images taken in Val-David or is seen standing in a Paris apartment. Friedrich's character contemplates a world from which he is excluded. The first two images in *Jane's Journey* clearly establish the *modus operandi* at work in the series. The first, a composite image, places Jane in Paris, in front of a statue of Triton in the Place de la Concorde. The fact that this image comes at the very beginning of the series may not be fortuitous. Don't tritons symbolise the victory of the gods over chaos and disorder? In this way, Baxter is signalling to us that the journey to follow will be free of anguish. The following image, moreover, situated at the base of the Eiffel Tower, puts Jane before a crowd of people whose silhouettes are indistinct. In later pictures she will carry out her voyage alone, without any other human presence to disturb her quietude. In these silent images, we are constantly on the edge of reverie.

The following images in Paris, rare interiors in the series, leave the viewer on the edge of the image while Jane occupies the space. In Italy, Jane remains outside, stopping at the threshold of the house where Bonnie once lived. But she plunges into winter in Val-David, while the composition makes us believe that we could also walk along the path she takes (as long as we did not break the silence). The subsequent sites visited include extraordinary desert landscapes of the American southwest. There, more than anywhere else, Friedrich's Romantic model comes to mind. The



Paris II, 2008, Oeuvre numérique

distance between Jane and the landscape appears to increase, in particular through the use of colour, which removes the scenes from realism by several degrees. The background of various scenes — skies, for the most part — is depicted using colours which transform what might have been taken for mere photographs into a “vision”. This is particularly apparent in the four *Monarch Beach* pictures (2008). This “unmaking” effect reaches its paroxysm in chapter six, announcing the imminent end of the American leg of the journey, because here the earth plunges into the sea. The sub-title of this section of the chapter, moreover — “edge” — specifies that we have reached a boundary.

In *Monarch Beach*, the yellow sky is imaginary. In other works such as *Fog* (2008), in which Jane plunges into a screen of fog that blocks our vision, and *Film noir en rose* (2008), we are persuaded, if we still entertained any doubts, of the singular role of colour in these images. As the ground to be covered diminishes, Jane finds herself at Bonnie’s mother’s last home in California. This sequence lets us believe that closure has been achieved. Having entered the site — a ruin — Jane finds herself in the garage, buried in a pile of shredded documents found in the home. In the background, against a pink sky, a mechanical digger is a sign of the demolition taking place. New homes are being built, a new reality will cover the old one.

Jane’s itinerary is coming to an end. She has relegated Bonnie to the role of a viewer of her own life, unless we are to see this entire travelogue as a way of rewriting Bonnie through Jane. In this sense, the digitally re-coloured images in *Jane’s Journey* are thus all products of the imagination. An image I have not yet mentioned highlights this aspect even further: the fifth chapter of this narrative, *Route 66*, begins with the only image in it showing a highway — a painted highway, indoors. Doesn’t this mural announce the inescapable? Jane was a simulacrum, suggests.

cornered before she even began her journey, which will only occur through the intermediary of illusion. This is what the mural, a simulacrum, suggests.



Route 66 I, 2008, Oeuvre numérique

With this painting, Baxter insists upon the fact that it was necessary to pay a great deal of attention from the beginning to the way her images were staged. Through Jane’s eyes, we see the landscape transformed, sometimes to the point of becoming unreal. Back on the sites of the past, a keen test of reality ensues: having passed the mural’s screen of paint, Jane comes face to face with a road sign for America’s famous Route 66. A new ruin. Nothing is the ideal it once was.

In one of the two final images of the series, Jane is pictured in a deep-red row-boat, paradoxically immobile on shore but ready to pursue the itinerary. The sub-title of this conclusion shifts our attention from her “journey” to her “voyage”, suggesting that it will no longer occur on land or in the air but rather by sea. It is impossible to say where it will lead Jane. The finale of this series lets us think that it could even possibly continue without Jane. In fact her wig is seen on the ground in the middle of the final image, with the ocean in the distance. In this last image, Jane has slipped away. Might we thus understand that once her journey was over, Bonnie no longer needed her? Was this something we should have foreseen? Having set out to find places she once knew, in the end Jane found only fantasized landscapes.



Voyage II, 2008, Oeuvre numérique

¹The first of these catalogues was published to accompany the presentation, alongside work by Michel Beaudry, of the Laurentians' chapter of *Jane's Journey*. This exhibition, *Jane au Jardin des délices*, was held at the Centre d'exposition de Val-David from June 20 to September 13, 2009. The second publication, *L'Amérique de Jane*, was prepared for an exhibition of *Jane's journeys* through the United States, at the Division gallery in Montreal from March 10 to April 24, 2010.

²Works which evoke the artist's cancer, detected in the late 1980s, are practically non-existent. "Mutations" inaugurated a series of spirit figures which concluded in 1993 with "Chimère", reproduced on the cover of the book *Violence and the Female Imagination: Quebec's Women Writers Re-Frame Gender in North American Cultures* by Paula Ruth Gilbert. The imagery of "Interference" is taken from a 1999 video. Note, however, that Baxter, curiously enough, never lost her hair during her chemotherapy treatments. We might think that she forced the conclusion of the process *in images*, as if to bring closure to the traumatic episode by means of substitution.

³On this topic, two recent exhibitions have explored the transposition of the road movie genre onto the visual arts: *Road Runners*, at Vox, image contemporaine, from March 6 to May 30, 2009 and in the Norman McLaren gallery of the Cinémathèque québécoise from March 11 to April 26, 2009, and *Sur la route/On the road* at the Musée régional de Rimouski from September 21 to November 12, 2006.

⁴On this topic, see Pierre Rannou's book *Incipit: Stratégies autobiographiques dans Rue Orderner, rue Labat de Sarah Kofman* (Montreal: Le temps volé, 2005), 7-20.



Mutations, 1988, Gravure sur bois,
101.60 x 66.20 cm

Bernard LAMARCHE

Curator of contemporary art at the Musée régional de Rimouski since the end of 2005, Bernard Lamarche worked for almost ten years as an art critic and cultural journalist for the daily newspaper *Le Devoir*, in addition to being a regular contributor to the magazines *Parachute*, *Esse arts + opinions*, *Etc Montréal*, *Espace*, *Canadian Art* and *Para Para*. Curator of the second edition of the Manif d'art, held in Québec City in 2003, and of *Riopelle. Impressions sans fin*, shown at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in 2005. Bernard Lamarche is the author of a growing number of catalogues on contemporary art, most notably on the work of Sylvain Bouthillette, Alain Benoit, Louise Robert, Claire Savoie, Lynne Marsh and Nicolas Baier. He is also the co-author, with Pierre Rannou, of the exhibition catalogue *Photography haunted by spirit photography*, published in 2009. For more than five years, he sat on the editorial board of the magazine *Esse arts + opinions* and also on the boards of the Société des musées québécois from 2006 to 2010, the art center Caravansérail (Rimouski) and Tour de bras, involved in the diffusion of new improvisation music in the Rimouski region. He received the 2008 "Relève" prize from the Société des musées québécois.