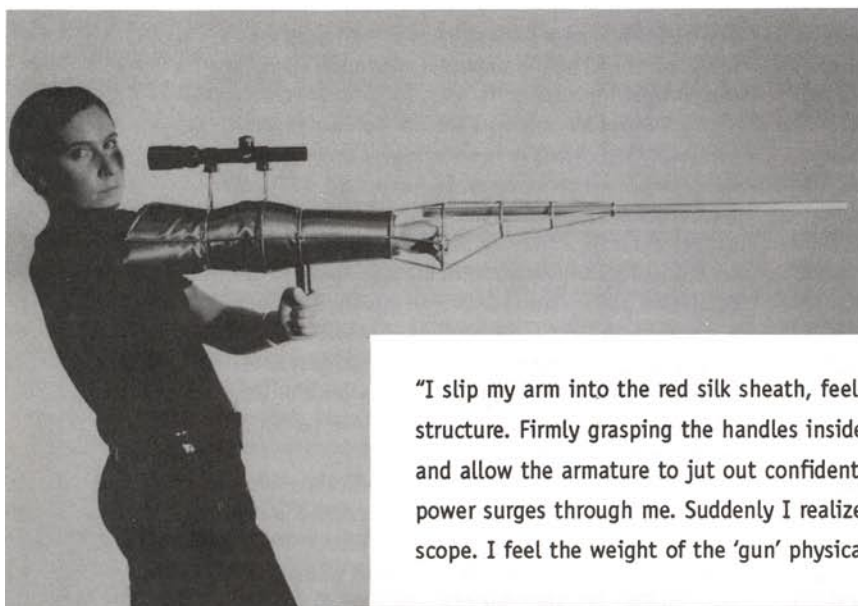


OUT OF CHARACTER

by Dionne McAfee

Installation by

Lynne Marsh



THE NEW GALLERY, CALGARY

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CAUGHT IN THE ACT

"I slip my arm into the red silk sheath, feeling it press snugly against the metal structure. Firmly grasping the handles inside and out, I raise the scope to my eye and allow the armature to jut out confidently from my body. A feeling of comfortable power surges through me. Suddenly I realize that I am looking at myself in the scope. I feel the weight of the 'gun' physically and psychologically. As my body

position shifts to accommodate this steadily increasing discomfort, my subject position also shifts and changes..."



Ligne de Mire (Sight Line) 'gun', 1995.
Photo by Lynne Marsh.

Lynne Marsh's installation *Out of Character* consists of two distinct, correlated pieces. The first, *Ligne de Mire (Sight Line)*, involves three 'guns': welded steel armatures constructed by the artist, lined with padded red silk. Each is approximately the length and weight of a real rifle and equipped with a scope for sighting. The only difference between the three devices is their size: small, medium, and large. (Marsh prefers that they not be referred to as guns; instead of weapons she considers them to be "looking devices.")

Accompanying these armatures are instructions which outline their use: "Remove your coat or bulky sweater; choose the appropriate size for a comfortable fit; slip your arm inside and aim." Aim at what?

Viewers looking through the scope are confronted with their own reflection in a large mirror on the gallery wall. The pleasure of discovery suddenly takes an unexpected turn and becomes a kind of self-discovery. We are made self-conscious of the act and the implications of viewing. Feeling powerful, we are simultaneously seized with a feeling of helplessness as the cross-hairs of the scope line up with our own bodies. We are in the line of fire.

Marsh says that her initial apathy toward guns changed after a hunting excursion with friends, when she was forced to engage a gun not only conceptually but also physically. In this exhibition she addresses this experience and invites the viewer to also experience the work directly, rather than contemplating it from afar. By altering the function of the gun, and changing the circumstances surrounding its use, Marsh has pulled out the most tenuous and protected threads which hold this object of power at a safe distance. Reclaiming this hot issue from the media and personalizing it, she effectively by-passes popular debates about guns by allowing viewers to construct their own line of questioning, thus activating a new space for discussion. More importantly, she encourages an awareness of the implications of power epitomized by this device by reminding us that it is an extension of ourselves, and that we influence it as much as it influences us.

Seeing oneself through the sightline of a gun, even an approximation of one, puts us in the dual position of voyeur and target; there is no separation

between the two. The desire to choose one side and rationalize the distance between the two positions is complicated and disrupted by this overlap. Marsh's objects function not as autonomous beings beyond our control, but as vehicles for our own self-determination. In resisting the conventional function of the devices, the meaning shifts to encompass a broader range of ideas. These objects appropriate the gun as 'object' and modify its original function.

Feminized by the use of sensuous red silk which provides a snug and comfortable fit over the arm, the armatures resemble a fashionable accessory. Although Marsh's intention is to allow women (who are traditionally discouraged from participating in positions of power) to be more comfortable wearing these devices, the authority implied by the 'guns' is still present. She suggests that by assuming an active subject position the wearer can explore "the relationships we maintain with certain archetypes of authority." However, as we fumble in this new territory, we cannot help but become self-conscious at being forced to examine our relationship to this object of power.

The second part of Marsh's installation, *Out of Character*, is a video projection of black and white photographs presented in flip book format. A group of women have been photographed as they pick up and playfully experiment with a smorgasbord of guns in the artist's studio. Some hold the guns in silly poses, acting out stereotypes such as the femme fatale, confident and deadly, while others are visibly uncomfortable holding a gun for the first time.

Like the opportunity to experiment, pose, and discover in *Ligne de Mire*, in *Out of Character* we are shown there is no right or wrong way to respond to the layers of meaning in Marsh's work. Caught in the act, Marsh's work allows for more self-generated questioning on both a personal and a political level while revealing the complexity and pervasiveness surrounding issues of power. •

Dionne McAfee is a Calgary-based visual artist, essayist, and curator.