

Lifeworks

Gathie Falk: a retrospective

Vancouver's Gathie Falk is an artist with a strong reputation in her home region, a senior artist whose work is included in major collections and who shows regularly in the west. There is little unique about that; each region of this country boasts artists with similar profiles at home but for whom the national stage has been elusive. However, for Falk at least, that national stage has arrived, courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada's Travelling Exhibitions Program. The Vancouver Art Gallery's senior curator, Bruce Grenville, has assembled a retrospective show that brings together 30 years of Falk's work in sculpture, painting, performance and installation. A large exhibition, *Gathie Falk* features over 70 works, not all of which were on view in Halifax at its latest stop, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The show was edited to



Gathie Falk, *30 Grapefruit*, 1970. Ceramic and Plexiglass stand, 32.4 cm × 49.5 cm × 49.5 cm



Trevor Mills / Vancouver Art Gallery

Gathie Falk, *Single Right Men's Shoes: Blue Running Shoes*, 1973. Glazed ceramic, glass and coloured varnish on wood, 101.5 cm × 105.4 cm × 16.1 cm

fit in the AGNS, but not having seen it in any earlier venues I can't claim any disappointment on that count.

In fact, I can't claim any disappointment at all. This exhibition is a knockout. Visually and conceptually engaging, it leaves this viewer wondering how he could have missed that Falk is such a major figure in Canadian art. As such, *Gathie Falk* does what a retrospective should do, and does it very well.

Yard sales

Grandma wore designer jeans and read Stephen King.

Yard sales are a fount of information. Peruse the gathered stuff — revealing intimate details, (none intended for public consumption), but sold at vast discounts with privacy stripped off for free.

Who cares?

Robert C. Dickson
Family physician
Hamilton, Ont.

Falk started her career as a painter, but made her first splash with ceramic sculptures and installation work. Her hand-built ceramic shoes, a series she calls *Single Right Men's Shoes*, are well represented in the show, as are her “fruit piles,” brightly glazed ceramic pyramids representing the displays of apples, oranges and grapefruits that she saw at her local grocer's. Dating from the early 1970s, these works led to another series in clay, the “picnics,” which were inspired by a series of per-

formances that Falk did in Vancouver during that period. *Picnic with Dog and Potted Camellia* (1976–1977) is one of the best of a series infused with humour and conceptual rigour. Throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s Falk concentrated on painting, working on series that examined various ideas about the everyday and were often rooted in the deceptively simple act of observation.

Thus, her *Pieces of Water* series looks at colours and surface patterns of small bodies of water, presented without any contextual clue, other than the title, as to the origin of the image. Her “cement” series depicts the concrete sidewalk she traversed every day while walking her dogs. The achievement of these paintings, as of all Falk's work, is to take the banal and make it utterly compelling.

Falk returns to sculpture in her most recent works in the exhibition, papier-mâché dresses that manage to invoke modernist sculpture (they're billed as homages to Henry Moore) and pop culture. These “reclining figures” are subtitled with women's names, such as Stella and Marilyn, that evoke the

screen goddesses of the 1950s and their famous roles.

Gathie Falk is a remarkable show, one that is accompanied by a significant book¹ as well as a small catalogue. The Vancouver Art Gallery has done a great job in mounting this exhibition, and by touring it, the National Gallery is fulfilling its proper role. (The show travels to Regina after its run in Halifax, opens in Ottawa at the National Gallery in the spring of 2002 and finishes its run in



Vancouver Art Gallery

Gathie Falk, *Dress with Insects*, 1998. Papier-mâché, acrylic paint and varnish, 90 cm × 60 cm × 60 cm

Fredericton at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery.) As for Falk, this retrospective shows that her work is as good as anything being made right now in this country, and that is the best revelation of all.

Ray Cronin
Halifax, NS

Reference

1. Laurence R, Grenville B, Thom IM, Graham M, Milroy S. *Gathie Falk*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre; 2000.