

Spotlight

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## Corin Sworn: Soft Focus, Sharp Tools

CORIN SWORN REVISITS THE FICTIONS OF MODERNISM THROUGH PLAYGROUNDS, B MOVIES AND A SCHOOL RULE BOOK

by MONIKA SZEWCZYK



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Corin Sworn once lived in Canada—some time in Toronto, some time in Vancouver—which is partly the reason this article appears in this journal. But even then I always thought she was living in another kind of country, inhabiting another kind of space: more modern and yet full of the past tense, of unhinged time, of nostalgia for the prescient play of children. Even when she was mainly drawing, it felt like she was living in a movie.

Not so long ago, I organized a small showing of her drawings of post-Second World War playgrounds in my apartment in Vancouver. It seemed right to show these mirages of modernity in a square space from the 1960s. The place was empty like a gallery (I was moving). Why all this talk of context? Sworn's work brings to the fore the sense of atmosphere, a fiction that surrounds you. Her delicate depictions of children scaling futuristic-looking forms are a perfect case in point. These early works in an ongoing (and morphing) series were made by eliminating the backgrounds in archival photographs of postwar playgrounds in the United States, Europe and Asia. Ironically, this removal of ground is how they became pure scenario.

That the drawings seemed atmospheric is due not only to the even diffusion of Sworn's pencil; they also became (to my mind necessary) ghosts of a larger project that would soon get underway at Or Gallery in Vancouver. (Sworn has stayed with the subject of children's modernity— their role in the shaping of notions of liberation and social reform and, in my opinion, their imminent descent into anarchy—in several exhibitions spanning different media.) In the Or show, Sworn and a small swarm of children created an adventure playground based loosely on Palle Nielsen's 1968 "The Model—A Model for a Qualitative Society," for which an adventure playground was constructed inside the Moderna Museet in Stockholm (the exhibition saw record attendance, especially by children). Walking into Or Gallery during the run of Sworn's project—and seeing wall paint, cardboard boxes and an improvised plywood monstrosity—one got a sense of tension, exhaustion and anarchic fun.

But as with all true experiments, it was difficult to say where the project could go next. The next time I visited Sworn in her studio, she showed me a small Arts and Crafts-style rendering (think swirly nature and rational rhythm) of school rules, based partly on accounts of the Summerhill School in Leiston, Suffolk, where A. S. Neill's experimental teaching philosophy was the basis of a controversial system of self-governance by children and adolescents. They ranged from the banal—"If you are going out for any length of time, you should tell one of the staff where you are going"—through the bombastic—"Playing with water indoors is forbidden (n.b. The prohibition applies only indoors. Splashing water is one of the human rights of childhood)"—to the foreboding—"All knives must be inspected." Together, the rules signalled not only a dialectics of law and freedom, but also Sworn's turn to experimentation with found poetry, an increasingly important register in her work.

A year or so later, the rules were exhibited at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in the group show "Exponential Future," alongside more drawings of children and an adolescent-scaled abstract sculpture made out of Tinkertoy parts (the toy constituted a small revolution in children's play). Was the sculpture made by a child? Was Sworn casting herself as a juvenile in order to make work? We could see a return to a number of wilfully childish strategies from classical modernity (think of Chagall's painted fairy tales of the shtetl and the Old Testament or the post-Second World War finger paintings of the COBRA group, made in response to the utter demoralization of European high culture). We could, were it not for the emphasis on rules and structures.

A deeper dialectic is evolving here. With the accelerating commodification of childhood and adolescence that attended the development of a consumer society following the Second World War, adults have been increasingly infantilized and robbed of self-governance. It is also true that children have increasing agency. They are treated as model citizens in formation, with greater access to violence. If adults never grow up, children's play is never innocent. Thus Sworn may be addressing her adult audience as strange, perpetual children. Perhaps we are like the figures she portrays—completely immersed in an artificial environment, playing with abstract constructions. Here, a figure like David Vetter (the "boy in the bubble"), who has appeared in her drawings on several occasions, is key. He makes it all the more difficult to determine at which point Sworn's work becomes a mirror of an existing society, as opposed to a nostalgic escape into a better time when we were young and things were simple, and modern.

To some extent, Sworn shares the nostalgia for modernism that can be glimpsed in much work by artists of her generation (and that of their teachers, for that matter). The last Documenta's leitmotif—"Is modernity our antiquity?"—and the last Berlin Biennale's unstated but dogged pursuit of this question via its keen focus on the new modernities being unearthed in the former Eastern Bloc are two prominent examples. And, closer to Sworn's current home of Glasgow (she divides her time between Vancouver and Glasgow), there is the Modern Institute. In the hands of several artists associated with this crucible of imperfect, punk re-modernism, nostalgia functions as a sharp tool for critiquing the present, in the spirit theorized by Svetlana Boym in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*. But such tools must be inspected carefully each time they are used, lest their longing looks back begin to obscure the messy present altogether. The problem can be a little bit like Mia Farrow's in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*; she played a woman whose desire for the exotic silver-screen world of the Middle East in the 1930s lets her forget her dreary small-town reality.

Sworn's latest work—a film project currently in development—takes up a fantasy world populated entirely by modern children at the moment when modernity, embodied as hyperrational suburbia, makes its transition into postmodernity, bringing an awareness of the sheer abjection in its structured organization of space and psyche. The film takes as its point of departure *Over the Edge*, a 1979 movie "based on true incidents

occurring during the 1970s in a planned suburban community of condominiums and town houses, where city planners ignored the fact that a quarter of the population was 15 years old or younger.” (It also featured a very young Matt Dillon, poster child of teenploitation.) Sworn has taken out most of the scenes that include adults, loosened the narrative and dubbed in new voice-overs and dialogue. The film opens with a new title sequence: after a lengthy glance at the FBI’s anti-piracy warning (an echo perhaps of the found poetry of the Summerhill School rules), we see the star-formed O of Orion Entertainment begin to spell out “Over the Edge” in luminescent lettering that then morphs into the subtitle, “Framed and Double Framed.”

The subtitle hints at an interest in living in a movie, foiling the sense of transgression or escape suggested by the film’s original title. Yet the work’s multiple framing devices accumulate into a kind of critique from within. The first shot shows a bulbous white architecture that could be a UFO or a Buckminster Fuller dome, at night; onto this runs a kid in jeans, the camera follows; a cut to him continuing along a row of cars in a car park; he looks at a light, which is promptly smashed; another cut to the interior of a car with headlights on, pursuing the protagonist from behind as he and some others run, falling in and out of focus. A story, told in voice-over, begins, but it will reach no conclusion. This is pure cinema; Sworn reframes narrative as atmosphere, a haze.

Some more impressions, then: a gang of bell-bottomed friends walks through fields, Matt Dillon never wears sleeves and there are intimations of violence, bruised faces and kids meeting at night and then running again, pursued by a car. I could continue, get lost in the adolescent beauty of the film. But I’m stuck on one striking aspect that belies the characters’ ages: the poetic language that the kids adopt on occasion. Most of the time, they walk and talk frankly—“Aww, this place! It’s like a movie, man...there’s nowhere to go that’s not scripted”—but at moments they slip into a rarefied vocabulary, rapping with increasingly rapid rhymes and reaching for abstractions:

ABBY: Listen, we’re allotted as connection points, that’s it. There is no endpoint. We must always be receptive, open to others even though whatever we build may inevitably be relinquished. Maybe it’s something else, maybe it’s that we mustn’t feel like a name to be maintained. We live in fiction. There is no end to what we do but we must keep finding new ways, even as the old are co-opted and the story is written to cool out the mark. CARL: You are moving in...and out of focus. ABBY: Don’t get confused, we have to remain with each other but still undefined. When I am sad and frustrated, might you not come closer? When I slid and frayed, a lacklustre stray, a faction of stays, subtraction and pays, eh, seas? Keys and plays. Absent actions praised...glazed tattle, recurring rings and rattles—spring apples reflected in a glass pane.

If Sworn’s work emphasizes our condition of immersion in a system— we are all living in a movie, we and the kids in her film—she also offers an out-of-character, almost nonsensical, almost prophetic speech for this context. And this is significant both with respect to the oppressive rationality of suburbia (as a symbol of modernity) and with regard to Derrida’s insistence that there is nothing outside of the text. Poetry is something that carves out a frame within the frame of language, escaping the system by plunging even more deeply into it.

See more of Corin Sworn’s work at [canadianart.ca/sworn](http://canadianart.ca/sworn)



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