

will have my pink in
 the wedding red ceiling
 up between the columns
 higher when ~~first~~ is only the
 old sense of grief?
 N/A got but two
 bats find the spiders of guilt
 keep the ready-ones &
 share cigarettes with every ^{system} A
 mostly. ~~and my~~
 My room also with the
 means also never attend
 under my floor the vines
 resource get ^{push} through ~~my~~ through
 my. The crickets
 remember with my

The Black Notebooks
 Brigitte Radecki

A Place for Writing:
Brigitte Radecki and Elizabeth Smart

Brigitte Radecki's process in creating the five large canvases known as "The Black Notebooks" has been called, even by herself, "obsessive." Maybe. Her process could also be described as meticulous, detailed, respectful, attentive, meditative. This is a way of working familiar for a long time in the intricate stitches of needlepoint, embroidery, knitting, or crochet.

The tiny brushwork strokes, which do not call any attention to themselves, are easy to miss. They seem almost unbelievable on these 5 x 5 feet canvases, simply there, in the way of nearly invisible quilting stitches, carefully placed one by one. The deftly precise strokes create words and then make a space for them, layer after layer. The paintings bring Smart's journal pages out of obscurity and into the light of the gallery, making them art on a grand scale, which suits their energy, their vitality.

These words have been many times refused: denied space in books, edited, self-edited, scratched out, scribbled over by Smart herself until they are barely legible on the pages of small notebooks, hidden away in archives. Other scholars have rescued them and put many of them into books, but Radecki takes them as they are, handwritten, scrawled, and raw. She acknowledges their spluttering onto the page, drawing out the beauty inherent in them, as well as the pain which ends in the silence of editors' marks, with no words at all.

Books and writing, over the past centuries, have been difficult places for women. Books contain, in all the senses of that word

and have not only refused women but have often simply been too small, too closed, to hold in all the power of words, their explosiveness, their magic. Writing, after all, originally had nothing to do with books. It was "incising into stone."

To be included in books, writing had to have authority, not always granted to women. Certainly, Elizabeth Smart struggled to be taken seriously as a writer, to be published, but much of her strongest, liveliest writing is to be found in her notebooks, her own books, where she had all authority over what was included and what was not.

During her lifetime, Smart published only one book, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. It was barely contained within its covers, extravagant, lyrical, voluptuous, outrageous, it was burned—by Smart's mother—who destroyed all the copies she could find. It was that act, more than any other, which caught Radecki's attention.

Brigitte Radecki was appalled by lists of books burned in Hitler's Germany, but to have a mother burn her daughter's book seemed the ultimate outrage. That book has risen from the ashes, though, to become a novel widely read, re-issued, and studied. It intrigued Radecki, and she began a search into Smart's life and work.

Much of Smart's best writing seethed into journals, beyond typeset, beyond what is usually thought of as "book." Her words are handwritten into a series of small black notebooks which Radecki read in the National Archives in Ottawa.

The canvases which are "The Black Notebooks" reverberate into the issues of Smart's life. It is appropriate that, where there are words, Radecki has them show through the paint, which permits

them, creates large space for them, accepting them as writing and granting them a multi-dimensional author-ity.

--Judith Miller

Decide to use a type of blackboard colour – to make it seem as if things could be changed or corrected easily. Use one of her entries that has many emotional “scratchings”. The words in this entry are difficult to decipher or not that interesting, so decide to use the remainder of the entry of the previous painting.

*Not God, but the bats and a spider who is weaving my guilt,
keep the rendezvous with me, and shame copulates with ev-
ery September housefly. My room echoes with the scream
she never uttered, and under my floor the vines of remorse
get ready to push up through the damp. The cricket drips
remembrance unceasingly into my ear, lest I mistay any item
of cruelty's fiendish inventory.*

The trap is sprung, and I am in the trap.

As this will be the first painting in the installation, it will also create a kind of circular path. But hopefully not a closed one.

I now have to decide how to present Elizabeth Smart's words to the viewer. After several studio visits and discussions with friends, decide to make them more physically part of the installation. To make them available to pick up, to hold, to walk around with. Most importantly, to let the viewer decide which segment of text might go with which painting.

Having written all of this, it now seems to be quite a logical progression after all. Have I forgotten things? Misrepresented my process? Told lies?

Barker and Smart lived in the United States for a few years, but then Smart followed Barker to London during the height of the war. She lived in abject poverty with her four children, working where she could to support them, struggling with her alcoholism and Barker's. Barker moved in and out of their lives, having affairs with other women.

Smart wrote her best-known work, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (1945), during the height of her passionate affair with Barker. It is an intense poetic novel, written in lyrical, extravagant language. It has been referred to as a rhapsody, an ecstasy, an agony, a triumph. Smart delighted in written language: Regret—mostly for the slow too stately way of words spoken. (Written, they go off on their own life, find their right time, like seeds, whirling, floating, snapping, bursting, lying low for generations till conditions are right . . .)

Smart's mother was mortified by the book which went against all her notions of proper behaviour and lifestyle. She worked to have her daughter's book banned in Canada, again using her influence with public officials. She rounded up as many copies as she could find, which had slipped into the country—and burned them.

One way and another, the book survived to become a Canadian classic. Alice van Wart has edited some of Smart's journals into two volumes: *Necessary Secrets* (1987) and *On the Side of the Angels* (1997).

In the Meantime, a collection of poems and prose pieces includes "Dig a Grave and Let Us Bury Our Mother." All her life, Smart struggled with her mother's disapproval and neglect, internalized as continuing and sometimes desperate self-censorship, often expressed as rage.

Smart died of a heart attack in 1986, back in Britain after a short time in Canada, during which she was writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta. Rosemary Sullivan wrote a fine biography of Smart: *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart; a Life* (1991). Kim Echlin's *Elizabeth Smart: a Fugue Essay on Women and Creativity* (2004) investigates Smart's writing process.

Artist Statement
Brigitte Radecki

My work takes the traditionally self-sufficient and self-expressive vocabulary of abstraction but then contaminates it with long and descriptive titles or segments of text taken directly from literary works. In the case of this exhibition, the paintings are from the series "The Black Notebooks", and incorporate the writings of Elizabeth Smart. Here, as in my previous work, the large, expansive and expressive gestures of historical abstract painting, have been transcribed into the intimacy of handwritten personal letters and journals. That is, the drive to originality and grandeur has been short-circuited.

As I feel it is important to communicate with an audience, the problem I've set for myself has been to find a way to keep the immediacy and visual clarity of abstract painting, and yet to open the possibility for the viewer to negotiate with and respond to the work – or to put it another way – to play the game. To keep this experience from taking on a didactic form – that is, having to read wall labels or panels of text introducing and explaining the work, I include as part of the installation, those excerpts of texts from my readings that are for me, the clearest place where the paintings originated.

In other words, I am questioning the self-containment of the single painting and want to produce a narrative installation where the meaning of the work is not inside the individual painting but reverberates somewhere between painting and text.

My intention then, is not to solve formal problems or to "find

my own voice” by developing a consistent style but to use the established vocabulary of abstraction and yet to re-introduce narrative, history, and references to life outside painting while maintaining the sensuousness and primary experience of abstraction.