Introducing Suzy Lake
ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO
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It was the chin hairs that did it. Really. They were curly, alternately gray or brown, and one emerged from an inflamed pimple. The others stuck out—as I myself know from experience these horrid things tend to do—at odd angles and in senseless places on the lower half of this made-up, obviously older woman’s face. I was equally repulsed and comforted by the brutal truth in these courageous and culturally outrageous photographs, which I encountered on the website of the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) under the exhibition title Introducing Suzy Lake. Scanning the summary, I discovered that Suzy Lake is sixty-seven years old, and has been producing a powerful body of politically engaged photographic and performance work for over four decades. Two thoughts immediately crossed my mind. The first was, “What a way to make an introduction!” and the second was, “Where have you been all my life?”

The latter question was one I kept repeating to myself as I reviewed this emotionally profound and tremendously experimental retrospective. Rightfully devoting an entire floor to what I later realized was just a fraction of Lake’s work, the curators have organized the show around the three urban communities where Lake has lived: Detroit from birth to the age of twenty-one, Montreal for the next decade, and Toronto from age thirty-one onward. Initially I was perplexed by this curatorial decision, as the work could so easily have been arranged around the concerns of late twentieth-century feminists: social inequities, gender stereotypes, and the body. But according to Lake, she has always been influenced by and invested in her immediate community. Thus, grouping the works by her cities of residence encourages viewers to comprehend that Detroit’s civil rights movements initiated Lake’s awareness of how society shapes and constrains one’s identity; that Montreal’s small but highly experimental art scene allowed her to combine photography, performance, and her studies at the Théâtre de Quat’Sous mime school; and that her final move to more cosmopolitan Toronto provided Lake greater exposure to the work of other artists and a larger audience for her own work. But as I reviewed the show over the course of two days, I realized that this arrangement made sense for another reason, the same one that struck me when I saw the inordinate number of nose hairs in the image from the series Beauty at a Proper Distance / In Song (2001–02), described earlier. This was the most honest recording of a woman’s chronological life I had ever encountered in all of my years as an art historian, and it literally moved me to tears.

As a young woman trained to be “a good wife and mother,” Lake’s investment in the women’s liberation movement, Vietnam protests, and civil rights activity in mid-’60s Detroit forever altered her, provoking her to question the social construction of identities. This political awakening informed the identity work she would begin once she moved to Montreal in 1968. In On Stage (1972–74), a video projection amended twice, Lake explored the ways in which fashion magazines and advertising dictate how women should present themselves in public, and eventually undermine their self-esteem when they realize how difficult it is to measure up. The first incarnation showed Lake dressed à la mode, posing languorously in evening gowns or intently strolling down city streets in culottes and beret, hoping that mere mimicry was enough to indict such industries. Sadly, after the work was mistakenly derided for being
“narcissistic,” Lake recognized that viewers needed more didacticism, and she added various texts, which explained that for women, “role-playing is a daily occurrence.” The final incarnation inserted images of Lake in whiteface, which in mime studies represents “position-zero”: a neutral state that negates the individual. When alternated with the fashion photographs and text, the contrast underscored a young woman’s lack of self-awareness and how willingly and frequently she conforms to society’s demands.

The social pressure to meet others’ expectations is most effectively embodied in Choreographed Puppets (1976–77), a photographic installation that Lake began while completing her MFA at Concordia University in Montreal. The artist built an enormous scaffolding in her studio, which allowed her to suspend herself from a harness that hung from its center. She then attached black straps to her wrists and ankles that resembled marionette strings, and invited various friends to act as puppeteers. The resulting photographs, with exposure lengths that range from one-thirtieth to one-fifteenth of a second, show a female body swinging in space, a mere blur, with her limbs at the mercy of those who pull the strings. Yet the work was one entirely devised by the artist, and as such, Lake insinuated her own complicity in letting outside forces influence her. As the five images displayed as part of this installation feature two men atop the scaffolding, it is tempting to read this as a 1970s-era indictment of patriarchal culture, albeit an entirely innovative and physically poetic one. But Lake informed me that when the work was re-performed at AGO, and when she herself first created it, the work was entirely devised by the artist, and as such, Lake insinuated her own complicity in letting outside forces influence her. As the five images displayed as part of this installation feature two men atop the scaffolding, it is tempting to read this as a 1970s-era indictment of patriarchal culture, albeit an entirely innovative and physically poetic one. But Lake informed me that when the work was re-performed at AGO, and when she herself first created it, women also served as puppeteers. Ergo, the work ultimately transcends gender, and stands as a broader metaphor for how easily all humans are manipulated and buffeted by circumstances beyond their control.

Lake’s training as a mime continually stressed the importance of neutrality in order to preclude personal biography so that her work could speak to a wider audience, and this is still one of the most compelling aspects of her images. Like the whiteface that allowed her to become all young women who yearn to make up a pleasing face—as seen in Miss Chatelaine (1973)—Lake’s gender-neutral choice of clothing and hairstyles in her later practice stands as an artistic testament to the era of “middle-aged invisibility.” Here are the mother, the teacher, the librarian, and/or the dog-walking neighbor down the street, all clad in their loose-fitting attire and entirely too-sensible shoes. In short, c’est moi—and all of the women one never sees as the subject of works of art. In Pre-Resolution: Using the Ordinances at Hand (1983–84), a series of photographs that mimic the scale and vibrancy of the richest Mark Rothkos, but that are far more potent in their content, a woman in “mom jeans” and a sweatshirt hurls a mallet at a blood-red wall, and the anger that women are so often encouraged to repress is made visually manifest in the shattered lathe and fractured plaster. It’s too easy to assume this is about “hormones;” and again, it’s Lake’s subtleties (in this case, the obviously laborious paint pattern that the subject intentionally smashes) that make the work so open-ended. The work is as much about an artist’s frustration at one’s unsuccessful creative endeavors and the desire to begin again, as it is about suppressed female rage finally let loose. Likewise, in

the Reduced Performing series (2008–09), where Lake laid under a flatbed scanner as it attempted to capture the most minute of her movements, the outcome betrays our culture’s desire to erase women who do not fit the ideal. So odd and flat are these images, so uncommon is it to transform the mundane middle-aged woman into the sacred by making her the sole subject of an artwork, that their awkward tenor is undeniable. Lake’s commentary in the exhibition title cards and its accompanying video explicates our discomfort: “Experience is positive; maturity is positive; but our culture doesn’t celebrate these attributes when associated with (female) aging . . . society has taught us we have a shelf life.”

The exhibition “ends,” if you will, with Lake’s most recent series, Extended Breathing (2008–10), sixty-minute long exposures that record Lake meditating, alone or among a crowd. Again, Lake is dressed generically and androgynously, her body a stand-in for myriad baby boomers across the globe. Five of these large-scale images fill the final gallery, and while I stood there, a beautiful woman who appeared to be in her early thirties and her equally pretty tween daughter entered. After a casual scan of the room, the daughter said, “Mom, I don’t get it. It’s just pictures of an old lady.” The mother shrugged and they left. Had they been taught by our culture that maturity and experience were positive, they might have lingered and looked more closely. If so, they would have noticed that there was an iPad with an eight-minute guided meditation on audio for visitors to experience while looking at a specific large-scale image from the Extended Breathing series. As viewers follow the soothing instructions to “breathe in, breathe out . . .” the vocal prompts encourage us to see things that at first glance are easily overlooked: a blue backpack, the miniscule details of that mural, and at the center of it all, a mature and experienced artist steadfastly teaching us. Not only how to see and how to breathe, but ultimately, how to live.

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NOTE 1. Suzy Lake, interview by the author at Art Gallery of Toronto, November 9, 2014.