

# History Repeating



Michelle Forsyth translates horror into pattern

Tragedy disguised as beauty. Horror translated into pattern. These are some of the elements in Michelle Forsyth's *Then & There: Work from the One Hundred Drawings Project*, currently on view at Deluge. Photographs of disasters are the source material for these highly decorative and detailed paintings. We are continually confronted with a barrage of media images depicting human suffering and Forsyth questions the long-term effect this exposure has on our psyche and on our ability to empathize. Rather than merely skimming through a plethora of disconcerting images, Forsyth lingers on a few specific ones and proceeds to recreate, and thereby reinvent, their content. Images move from scenes of disasters to spectacles of colour through her elaborate patterning process.

possible without actually having been there at the time of occurrence.

A computer-generated grid pattern is layered on top of the photographic image to establish colours and values that are then painted on paper with gouache. A paradox ensues—as the work gets more detailed, it becomes less descriptive. This oblique subject matter gets returned to its literal source with descriptive text panels accompanying each painting. The detail-oriented text leaves you looking for images in the surface that can no longer be found—reminiscent of the photographic visual clues in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up*, impossible to ignore and yet impossible to define.

Forsyth found that after 9/11, many of her repeated abstract shapes were being interpreted to be Islamic geometric patterns. The

work began to acquire unwanted or unintended meaning. It was at this point she created patterns made of flowers. So rather than being an arbitrary design, these new patterns added another layer of meaning in that flowers are often used as commemorations on sites of disasters or death.

Forsyth's most recent work con-



MICHELLE FORSYTH | POINT ELIĆE BRIDGE COLLAPSE, VICTORIA, BC, MAY 26, 1896

Forsyth grew up on the West Coast and spent a good deal of her childhood living on a sailboat. She would concoct not-so-unlikely (considering her circumstances) fantasies of being lost at sea or swept up in a dramatic storm. This experience left Forsyth predisposed to speculate on possible impending and real disaster situations. The use of found images (often gleaned from websites such as rotten.com) could appear to be voyeuristic, but Forsyth attempts to invoke the conscientious gaze of an empathetic outsider. While she might have no personal attachment to the particular incidents she addresses in her work, this lack of connection is compensated for by an intense intimate involvement with each photo through an elaborate artistic process—sometimes involving the use a tiny brush made of only a few hairs. But unlike a voyeur who might enjoy looking at images of disasters for the sheer fascination factor, Forsyth takes the process one step further with visitations to the sites of each event she chooses to portray. These “scene of the crime” visits are a way of making depicted incidents as real as

sists of layered three-dimensional cut-out paper flowers attached to the walls with straight pins. This sculptural work has a physical presence that is evocative of the idea of a disaster, as its physicality is both fragile and real. This fragility doesn't come across as strongly in the paintings on paper that are carefully contained behind glass. The sculptures allow the flower image to become elevated from decorative pattern to metaphor for a memorial. Another strength of the relief work is that the images seem to hover over one another, challenging the viewer to attempt to discover layers of hidden meaning in the surface and its shadows.

Forsyth's work encourages us to question how we respond to tragedies outside of our own experience. It also makes us consider the role of beauty in art: is beauty used to anesthetize and make suffering and pain more palpable? Or is it used as a possible form of salvation or redemption for the human spirit? Most likely the answer rests somewhere between the two.

***Then & There: Work from the One Hundred Drawings Project***  
To February 23  
Deluge Contemporary Art, 636 Yates  
385-3327

—Wendy Welch