

Rishma Dunlop

*Notebook Fragments 2008*

## The Light in Studios



Suzanne Northcott's Studio, Fort Langley British Columbia  
Photo Credit Joe Paczuski

Vancouver, November 1, 2007. The Linda Lando Fine Art Gallery. The opening of *Esperanza*, a collaboration with visual artist Suzanne Northcott, an installation of her art and my poetry. The rain is torrential, creating a surreal scene around the gallery and the crowd of art lovers mingling inside. Linda Lando, the gallery owner, has supported several exhibitions of our work, and she has allowed me to write poetry with graphite on the white gallery walls. The poems are from a new manuscript in progress, conversations with Suzanne's paintings. The word *esperanza*, Spanish for hope, has multiple resonances for Suzanne and for me. "Esperanza" is the title of one of Suzanne's paintings that depicts moths against a screen. The word has appeared in poems of mine about the Okanagan Valley, and in reference to roses grown in my father's garden when I was a child. While notions of "hope" and "beauty" are frequently resisted in the realms of contemporary art criticism, our impulse in this collaborative work, and in my individual work as a poet, is to look deeply at the world as it is, to confront what is left when platitudes and banalities are stripped away. When all skepticism and judgements have occurred, as the poet George Oppen wrote, it is "the real that we confront" (2002, 202).<sup>1</sup>

But perhaps what is left for artists in confronting the world is the very unreal residue of hope. One location for this residue of hope is the artist's studio, the place of *poiesis*, of art-making. Suzanne Northcott's studio in Fort Langley BC and my apartment in a converted

Toronto factory are places of making. Within these locations, and wherever we construct our studios, art can evoke consciousness that pays careful and critical attention to the world, the “real,” while remaining alert to our hopes and yearnings, the unreal. In her remarkable collection of essays, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*, Rachel Blau Duplessis describes the tenuous thread of hope that I see as central to artistic practice. *Blue Studios* is a reflection in part on the nature of poetry and writing practice in the context of what Theodor Adorno referred to as a “displacement and estrangement of cultural habits under the ‘messianic light’.”<sup>2</sup> Posing further questions and embodying questioning, poetry as a mode of practice becomes a global historical responsibility. DuPlessis cites Judith Butler who states that we do not know how people are inspired by artistic work but that the “cultural life of fantasy” can provoke the “resignification of social bonds.” DuPlessis sees this transformation through poetry as secular, connected to social justice and cultural complexity. Poetry as a writing practice evokes that which is beyond the conventions of rationalism or fixed narratives. DuPlessis writes of *Blue Studios*: “This book is backlit by almost hopeless hope.”<sup>3</sup>



Photo Credit Joe Paczusi, 2007

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As we begin the new year of 2008 with the publication of this issue, a sampling of the world headlines offers us the following: Shootout in Guatemala; Benazir Bhutto Assassinated; Iraqi Soldier Killed by Two U.S. Servicemen; Fear of Civil Conflict in Sri Lanka, Cease-Fire is Annulled; Terror in Dakar; Violence Erupts in Kenya. In a world devastated by violence, injustices, war, oppression, and poverty, what brings me back to hope is the studio, a place “backlit by almost hopeless hope.”

I continue to find comfort in *historiographic poiesis*, art making that responds to history and envisions poetry as aesthetic and ethical literature with the potential to arouse thought while avoiding didacticism. Post 9/11, in September 2001, *The New Yorker* published Adam Zagajewski’s poem “Try to Praise the Mutilated World.” While the poem was written two years prior to 9/11, it is now linked in association to the World Trade Centre bombings. In the face of the new year, the faint but stubborn residue of hope can be found in rereading Zagajewski’s lines:

You have seen the refugees heading nowhere,  
You’ve heard the executioners sing joyfully.

...

Praise the mutilated world  
And the grey feather a thrush lost,  
And the gentle light that strays and vanishes  
And returns [4](#)

And in the words of poet Muriel Rukeyser, in her poem *The Speed of Darkness*, a timeless call to poets:

Who will speak these days,  
If not I,  
If not you? [5](#)

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Given my interest in collaborative and collective works between artists across genres and practices, I am pleased to introduce a new feature in *Studio*, a section called Gallery. In Gallery, we will showcase works of interdisciplinary collaboration between poets and other artists. Our first Gallery features the works of New Mexico poet Jamie Ross, a series of poems from a manuscript titled “Postcards from Mexico.” Ross’ poems are responses to the stunning black and white photographs of José Angel Rodríguez, Mariana Jampolsky, and Antonio Turok.

Our new issue also features poetry by: Judith Barrington; Margo Berdeshevsky; Samantha Bernstein; Dennis Cooley; Barry Dempster; Robert Gibbons; Lydia Kwa; Molly Peacock; Miranda Pearson; Henry Rappaport; and Evie Shockley. Our Education section features poems by Chella Courington. Books reviewed are Robert Gibbons’ *Beyond Time*, reviewed by Bent Sørensen, Roseanne Carrara’s *A Never Wilderness*, reviewed by Christopher Doda,

and Mahmoud Darwish's *The Butterfly's Burden*, translated by Fady Joudah, reviewed by Deema Shehabi. Rose Lucas, Lorin Schwarz, and Ann Fisher-Wirth all contribute essays.

A special note of congratulations to Fady Joudah whose book *The Earth in the Attic* won the 2007 Yale Younger Poets Prize.

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[1](#) Oppen, George. *New Collected Poems*. Ed. Michael Davidson. Preface by Eliot Weinberger. (New York: New Directions, 2002), 202.

[2](#) Adorno, Theodor. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Trans. E.F.N. Jephcott. (London: Verso, 1974), 247.

[3](#) DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 3.

[4](#) Zagajewski, Adam. "Try to Praise the Mutilated World." *Without End*. Trans. Clare Cavanagh. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002), 60.

[5](#) Rukeyser, Muriel. *The Speed of Darkness*. (New York: Random House, 1968), 109.