

"Other than the fact that these works are photo-based, what struck me is that the exhibition reflects the interdisciplinarity of my practice because the works each interact with ideas "outside" of art. Nature of the Body is about consciousness; its content is heavily influenced by Buddhism and is increasingly relevant from the point of view of scientific disciplines. The Guardian series (there will be more) relate to issues of the environment, food and the economy. The identity of the fantasy figure highlights the local (she is the Guardian of Niagara, after all) but the issues are global as much as local.

I used to think of the interdisciplinarity with which I defined my work solely in terms of the relationship amongst the artistic media I used. In the 1970's, when my career began, this was an artistically vanguard position. At a certain point, the word "interdisciplinary" entered into public discourse separate to art. (For example in the social services, to mean a team including a social worker, nurse and probation officer). This meaning then seemed to influence the word's use in art. I came to understand that this change was an important one that I could enthusiastically embrace because it reflects my values about art that is of the world instead of about itself and it reflects a shift away from the dominant, modernist mode of organizing knowledge and being in this world through specialization and isolating parts of a whole. I could make a case that my body of work has operated outside of authoritative disciplines of art interpretation because it has not been specialized and I cheer the shift to interdisciplinary, networking ways of thinking." (Chitty, Elizabeth. Artist Statement, HAI 2009)

Essay by Irene Loughlin

The artist wishes to thank Brian Yungblut for his role in realizing the Guardian photographs.

Chitty, Elizabeth. Telling Tales. 1979. 26:45. Code 114.00 VTape, Toronto, ON

Chitty, Elizabeth. *Asserting Our Bodies*. *Caught in the Act*. An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women.

Edited by Johanna Householder and Tanya Mars YYZ Books, Toronto ON p. 74

Rainer, Yvonne. *Feelings are Facts: A Life*. MIT Press, 2006 p. 391

Ross, David on Susan Sontag, MIT Review - *Feelings are Facts: A Life*, 2006.

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/21/feelings-are-facts.html>

Works in the exhibition:

**Nature of the Body** (light, colour photocopies, stainless steel bowls, water, 1996)

**Guardian of Niagara: The Great Lakes** (colour Chromira print, 30" x 24", 2007)

**Guardian of Niagara: The Soft Fruit Industry** (colour Chromira print, 24" x 30", 2009)

**Fly HAI** (colour solvent ink on vinyl, 30" x 40", 2009)

Elizabeth Chitty is an interdisciplinary artist born and residing in St. Catharines, ON. Since 1975, she has created performance, video, installation and photo based works. Her single channel videos have been exhibited widely, including at the 11th Biennial of Paris, and the National Gallery of Canada. Her work is part of the permanent collections of the Art Gallery of Hamilton and the Canada Council Art Bank. [www.elizabethchitty.ca](http://www.elizabethchitty.ca) [www.ccca.ca](http://www.ccca.ca)

Irene Loughlin is an interdisciplinary artist and the Programming Director at HAI. Her lectures on interdisciplinary practice include presentations at Performance Studies International (NYU) and the University of Santiago in Chile. Publications include the Phillip Review, FADO website, and Western Front books.



## Hamilton Artists Inc.

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Artist will be in attendance

Elizabeth Chitty



HAMILTON ARTISTS INC  
ARTIST RUN CENTRE

"The beginning of her story was that she felt obliged to make one. Time ticked on, events passed, relationships developed or discarded, diseases humbled to or overcome. She felt an urge to observe the sequence of events, to make order of the information. She would have to appoint certain things as the most important, as essential to her theme..." (from the video *Telling Tales*, Elizabeth Chitty, 1979)

Elizabeth Chitty's work spans thirty years of art practice. In the 1970's, she played a crucial role in feminist intervention within video art and the use of new media. The early performance/video works were driven by an interest in semiotics (the production of meaning from sign-systems, such as written and spoken language, symbols, images etc.) Her work of this period is located within the spectrum of second-wave feminist works such as the 1975 work *Semiotics of the Kitchen* by Martha Rosler. Through the creation of spoken narratives that resisted linearity and asserted a repetitive use of the feminine pronoun, Chitty insisted on contributing a vital, female perspective to both semiotics and video art in Canada.

At the forefront of demonstrating the emerging concept of interdisciplinarity (where, in order to create a work, the artist draws from two or more disciplines) Chitty often merged dance, video, performance art,

sound, installation, and concrete poetry. In an era where “everything was just beginning” Chitty’s experimental work contained the spontaneity of responsiveness to her body as semiotic site. The body continuously occupies a central position throughout her practice. The work of the 1970’s sought to empower the female body symbolically within an urgent social and political context, and evoked a type of rebellion also fuelled by parallel counter culture movements such as punk rock. Susan Sontag has described this time period as containing an “adversarial culture.” (Ross on Sontag, *Review - Feelings are Facts: A Life*, 2006) In the artist talk at HAI, Chitty mentioned the influence of the 1965 NO manifesto, put forward by dance artist Yvonne Rainer. Rainer both rejected and was influenced by the reigning minimalist aesthetic that supported an aggressively masculine perspective. Reacting from a gendered position that sought to decentre the supremacy of masculinist art production, Rainer stated in the NO manifesto:

“NO to spectacle **no** to virtuosity **no** to transformations and magic and make-believe **no** to the glamour and transcendence of the star image **no** to the heroic **no** to the anti-heroic **no** to trash imagery **no** to involvement of performer or spectator **no** to style **no** to camp **no** to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer **no** to eccentricity...” (Yvonne Rainer, NO Manifesto, 1965)

The aspect of Rainer’s manifesto that became most problematic in retrospect, for both Elizabeth Chitty and for Yvonne Rainer herself, was: **no** to moving or being moved.” (Yvonne Rainer, NO manifesto, 1965)

In a review of Rainer’s 2006 autobiography *Feelings are Facts: A Life*, Daniel Ross notes “Rainer recognized that much of what passed as experimental and avant-garde really was an indefinite postponement, that is, an evasion, specifically of moving and being moved, that is, of emotion”:

“While we aspired to the lofty and cerebral plane of a quotidian materiality, our unconscious life unraveled with an intensity and melodrama that inversely matched their absence in the boxes, beams, jogging, and standing still of our austere sculptural and choreographic creations.” (Rainer, Yvonne. *Feelings are Facts: A Life*, p. 391)

In a parallel experience, Chitty alludes to her difficulty with the binary prescriptives of contemporary art in the 1970’s that excluded a sense of emotive wisdom, when she states,

“I regard my early work as enacting disembodiment, it was intellectually driven, and about intent, not expressivity. Although there is no question that emotion often seeped, sometimes poured, through.” (Chitty, Elizabeth. *Caught in the Act*, p. 74)

Chitty’s later work in the 1980’s and 1990’s reclaimed aspects of a deeply emotive interiority, an embodied consciousness that offered a quiet place of contemplation that is evident in the current installation, *Nature of the Body* at HAI (first exhibited in the group show, “Terre Commune”, Grimsby Public Art Gallery, Grimsby, ON/Sequence, Chicoutimi, QC 1996). In recalling the 1980’s, Chitty spoke of the AIDS crisis, which resulted in an urgent questioning of the body politic. During this period of time, she moved from an urban center to Jordan, in rural Niagara. Her work reorganized itself around a new locality and identity as a regional artist. A pervasive environment of grief in the artworld paralleled Chitty’s move towards this quiet interiority, and marked a renewed interest of the body’s interior, with an investigation of the internal organs in particular, as sites of phenomenological knowledge and emotive importance.

The necessity of being present that comes with the terrain of motherhood brought a new set of questions to her work, which she explored collaboratively in a series of photo images with her daughter that was centred in the senses, and is found within the installation *Nature of the Body*. The photos are pinned simply to the wall in a sequential horizon devoid of a sense of hierarchy. The viewer moves through captured moments - images of a young girl’s interaction with her natural environment through the use of her senses. Sight, taste, sound, touch, and smell are flashed as visual signs and become illuminated instances of poignant moments of arrival to the present through the affect of the senses. A large outline of a lung/heart shines from a single theatrical light, floating above a grouping of silver bowls filled with water and arranged in the shape of a brain. The epic proportions of the lung/heart shimmers down upon the suggested shape of this brain, which is only brought into being through the watery materiality and the grouping of the light reflective bowls. The lung/heart is assigned a centrality and a definitive presence that denies the Cartesian hierarchy of the supremacy of mind over the body. This inversion recalls a kind of reverence for the emotive mixed with the sly humour of artist Joyce Wieland’s wordplay using a famous quotation from Canadian history: *reason over passion / passion over reason*.

Despite the Cartesian split, the images of internal organs quietly share the same place as the poignant images of the artist’s daughter and the space of contemplation offered by the ‘thinking’ bowls. Chitty’s installation creates an auratic device that differs intensely from that of art historical references to the organs, which emphasize scientific ex-

cavation and mastery (found, for example, in Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson*). A certain kind of Western logic is brought into question; Chitty’s research has led her in differing directions, reflecting the artist’s interest in Buddhist philosophy and Western history. In a small book that accompanied a performance simultaneous to the installation *Nature of the Body*, Chitty gathers several observations under the heading *Miscellany*, including:

“Plato viewed the lungs as “set around the heart like a cushion” to contain its leaping in fear...The Buddhist conception of the sense organs are: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind... The Tibetan word for mind and heart is the same...The Tibetan word “Lung” means the spoken transmission of particular sacred instructions by a teacher to a student... The lungs of a bird were still recently called its “soul” in Yorkshire, Somerset and other English counties.” (Chitty, Elizabeth. *Artist Book*, from the Performance: *The Nature of the Body* 1996).



Elizabeth Chitty *Nature of the Body* Installation

Three new photographic works featured in the installation at Hamilton Artists Inc. explore the artist’s interest in environmental issues. In the work *Fly HAI* (2009) the artist enlargens a low-resolution video image of a red tail hawk. She states, “I approach (the image of the hawk) from two points of view – the unabashed enthusiasm I have for this bird and the emotional thrill I get being close to it, and the nature/culture “both/and” of technologically distancing nature photographs.” (Chitty, Elizabeth. *Artist Statement*, HAI 2009) In a two part photo series, the artist turns her attention towards the Great Lakes and to the disappearing fruit orchards of the Niagara region.

In the *Guardian of Niagara: The Great Lakes*, the work functions as performance/photography, a further evolution of Chitty’s interdisciplinary practice. The artist as crone squats over the Great Lakes, inspecting them for environmental damage. She naturally assumes a position of authority, her left hand rests on her thigh and points down toward the earth, her right hand reaches up and rests on a staff. The position of the hands brings to mind a conflation of religious iconography: the Ingres painting—Joan of Arc at Coronation of Charles V11, the Empress of the Tarot, the Buddhist female deity Tara. In Chitty’s work, it is as if the woman has walked the earth’s circumference inspecting various land and water masses and has paused, troubled by the condition of the Great Lakes. In a bubble that references the speech of comic strip heroines, her activity and physicality is neither young nor vacuous. “...she surveys the Great Lakes, pondering the ills that plague them, and rouses government, industry and the public to save the day, recalling the famous feminist slogan ‘We can do it!’” (Chitty, Elizabeth. *Artist Statement* HAI 2009) Simultaneously serious and irreverent in its effect, Chitty’s call to action asks the viewer to contemplate the environmental damage of their immediate surroundings.

The second part of this series is titled *Guardian of Niagara: The Soft Fruit Industry*.

Chitty states:

“The crone returns to comment that soft fruit agriculture, which once defined Niagara, is at serious risk. This time she is less optimistic. With her staff of falling water, she straddles the roof of the last fruit processing plant (closed in Niagara in 2008) and a cherry orchard in bloom, flanked by ripe peaches, all layered on top of a row of suburban houses where orchards once flourished.” (Chitty, Elizabeth. *Artist Statement*, HAI 2009)

The composition of the work is striking in that it reflects both interior and exterior environments. The building the crone stands on functions like a stage to the backdrop of domestic, curtain-like panels of closely cropped hanging fruit, opening to the backdrop of a deeply perspectival lane of a cherry orchard. This fantastical environment presents the viewer with technicolour simulacra of what once was, and what has now been replaced. This replacement is thus strangely alluded to through the integrated aspects of interior decorating aesthetics within the photographs, domestic stagings which fill in for the once abundant landscapes of the Niagara Region.

In mounting this exhibition, there was the desire to provide a moment of celebration for the work of Elizabeth Chitty, placing it within the continuum of curated exhibitions in 2008 -2009, highlighting the importance of feminist art contribution to the development of contemporary art in Canada and abroad. In her experience of preparing for this exhibition, Elizabeth Chitty notes,