

[ Spotlight ]

## Luminous Life



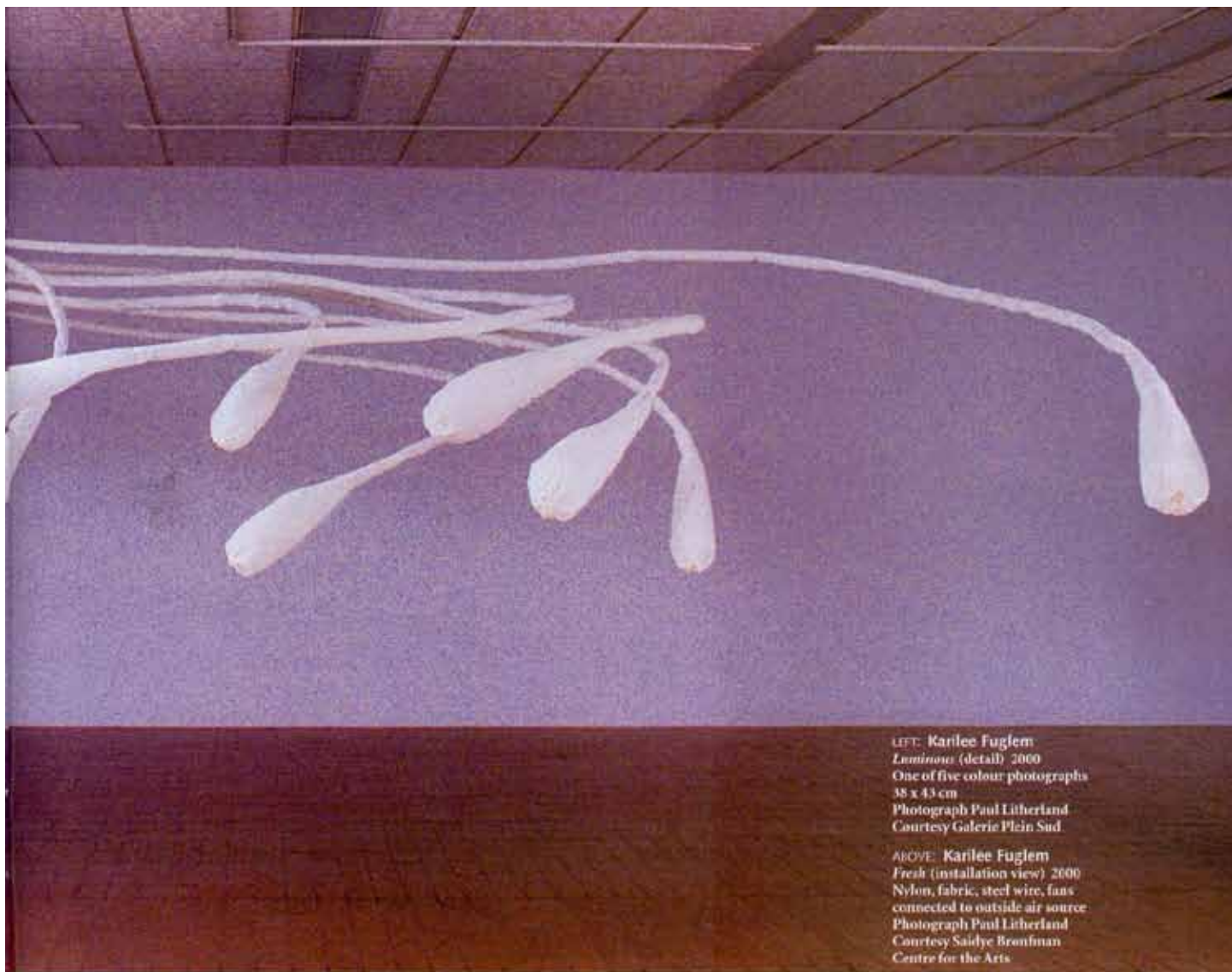
Karilee Fuglem makes  
an art of intangibilities that  
strikes close to the heart.

By David Liss

This series of essays on emerging Canadian artists  
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This should mark the last time B.C.-born Montreal artist Karilee Fuglem can rightfully be referred to as an emerging artist. Her exhibition "Evidence" last spring at the small but highly regarded Galerie Plein Sud in suburban Longueuil, Quebec, was another in a string of solid solo exhibitions in small galleries and artist-run centres in Quebec and Ontario since the mid-1990s. She has also been included in noteworthy group shows alongside established artists where her work is often cited in the media reviews as being among the highlights. A solo exhibition this fall at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery is the final indicator—Karilee Fuglem has *emerged*.

Most remarkable about Fuglem's work is her near-magical ability to make conceptually sophisticated and genuinely engaging visual phenomena, whose precise meaning eludes the grasp of didactic explanation. She uses the humblest of everyday materials—plastic bags, packing tape, nylon, bubblegum—as well as stunningly simple principles of physics involving light and air. They provoke a reaction that is neither specifically visceral nor intellectual, yet they make a profound impact on the viewer.



LEFT: Karlee Fuglem  
*Luminous* (detail) 2000  
 One of five colour photographs  
 38 x 43 cm  
 Photograph Paul Litherland  
 Courtesy Galerie Plein Sud

ABOVE: Karlee Fuglem  
*Fresh* (installation view) 2000  
 Nylon, fabric, steel wire, fans  
 connected to outside air source  
 Photograph Paul Litherland  
 Courtesy Saidye Bronfman  
 Centre for the Arts

Her highly inventive, alien-looking objects (somehow referring to them as sculptures or installations does not seem accurate), are microcosms or literal descriptions of non-visible phenomena. They raise questions about how we inhabit space and how we interact with, and are interdependent upon, each other and our environment. Implicit in this dialogue is the coexistent and permeable relationship between interior and exterior realms.

The first work encountered in the recent Plein Sud show was *Fresh* (2000). It consisted of nine inflated, elongated, nylon tendril-like tubes swooping down into the centre of the room from holes cut above the gallery entrance way. The air filling these tubes, and keeping them slightly bobbing as if they were alive, could be felt exhaling softly from the tiny mouth-like openings at the wide end of each tendril. Visitors followed the tubes to locate their mysterious source of air. They led out of the gallery to a larger tube across the corridor that led into the gallery offices and along the ceiling to the window. By treating the architecture as permeable, and by connecting the exterior of the building to the gallery, Fuglem effectively converted the room into a living,

breathing space, one where the "tendrils" actually seemed to function as lung-like internal organs.

Inside a glass case across the gallery was what appeared from a distance to be a repulsive, squirming little mass of squishy, fleshy pink things. An initial reticence to approach was immediately shattered by the humorous discovery that these were simply dozens of pieces of bubblegum that had been chewed, blown into bubbles, and randomly placed in the case in a pile. Over time, some of these little sacs began to deflate while others fully retained air, or, more correctly, human breath. Any notion of an art gallery being a showcase for "dead" artifacts was undone. We saw a display unit contain the very essence of life.

From these animations of the gallery space, Fuglem extended her personification of architecture metaphorically with a series of five small, framed photographs called *Luminous* (2000). Unrecognizable, almost abstract at first glance, the images are extreme close-ups. Two show sections of an ear; one the part of a hand between thumb and forefinger where the skin is thin and slightly transparent when held up to light; and two others



LEFT: Karilee Fuglem  
*Bubblicious* (detail) 2000  
 Bubblegum, glass, steel  
 101.6 x 66 x 30.8 cm  
 Photograph Paul Litherland  
 Courtesy Saidye Bronfman  
 Centre for the Arts

BELOW: Karilee Fuglem  
*Words take on a life of their own*  
 (video stills) 2000  
 Nine-minute repeating video loop  
 Courtesy Galerie Plein Sud



of fingers held together vertically and horizontally with cracks of glowing light between them. Hung as they are on the wall, and within the context of Fuglem's lexicon, the works invite consideration of the architectural structure as a porous membrane. Not unlike human skin, it is similarly penetrable by sound, the onslaught of time and forces of nature, and in the long run, as temporal as a breath of air.

In 1996, for her exhibition at Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Fuglem rendered this notion literally with *Untitled (Breathing Wall)*, by replacing a wall of the gallery with a thin, textured membrane fabricated from latex and made to pulsate subtly at regular intervals by hidden fans. So effective, so powerfully evocative, at once eerie and funny, repulsive and alluring, the work was the talk of the Montreal art scene at the time, and still stands as one of her best works. In fact, Fuglem was invited to recreate the piece in Montreal, Toronto, Quebec City and Rimouski.

*Words take on a life of their own* (2000) is a video-projection piece, and is another new work in the "Evidence" exhibition. On a modest-sized suspended scrim, which undulates almost imperceptibly from air circulating in the room, images of wisps of smoke enter from the left and right sides of the screen frequently, but without detectable regularity. The title, though confounding at first, hides a decipherable clue. The wisps were recorded against a black backdrop during a conversation with two people outdoors on a cold day. As simple as it sounds, as with all of Fuglem's work, there is an entrancing visual pull as the delicate breaths of air slowly and beautifully billow and dissipate across the screen before it goes black and more words are exchanged. As these words are released or exhaled from within, they traverse the permeable barriers between people and things, between interior and exterior existence. They, and the breath which accompanies them, take on a life, an energy of their own as they inhabit other bodies, other spaces, other voids in a cycle of reciprocity.

Within this context, the body is considered the locus of stored and exchanged energies which link us to each other and the world. Fuglem intends her works to call attention to this intimate and essential interactivity by investing them and their surroundings with charged, yet intangible human emotion: desire, warmth, eroticism, anxiety and repulsion. The art becomes a kind of evidence affirming the existence of the non-visible and unquantifiable aspects of the human condition. ■