

Karilee Fuglem: Cumulous

SOUTHERN ALBERTA ART GALLERY

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by Tomas Jonsson

Before going out one evening, a few friends and I were sitting around swapping ghost stories. Not the campfire variety that end with a hook hanging from the side mirror of some kid's parent's car. These were stories of unexplained occurrences. Each dealt with subtly strange premonitions; gut feelings of an indefinable *something* that existed at the peripheries of our rational experience. In *Cumulous*, shown at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Montreal artist Karilee Fuglem deals with ghosts of a similar sort.

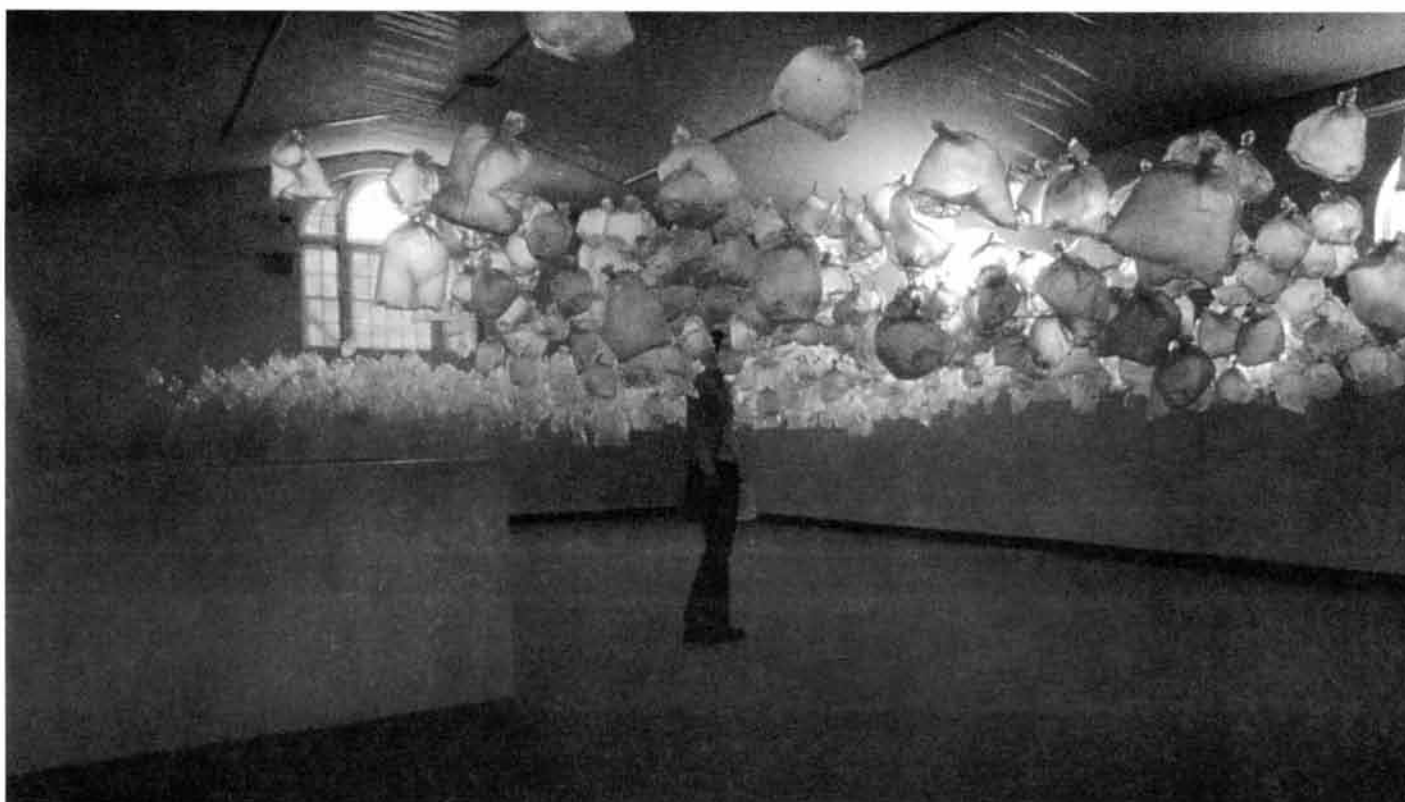
Fuglem says her installation is based on "an informed daydream." Although she made several pilgrimages to the Southern Alberta Art Gallery when she was a student at the Alberta College of Art, Fuglem doesn't recall setting foot in the upstairs gallery. For two years prior to *Cumulous*, she constructed a mental image of the space based on photographs, floor plans, and sensual descriptions. "I even asked what it smelled like," she says. "I imagined a musty old-library smell erased by carpeted floors and continually repainted drywall." Armed with both factual and empirical information, Fuglem approached the gallery, not as an empty, abstract, anonymous space, but as a room charged with life.

For *Cumulous*, Fuglem suspended hundreds of tiny plastic bags, "about the size of a fist or a few

breathed words," on thin coiled wires from a fish line latticework across the ceiling. The bags, hung at or below head level, sway in an indoor breeze. Fuglem had holes drilled into the walls of the gallery, allowing air from the outside to drift in. Normally a sanctuary from the outside, in Fuglem's hands the gallery becomes a place where carefully guarded borders are breached. We're asked to consider the continual ebb and flow of breath as something of ourselves that extends beyond us and intermingles with the surrounding world.

Galleries are one of the few spaces that offer opportunities for reflection, be it about the artwork or our own thoughts. "When you enter, you bring with you what you know of the outside. Conversations you've had here return to you," Fuglem asserts. Do these thoughts, or remnants of thoughts, remain in the space after we're gone, like psychic fingerprints? Suspending the bags at or near eye level draws a comparison to the head, both as a mental space and as a conduit for breath. Seen in this way, the bags literally reference 'thought balloons'—encapsulated words.

In her artist's statement, Fuglem writes: "If so-called emptiness is actually full of the thoughts and dreams of everyone, then the space we pass through is full of everything that has been said, and, in fact, the



Cumulous, installation: air-filled plastic bags (7 x 9 inches & 9 x 11 inches), steel wire, fishing line, Karilee Fuglem, 2000
photo: Don Gill

breath that carries those words is passing through us as we inhale and exhale, and our breath is passing through those near us, and so we inhabit each other continually whether or not we acknowledge each other's presence."

The act of breathing is an underlying motif in Fuglem's work. It is an interaction with the world at its most basic level. In her video *Words take on a life of their own*, she documents the transactions of breath that pass between two people engaged in conversation on a cold day. The faint wisps of air are the only visible record of the existence of the words and the speakers.

Another of Fuglem's installations, shown at the 1998 Montreal Biennial, garnered considerable acclaim for the artist. Untitled but generally known as 'the breathing wall,' it was a large latex membrane, installed to emulate a gallery wall, which slowly inhaled and exhaled through the operation of timed fans. Discussing this piece when I met with Fuglem in Montreal, she said that viewers would often subconsciously match their breathing patterns to the in-and-out motion of the wall.

Like her previous works, Fuglem constructed *Cumulous* with the body in mind. When in gallery spaces, we tend to rely on sight to interpret what we

experience. "We have this bodily intelligence, which doesn't get a chance to participate because we're so used to thinking only through our intellect," Fuglem noted. She said she expected a wide assortment of physical emotions from viewers, ranging from disorientation and unease to elation. Entering the upstairs gallery, my expectation was that the bags would be installed well above head level. Instead, the installation initially had me clinging shyly to the perimeter of the room. When I decided to move from the safety of the periphery into the charged space, the feeling was immediate euphoria—remarkably close to my childhood imagining of flying through clouds.

Cumulous speaks to the body, but, like a ripple in water, the installation resonates in my mind/memory long after I've left the gallery. How similar are these pathetic sacs—tightly huddled next to each other, guarding their own spheres—to our own self-contained thoughts? Like radio waves that continue to emanate in space, are our words, our breaths on a journey, travelling like ghosts out of their shell?♦

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