

## **Inside The Paradise Institute: A conversation with Venice Biennale prize-winner Janet Cardiff**

**Janet Cardiff spoke with François Lachapelle, head of visual arts at the Canada Council, in the fall of 2001**

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Canadian artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller received a special jury prize at the 2001 Venice Biennale for their installation *The Paradise Institute*, in which sounds and images blur the boundaries between film and observer. The Canada Council invested \$174,000 in the Biennale, the world's most prestigious contemporary art exhibition.

*Q. Can you describe The Paradise Institute.*

Cardiff. First, a group of 17 people are escorted into a large wooden structure. Inside is what appears to be a life-size balcony that seats 17 people overlooking an architectural model of the interior of a movie theatre. What we're trying to do is give an experience of actually being in a balcony over top of a large, old-fashioned cinema.... When you enter you put on headphones which are attached to the seats. At first the screen is black but there is a three-dimensional sound on the headphones that appears to be people talking around you. After this, you hear footsteps and a woman singing, and you're not sure if they're actually in the theatre below you or part of the soundtrack. Then an image comes up on the screen with a voice-over that sounds like you are in a very large cinema. The image continues into a scene in which someone gets shot. During this scene a woman comes in, on the soundtrack, and sits down beside you and offers you popcorn and starts talking to you about different things in the film. The sound and image are very intertwined and it becomes increasingly confusing what is part of the 'film' and what is part of the 'real' balcony experience.

We accomplished the different types of sound by playing the soundtrack of what we had shot on location in a big theatre, and re-recording it with a binaural headset so that when you're listening to it on headphones it sounds like you're actually hearing the soundtrack from speakers in a big theatre....

It's sort of a model of a film because you get iconic scenes that involve you, and that seem very familiar in terms of cinema.... [and] at the end the bad guy comes out of the screen area and actually comes into the balcony and sits down beside you. That was kind of a playful thing to do, but it freaks people out.

*Q. You're now devoting yourself full-time to your art. So you will be working more internationally?*

Cardiff. Working internationally is really important because in some way it's difficult in Canada because Canada's art world is kind of insular. You can be a very successful artist within Canada but nobody outside Canada has heard of you. It doesn't necessarily lead anywhere. Not to say the Canadian art world isn't important, but exhibiting internationally is what really counts in terms of art history, collections and making your space within the contemporary art world. As well, there are many more opportunities internationally than in Canada.

*Q. So it's always in the back of the mind of the artist to make a mark on the international scene?*

Cardiff. It's very difficult for Canadian artists unless they make a type of art that's not made anywhere else. You have to be very unique to make it internationally, otherwise curators will

just choose an American or European because of access. One thing that's helped me is that the Canada Council has supported me over the years and the parallel art gallery spaces are a really good ground to establish a way of working. [So] I was able to develop a unique sort of art piece that no one else has done. And when I started showing on the international stage people were going, 'My god, how come we haven't heard of you, you have mature work.'.... But when you're only showing in Canada most of the international curators haven't seen you. So it helped me so much to have the support in Canada to develop a way of working and ... to develop connections to Canadian curators who are connecting internationally.

*Q. What can we do in Canada in the art scene to be more outward looking?*

Cardiff. I think that support of the arts, like big grants and all that, is important, but I think the money would be better spent if it could go to residencies for good young artists and curators, in places like Berlin and major centers like London and New York.... What's really important are the connections. Especially for curators. Curators who travel and understand what the art world is about and have connections really make a difference to Canadian artists. This is a very neglected area.... Bringing in international curators is also extremely important for Canadian artists.