



Sharon Switzer, *Swing*, 2001, video still

Shadow Play

Sharon Switzer at the Koffler Gallery

by Gary Michael Dault

By yoking together a vocabulary of images harvested from the past and contemporary techniques to handle them, Toronto-based artist Sharon Switzer has deftly avoided two kinds of sentimentality: first, she has side-stepped an unearned nostalgia (many of Switzer's images—of Victorian children, for example—predate her by a century), and second, she has end-run what might have been a contentless swoon towards the blandishments of digitalization and other slick imaging aids (a central reliance on video projection, for

example) for their own sake.

One work in her recent exhibition, *Shadow Play*, at Toronto's Koffler Gallery—a work re-presented here after an initial mounting at Toronto's Red Head Gallery—is a crystallization of many of Switzer's concerns. Here, in a six-second video loop called *Toys*, two starchy, characteristically overdressed Victorian children, a boy and a girl, stand facing the camera (the video is generated directly from, or is a sort of gloss on, the original photo). The girl is in white, the boy wears dark cloth-

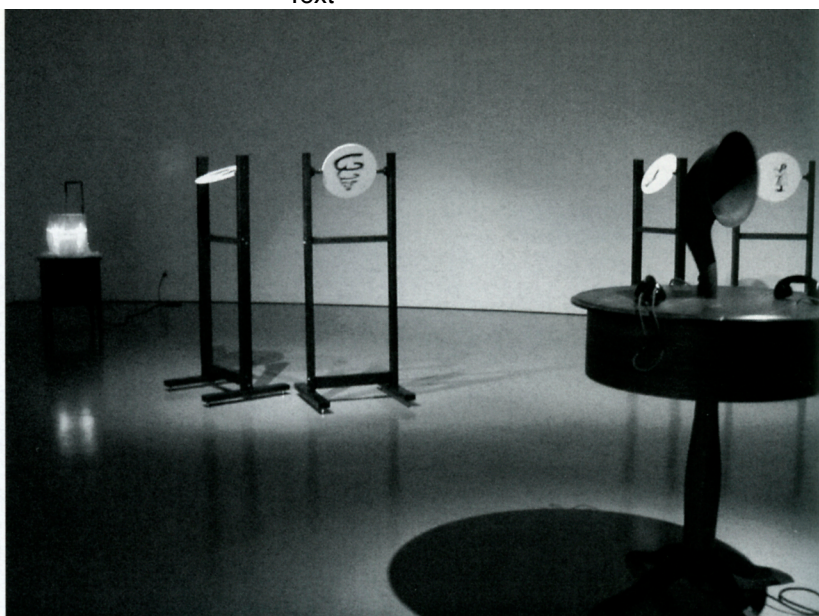
ing. Each possesses—or is at least standing close to—a toy animal. The way Switzer has contrived it, the children remain as still as they ever were in the original photograph. Only the animals move—slightly. The donkey or horse or rabbit or whatever it is standing on the table beside the boy, for example, jerks haltingly to and fro across the tabletop. The boy stares on. The movement of the animals is hesitant, clunky, episodic—but at least it's movement. And it makes the motionlessness of the children all the more touching, even anguishing. For, seized up in the amber of time, they will never move again, even if the animals can.

It's as if Switzer has made a

sort of anti-Barthes work in which the writer's lament (in his *Camera Lucida*) for the elegiac, death-stilled, unredeemable motionless of the photographic past is countered, in Switzer's work, by her partial reanimation of her lost subjects. The hesitant animals in *Toys* are, in a sense, anti-punctum (the punctum in a photograph being, for Roland Barthes, that place (object, incident) we first cling to in the photograph and through which we imaginatively enter it).

The past whispers through all of *Shadow Play*. It is a gallery full of tender, plangent sounds as well as evocative images. For a work like *Siren*, for example, a larger-than-life, period coffee table—as big to adults as a normally-scaled table might be to children—supports, at its center, a dark, rather sinister antique speaker which sprouts from the table's surface and slowly turns in an endless circle. Also on the table are a number of old-fashioned black telephone headsets. If you pick up the telephone receivers and listen, you hear—in small dusty voices, as if they were coming from very far away—a child making the sound of a siren, or (in another headset), singing a lullaby like *Hush Little Baby*. These songs, these sounds, seem to come from a great distance—a distance in time, even more than place. Switzer is on perilous ground here, aligning herself this closely with generalized memory and therefore, with a possible banalization of memory. Here, it is the physical beauty of the work—a kind of responsive, interactive piece of period furniture—that keeps *Siren* sober and centered.

It is one of the achievements



Sharon Switzer, *Siren and Flow*, 2001, table with speaker and telephone handsets (*Siren*), table with the rotating image projected onto silk (*Flow*), Thaumatroptic sculptures, installation view

of *Shadow Play*, in fact, that Switzer's contriving so stern a balance between the emotive content of her pieces and their physical beauty so handily creates a sort of moiré effect, emotionally speaking, pitting a tender, omnidirectional, *ubi sunt* sense of loss against a cunning, here-and-now formal inventiveness—and eliding them.

A couple of works in *Shadow Play* embody this dualism in a remarkably lean, spare way. In *Paper-dolls*, for example, a one second video loop (with a one hour running time), of a tiny ring of stylized, interconnected paperdoll figures (they are holding hands, which is the easiest way to cut them out)—who look like the embodiment of any childhood's ring-around-the-rosie games—is projected onto a large, curving, IMAX-like wall of the gallery. The resulting image is huge (the original magic-circle ring of paper figures is about 2" high and 5" across, like a paper diadem worn by a little girl pre-

tending to be a princess). And spatially ambiguous. For now the little circling of paper figures whirls in the dark of the gallery like a nebula in space (hush-a, hush-a, we all fall down; how honestly childrens' games and rhymes deal with mortality!). While the new expanded scale of these revolving paper figures lends them an undeniable majesty, it is one of the achievements of this disarmingly simple work, that the hold-in-your-hand intimacy of the paper-doll people is still somehow maintained. The projection, as with so much of Switzer's work, feels like the scalelessness of memory. And the revolving paper dolls become pure idea.

There is another work with the clarity, the fully-disclosed simplicity of *Paper-dolls*: Switzer's remarkably affecting *Swing* (color with audio, 30 second loop). The setting is some playground or other. Someone is on one of those small carousel-like swings, going round and round (the exhibition is made up of circles within



Sharon Switzer, *Siren*, 2001, table with speaker and telephone handsets, installation view

circles, wheels within wheels). But Switzer's camera, which is stationary, remains looking at the ground, just to one side of the carousel, so that all we see is the shadow, on the ground, endlessly returning, of the revolving figure. And we hear the rhythmic squeak squeak of the device. The setup is simplicity itself. But its poetics is complex. As is true of all of *Shadow Play*.

What it comes to is that *Shadow Play* is all technically-assisted reverie. Which is everywhere tintured by the sad exaltations of memory—with mortality lurking everywhere in the bitter-sweet darkness. *Shadow Play* is ever so gently about death (oh dark dark dark, they all go into

the dark, wrote T.S.Eliot) and maybe (all those circles, always returning) about the defeat of death within the machinations of memory. But then, as Gaston Bachelard has pointed out in his *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*, 1971, "The terms 'life' and 'death' are too approximate. In a reverie, the word 'death' is vulgar. It ought not to be used in a micrometaphysical study of the being which appear and disappears only to reappear, following the undulations of a reverie on being. Besides, if one dies in certain dreams, in reveries or, in other words, in the peaceful oneirism, one does not die." (p.111). And art is, like reverie, mercifully, long.



Sharon Switzer, *Paper-dolls*, 2000, video still