

## MINING FOR GOLD

SHARON SWITZER

FALLING FROM GRACE: SCENES 4, 5, AND 6

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FALLING FROM GRACE

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Kitsch. Cliché. Nostalgia. Negative epithets could easily be thrown at “Falling from Grace,” the latest multiple-channel video project by Toronto-based artist Sharon Switzer. However, to do so would be to miss the point. While much of the work undeniably relies upon these superficial aspects and may initially seem to revel in a kind of detached irony, it ultimately cuts through to something more profound.

“Falling from Grace” consists of six short scenes that are loosely paired. While not wanting to force a tidiness upon the whole, these scenes seem to function as three couplets, each distinct in mood and mode yet thematically linked in that they all speak to a pervasive and contemporary sense of loss.

On the level of pure sensibility, *Scene 1: Hope* (2005) and *Scene 2: Fall* (2002–6) are the most somber and subdued. In *Hope* the viewer is traveling through the desert at night. Specifics are hard to discern: trees, bushes, and distant hills flit past in silhouette, at times barely distinguishable from the night sky. The rhythm of the landscape and the inability to focus in on the scene are familiar sensations for anyone who, absently gazing out the car window, is lost in thought.

Graphically animated and superimposed on this scene is a kind of searchlight or radar that at regular intervals generates a burst of letters—blips on the screen—that slowly form words and cohere into statements: *Connecting the dots never works for me. Pretending to be casual just gets me confused. I start to worry that I have been wrong from the start. The big picture never looks the way I hope it will.* Rather than literally expose the unknown out-there, this light instead reveals, in the form of preliminary self-observations, an attempt to navigate through a more existential darkness.

*Fall* is, by contrast, a deceptively “simple” and uneventful video in which a spotlight illuminates a dark pool of water as though expectantly looking for something to emerge or happen. The circle of light and the static camera expose the surface of the lake, the rain as it falls in varying intensities, and the undulating waves. These are the only events, yet the scene is mesmerizing: a poetic and melancholic meditation wherein the whole is lost to visual details and intensities of surface. We are left unsure of what lies beneath in

the depths and darkness, giving us the sense that we have indeed lost something even as we are uncertain of what that something is.

*Scene 3: Heaven* (2005) and *Scene 4: Gravity* (2006), the next pair of videos, mark a dramatic change in mood and approach. They are what Switzer calls “text-based”: the central element is her own brand of one-liner or aphorism.<sup>1</sup> Both *Heaven* and *Gravity*, when framed within the larger whole, intelligently speak to another common and profound experience of loss in our consumer-oriented and media-dominated culture: our loss for words and failure to truly communicate; the loss of honesty and tangibility in the face of mediation and superficiality; and perhaps a loss of confidence and faith.

*Heaven* has the feel of trade-show power-point advertising. Against a stock background of blue sky and puffy white clouds, a litany of excuses slowly zoom in and zoom out, explaining why the prize of a “free trip to heaven” cannot be claimed: *I once won a free trip to heaven, but I had already made plans for the weekend. I once won a free trip to heaven, but all the fine print made me suspicious. I once won a free trip to heaven, but I needed the cash so I sold it on e-bay.* Given the absolute incommensurability between the euphemistic prize and the reasons (she offers us over twenty such excuses), they function as one-liner jokes. We understand that heaven is a place that cannot be known or visited in advance. But if a trip were possible, it is one perhaps best deferred for fear of disappointment or because we need to have something to look forward to.

Similar, or perhaps even most pronounced in terms of its kitsch appeal, is *Gravity*, a garish video projection where endless platitudes (large, yellow text set in a tacky typeface) spill from the top of a massive waterfall, flow down the image, and dissolve in the pool below. The background is a composite of real video footage of Niagara Falls and one of those backlit and wonderfully fake photographs, replete with the illusion of movement and the sound of water. The text consists of thirty statements that reside somewhere between self-help affirmation and friendly advice: *you look a little tired / you need to relax / it could be worse / these things happen / don't be disappointed / maybe try meditation / try not to dwell on it / you have such potential...* There is no stopping this flow of banalities.

Despite their numbing familiarity—we have heard such things before—these platitudes hover between the earnestness of good intention and the insincerity of compelled response. As with any such direct address, we take ourselves as the subject and weigh these observations and implied judgments in terms of our own sense of wellbeing. If we identify with the sentiments of these statements at all, or equally if we refuse to hear them, we are probably not doing so well.

In *Scene 5: Little Town Blues* (2006) and *Scene 6: A New Song* (2006), the last pair, Switzer returns to familiar tropes and territory in both her mode of display and choice of subject.<sup>2</sup> The videos are what she calls her “boxed-works.”<sup>3</sup> This characterization is tongue-in-cheek, perhaps, as they could accurately be described as sculpture. The object itself is a key component and harks back to the early film technology of the kinoscope. Here, the small monitors are encased within beautiful custom-made walnut display cabinets. In order to view them one has to step up on a small stool and peer down through a magnifying lens embedded in the top of each. Adding to the intimacy and breaking with the conventional aspect ratio of the medium, the videos are vignettted. Both of these works use sound, which quietly, eerily, emanates from the boxes’ sides.

In *Little Town Blues* we peek in to see a snow-globe of a miniature Manhattan being held and periodically activated; turned upside-down we hear it being wound-up. Right-side-up, music plays and a blizzard engulfs the encapsulated city, swirling around the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and other iconic buildings



congregated in this glass bubble. The song is a tinny music box version of “New York, New York,” without lyrics, and whose tempo comes and goes like the snow, petering out only to be wound up and vigorously shaken again.

*Little Town Blues*, a title taken from the song, is indeed a melancholy little video, endlessly looped. In general, it speaks of a “loss of innocence”—that of childhood, a bygone era, and the pleasure found in such simple amusements—but also unavoidably, that of a so-called pre-9/11 world. This piece subtly shows, as Switzer nicely describes it, “an obsessive and ill-fated attempt to keep a fantasy alive.”<sup>4</sup>

In *A New Song* two bright yellow mechanical toy birds are busy chirping as if in spirited conversation. What is this song they sing? Is it simply empty, repetitive, and meaningless chatter? Is the topic of conversation the loss of the natural or real to the artificial, simulated, and consumable? Whatever it is, stuck inside this box, these precious birds solicit a kind of empathy.

Switzer comments that it is through the use of what is familiar and commonplace in our lives that she is best able to draw us in, to provide a point of connection and thus entry into the work.<sup>5</sup> While kitsch, cliché, and nostalgia may be the starting elements, Switzer, in complex and subtle ways, goes deeper. This is part of her talent; she has a remarkable ability to mimic and subvert the ubiquitous rhetoric of the mass media. She chooses to work with short video loops, what she calls her “small ideas,” rather than force the viewer to engage with long or linear narrative. Similarly, she relies upon the sound bite, immediate recognition, and importantly relentless repetition to initially evoke the common and all too superficial experience of such things yet ultimately draw out the more fundamental: our experience of loss, desire, disappointment, failure, hope, and fear as we do what we can to make our way through the dark.

In the end her use of media is not about representation of the external world as much as it is about an interior psychic space evoked through metaphor. And what of “falling from grace?” If by this Switzer means for her art to descend from the lofty heights and to get mired in the here and now, then so be it, for the work powerfully resonates with something pervasive. With a finger on our collective psychic pulse, her work attempts to come to terms with change and loss—encouraging thought without providing superficial comfort, catharsis, or resolution. “Falling from Grace” is a strong and important work.<sup>6</sup>

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*NOTES* 1. Sharon Switzer, public interview with curator Carla Garnet, McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton, Ontario, January 18, 2007. 2. Switzer was trained as a ceramicist and much of her pre-video work was installation-based and explored the early technologies of photography and film. I am thinking specifically of her exhibitions “Waltzing in Now-Time” (ArtLab, University of Western Ontario, September 1997) and “Shadow Play” (2001, Köffler Gallery, Toronto, touring). 3. Sharon Switzer, artist Web site, accessed February 20, 2007: [www.sharonswitzer.com](http://www.sharonswitzer.com). 4. *Ibid.* 5. *Ibid.* 6. A catalog is also available: Sharon Switzer: Falling From Grace: Scenes 1-6 (Ontario: McMaster Museum of Art, 2007).

**FACING PAGE**

Video still from *Falling From Grace*—Scene 4: *Gravity* (2006) by Sharon Switzer

**ABOVE**

Video still from *Falling From Grace*—Scene 6: *A New Song* (2006) by Sharon Switzer