

**Poets and Authors**  
**reflect on**  
**Susan Low-Beer's *About Face* sculpture exhibit**  
**David Kaye Gallery**  
**Toronto**  
**Feb 23, 2012**

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## Susan's Spaces:

A memoir for the ekphrastic reading at *About Face, a show of heads* by Susan Low-Beer by Kelley Aiken

Culture is expression born of place. Art is centered in place. Our lives and our memories are framed by personally iconic locations.

My list of these includes being in the bow of a canoe; sleeping in a tent with Frank; most art museums but also specific rooms in museums, perhaps the most important being the large slightly gloomy salon in the pre-renovation Prado which held the massive dark paintings Goya did at the end of his life. Also on my list is a small mound on a hill overlooking a gorge in Los Chillos, Ecuador, before that view became littered with the plastic-covered greenhouses called *vernaderos* where so many of our roses are grown. The seasons come and go and the eagles barrel roll outside the window of Sue Wheeler's hexagonal log cabin on Lasqueti, a little corner on Paradise. I remember again the bright surfaces of shrimp ponds upriver from Cojimies; the best vista of them was framed in the open doorway of the outhouse—a two-seater, now there's an interesting notion of togetherness. But my only companions were the dogs:

Janeka with her torn ear and one or more of the pups she had born that had survived a host of tropical ailments to achieve adulthood.

On my list are all of Susan's studios since I've known her: not just the light-filled and window-framed main floor of the pale grey house at Ulster and Brunswick. Before that she used a large room on the main floor of her home on Euclid where she plugged and worked clay into sculptures, and another room at the top of the house where she coloured the fired clay surface, seated beside a hotplate with small pots of melted wax, way before everyone else started going gaga about encaustic. That room was lined with clay figures I came to think of as personal friends, they were my height or slightly taller on their stands: stacked torsos and heads, vertically collaged. Each one read as a kind of plot, narratives of tension or passion or companionship. They were vaguely totemic but more affectionate or touch-able than didactic; more inviting than authoritative. Susan called them *Still Dances*. She might have called them "we're still dancing," because of how wonderfully that body of work spoke to the endless jive and sway, waltz and contact-improvisation that is human relationship, our often difficult need for each other. Susan has always mixed forms and visual tropes from other eras and cultures, and so being in her studio is like being surrounded by quiet visitors from the history of art and in that

setting Susan and I have talked about art and work and food and teaching and love, and love and love, an almost three-decade long conversation. And although every gab session in her studio was unique, they were nevertheless the same, following an arc from frustration and disappointment to laughter, under the benign gaze of our clay confidants who absorbed our complaints, our foolishness and our tears.

They say you can tell a lot about a woman by what's in her purse. Studios are like great big purses with tables in them. Studios have functional beauty. It's not that they're better than galleries but they're less edited and more inclusive, what they contain has not been polished and revised. They are the container of containers of stuff, all of which might prove useful and become art, or that reminds the artist of something, someone, or somewhere. Imagine cords attaching the open books and keepsakes and photos and postcards and small rusted objects to the places they were found or harkened back to, then the birds' eye view of Susan's studio would be like a flight map in an airline magazine, with connections to ancient Syria, or Grand Matane, or Mumbai or the Montreal of her childhood. The studio is the hub where those strings are tugged and a kind of energy flows back to the work at hand, the work of hands, from distant points and infuses it with the energy and resonance of

memory and history. The studio is where things are pulled apart and put together and the conversation Susan and I have been having has been a pulling apart and putting together of things that were a bit bruised or broken in our lives, the anecdotes that needed telling, the frustration that needed airing, the whines that, necessary or not, come out of a bottle of wine, or a pot of tea and circled the room. And I think it is in no small part due to our clay witnesses that always and eventually laughter chased our individual heartache and mutual concerns out the door, even just temporarily and every time, there was a little war about who should eat the last piece of dessert: *you, no you, no you.*

Art is spatial punctuation. It makes you stop or pause or connect. Sometimes it's transformative, sometimes its preverbal, sometimes it's both the pea under a dozen mattresses, and the mattresses: the prod and the deep comfort.

## About Face – A Micro Drama in Three Parts

Grant Carmichael

### *Part 1. The Artist Sleeps:*

She's transported by dreams to the end of the line, the top of the spine. "The head is divine," Susan enthuses, and muses appear—five puffs of paper angel, radiant as white magic—and in chorus they say, "Ms. Low-Beer? The Big Guy wants to talk to you."

Susan falls through her bed, first her feet, then her head. God has landed in the studio below and he asks (one artist to another): "In *State Of Grace* you captured the head and shoulders, knees and toes of my experiment. Why the *About Face*? Why these lonely heads?" Susan is struck by the Big Guy's lack of pretence.

"The heart is elusive," Susan laments. "Don't you see? Our noggins on bobbins are coming undone."

When she wakes she can't determine if she dreamt of Mahatma Ghandi or Ben Kingsley. Or was it Dr. Seuss?

### *Part 2. A Consumer Visits the Gallery:*

"This one is like a cantaloupe,  
This one is like a ball,  
This one has cartographic lines  
O God, I want them all!

Are they cheaper by the dozen?  
Could you put more in the oven?  
If I bring some friends to see them,  
Do you think I'd get a free one?"

In a corner of the gallery the Godhead appears. Impervious to mystery, the Consumer cries out, "Holy Christ, now *that* one's nice!" and ignorant of Icarus she flies toward the light, but is reduced to a pile of dust.

"Sluice And Slurry, What's Yer Hurry?" God mutters. He sweeps the ashes into his hand and licks them from his fingers. "Recycling keeps the cosmos spinning," he says, chewing with an open mouth. Then from his pocket he produces Yorick's skull and, like a ventriloquist, he adds, "Let's just have some laughs, shall we?" The good book talks of the potter's power as if all we was is a lump of clay. Dust of the ground, built pound upon pound, we grope for the memory of the mould that once whispered something to us.

My heart has been hijacked by my head and kept in close confinement. Over and over again I try to tell a story, but what I hear is silence and the piping of fresh clay.

Is it the head of the pin or the point that is most needful? Are you the cause of the beating of your heart?



**About Face**  
Beth Follett

a host of impregnable heads

audience or chorus?

1.

Swimmers in a white room, crypt—quiet water,  
secret, still. Nobody breathes without nostrils.  
Here is dark, confusion. By the bright, orderly  
arrangement of these heads, the  
atmospheric lighting, do not be fooled.

Cynical, broken, clownish, hurt, with circles  
encircled, with orifices closed, skulls cracked,  
re-assembled, re-membered, they are  
neither male nor female, and decidedly  
not children.

These unchild faces charge me  
with claustrophobia. I want to run.

*Cracked, we were never, without speaking,  
without breathing, they cry never, we were never  
children.*

2.

Why is the head, so unlike other parts  
of the body, distinctly itself?

A question of sex and death.  
Move in closer, approach  
what is difficult.

Pondering I locate in the head, the site

of wishes and phrases, and I note  
how words crack and fragment there, how  
silence reigns.

And the face?

A portal, gateway. No,  
turn away. There is dark here, confinement,  
blankness. Gateway? No. By these bright walls,  
this orderly arrangement of heads,  
by this trickery, treachery, artifice, artiface,  
this *artist*, forebear to be fooled.

3.

From Toronto to India Paramita flew. Was her father's death by fallen rock –  
was it looming or accomplished? The awesome archetypal father flew with her.

When she landed the death was confirmed but the body required  
identification. Why her? With grief, her mother had cracked, her brother was a  
child, so it was

Paramita who travelled to the mountain site where, recovered from beneath the  
fallen rubble – do not be fooled – her father's body lay. It had been  
decapitated.

4.

These mute, decapitated angels,  
(clownish silence, terrible beauty) –  
the transfer of joy (beneath the rubble),  
the shock of my pleasure is troubled  
by the impulse to cry out, break away,  
flee.

No. Stay. Reconnect mind and body.

Take your time.

To witness is crucial,

but do *not* be fooled  
by these bright walls,

nor any maker soft  
as a head of cabbage  
rolling in a field.

## Questions for and from the heads

Maureen Hynes

Children beyond and before forgetting.

How white your heads are, as if Egyptian cotton-wrapped and sealed with plaster of Paris, each cast weathered by threadlike binding rain and the snow of art, hail pocks of perception marking your minds.

When the heads separate from the bodies, what form is this? A room full of heads, next door a room full of torsos?

In Uganda, a taxi driver drove us over narrow potholed roads north of Kampala. At the side of one of these roads, every ten kilometers or so, planted into the high grasses, were long rough rickety tables, wooden legs of uneven lengths. Human skulls, bleached rows of them, three or four deep, covering the tabletops. All ages, all sizes. I could not photograph them, I could not touch them, though I wanted badly to comfort them. "At night, we hear them wailing," said the driver on our way back.

One summer in Turkey, I walked the empty Marble Road that was scalded by a breathless noonday sun and lined with the ruins of homes and temples and shops in the ancient abandoned city of Ephesus. Grottoes in the library's façade held statues, some headless, decapitated by early Christians Desecration. They had stood two thousand years without their heads, but when we arrived at *Sophia*, the robed statue of Wisdom, a fresh bouquet of flowers lay at her marble feet.

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O porcelain heads, I don't hear you wailing, I hear the questions you want to ask instead.

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*Questions for the heads*

But first I want to know what your eyes saw when you emerged from your plaster molds, what name was embroidered on each of your hard white pillows.

Do you speak among yourselves at night in one ceramic language?

What do your heads contain and why do you frighten me?

O little ones, what sports most attract you? What herbs and fruits, jewels, birds? What tastes – ginger or chocolate or linden flower tea?

What dwellings do you favour? Nests or treehouses or mansions?

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*Questions from the heads*

Number Twenty

Indigo-etched boy warrior, smooth-faced and nearly smiling, about to speak, about to grow quickly into old age, a blue lake mapped onto your cranium. The phrenology of our origins in Africa. You are looking beyond me into yourself, summoning the orthography of joy and achievement, how it prints itself into the clay of our souls. I see you greeting the largeness of life, the serenity to gain it all. Lips parted, you are staring into the sunrise, about to speak syllables of hope, wordless stretches of vowels that could cross desert or prairie or icefield. I lean close, tip my ear to your lips, hear “When will the lost animals return?”

Number Eighteen

You are my snake- and thread-headed double, wired and mechanically plated, your frightening tacility and the squashed depths of your gaze. The coiled gears and twisted yarns of my own doubts, a loop of anger spliced into longing and pain. Love rounds and smoothes your head but doesn't soften your eyes. Your mouth open, “What melody can we sing together?”

Number Twenty-Six

You tickle me, dressed as you are for a carnival. A print bandana draped over your face to protect you from the sun's rays, the chandelier's glances. A bouquet of buttons or pills or after-dinner mints fixed to the hairline on your forehead – a garland to carry you forward into conversations. You are sequined and ready to seduce the minor saints and lowly devils of the

realm. But what of these small round scars, polkadots turning to bullet holes, the reminders, the remains of punctures, something that should not have entered, should not have marked you? From behind your closed and veiled eyes, your question, "Who will be my partner in this porcelain tango?"

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○ little ones with your bandages and pills and wires, the fragrant smoothness of your bald birth heads roughened and scored so early – you are as breakable as us.



See her well &  
See him well

insists the Prince of Riddle.

What is :  
not mass-produced  
but has been fired  
in the same mold?



KILN  
Jim Nason

*After Susan Low-Beer  
About Face #20, 2011*

*i.*

In front of me, a head, balanced  
on a white pedestal; a third eye

blue-dot tika mark pressed into  
the middle of its forehead. Textured

like a topographic map, inked-in cities  
and continents, a sculptured island, long

as Manhattan, bordered by knife-scar waves.  
And like an acupuncturist's mannequin:

pressure points – one for art, another  
for intuition, one for finding stars

shimmering on drifts of new snow.

*ii.*

I was born on the shortest day,  
snow-plowed solstice, the drive

through a blizzard *excruciatingly slow*.  
The head came first, down through  
the cervix, crowning. Spit and fire, I was  
her fifth. Eyes blinking, pink mouth

puckered, wanting the sensual – my mother's  
breast. City-white winter, icicles sharp

as branches hanging outside the frost-licked  
windowpane of the hospital. The coldest day,

my body bloody, kicking pink-skin naked.

My first breath, high-pitched alive, born  
of fire, cried from the crimson dark.

Deer Dreamer: Susan Low-Beer's "About Face #21", 2012 by Maureen Harris

1

*How does the impulse to draw  
something begin?*

John Berger

Hungry and enthralled, the dreamer stares  
at the lords of her world. Simple hunger  
awash in awe becomes love. Longing  
to touch them, to feel that strength rippling  
warmly, hide bristling against her palm,  
her hand reaches out, trembling—

picks up the charcoal shard, gropes toward  
the rock wall, feels a shape emerging.  
Her hand traces a deer's back,  
the narrowing of its head, a leg's gesture,  
bringing what is out of reach within it.

The animal lives now inside as well as out.  
She puts down the shard, turns back  
to the world, is stabbed  
by its brilliance. A new alertness owns her.

2

*We see that to look at an object, a work of art, say, we have to see it as something happening, not as it did to him who made it, but as it does while we see it. We don't have to go anywhere. It comes to us. –John Cage*

Try to read the gaze, direct but preoccupied—  
consciousness in two places at once.

Those eyes staring across eons look past  
yours, reminding you of something  
left behind you can't quite name.  
You'd go back for it now, if you could.

A deer dwells in the frontal lobe, seeps  
through the porous skull to emerge  
as pure alertness, then steps serenely  
forward, drops its head to graze.  
Thought sometimes moves like that.

Adjust your gaze and see the deer  
worn like a mask around the eyes,  
its hind leg drawing a line of silence  
across the mouth. Or does the deer wear  
those eyes, watching you watching it?

Remember when we weren't our own  
gods but lived by the grace of animals?  
The dreamer's eyes are noticing and shy  
and elsewhere, a place we no longer know.  
Her Buddha-look saddens. It tells us  
*You must make your own way home.*