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### **Fishing for Answers: Dorothy Cameron's "The Lost Goddess"**



*The Lost Goddess After Treatment in Conservation lab at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. 2005. Photo by author.*

Modern and contemporary artworks pose challenges on many levels. This is partly due to the fact that the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century art is still very much in formation, something that has to be kept in mind when dealing with works from this time period. Dorothy Cameron's *The Lost Goddess* (1980) has been interesting for a number of reasons, including the materials, subject matter, and the responses that it has received; from a curatorial and artistic standpoint it is generally a good sign when a work of art provokes a response because it means that there is something happening between the audience and the artwork. *The Lost Goddess* was acquired by the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario in 2003 and was brought into the Art Conservation department at Queen's University for conservation treatment for an upcoming exhibition. The treatment and subsequent research into the artist and the artwork have led to questions about issues of accountability for protecting the integrity of the artwork, the artist, and the artists' intentions

primarily because the artist is no longer living and the artwork had been altered significantly over time. This had led to dilemmas about what aspects of the alterations of the artwork should be honored and what had become effectively a part of the history of the piece. To gain insight into this artist' practices and processes, research was conducted and dialogues were created to understand what is or was important to help create an overall approach towards the conservation treatment philosophy.

It is not unusual for contemporary artworks to be constructed from a range of materials; many of which might not be stable, but are integral to the creation of the work of art. It can also contain any number of components that must be dealt with both individually and as a whole. In this case, the sculpture is a multi-part, double self-portrait of the artist that includes unfired clay, acrylic paint, card, metal, plastic and Astroturf among other materials. At the centre is a green scale-covered, blue veined figure giving birth to a

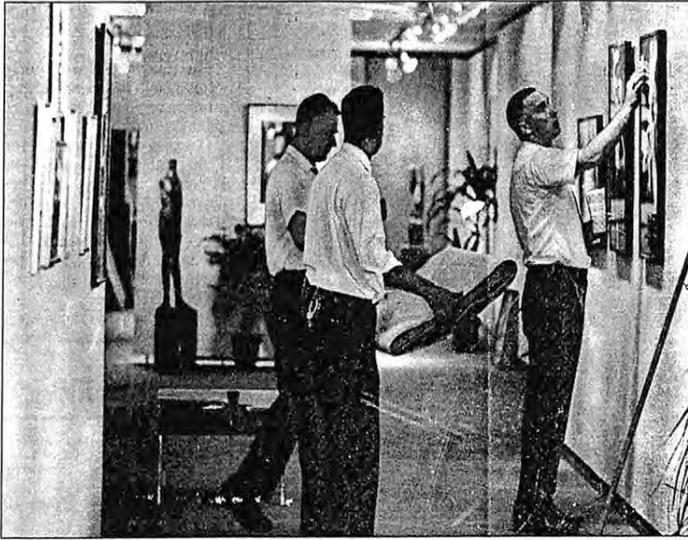
pink shrimp, reclining against a blue/green mound. A spray of seaweed branches out from behind the top of the head and the right leg is bent and protrudes through the surface of the table into a partially opened drawer below. A second smaller figure in a blue dress, also reclining with vagina exposed, perches fishing atop the first. The silver cabinet on which the figures recline is strewn with sand, seaweed, and seashells, suggestive of the sea. Below the drawer is a shelf where an under water setting takes place with floating starfish and a shrimp caught on the smaller figure's fish hook. Behind the cabinet is a large altar-like triptych constructed from plywood panels that are painted yellow on the inside that is adorned with shells, two banners, an acrylic painting on canvas, and the text THE LOST GODDESS in silver vinyl lettering. Two tablet-like assemblies with shrimp motifs are attached to the central yellow panel on either side of the central assembly directly above two freestanding assemblies with shells, ornaments, and candles. A rectangle of green Astroturf covers the floor. The overall dimensions of the piece measure 197 cm high by 107 cm wide by 54 cm deep.

This paper contextualizes the artist and the artwork and illustrates some of the decision-making processes involved in the conservation measures of Dorothy Cameron's mixed media sculpture, *The Lost Goddess*, while examining the philosophical approach that was developed through discussions with Professor Barbara Klempan, Paintings Conservation supervisor at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Jan Allen, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, with the generous support of the artist's surviving husband, Canadian artist Ronald Bloore. As research unfolded the artist's original uses and wishes for the work, images and documents from 1980, 1985/86, and 1993 were examined and compared to the perception of how the work was treated, altered, and displayed to result in the present day form as acquired by the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in 2003.

Dorothy Cameron was born in Ontario in 1924 and when she was ten years old her father took the family on a year long vacation to Florence where she was exposed to the sculptures and paintings of the Italian masters. In the 1940's and 1950's Cameron studied English at the University of Toronto followed by studies in Contemporary Art at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston under the auspices of Harvard University. She returned to Toronto as a public relations coordinator for the Art Gallery of Ontario before apprenticing under two commercial galleries, both of which failed before she opened the *Here and Now Gallery* in 1959. In 1962 it became the *Dorothy Cameron Gallery* and functioned as a platform for the promotion of contemporary Canadian sculpture and painting. She established a strong reputation and was credited as a major force in establishing Toronto as an important art center in the 1960's. Sources have claimed that the gallery never really functioned as a business because she exhibited artwork that she believed people should see rather than what they should buy. She was relentless in her efforts to find out who was doing what

artistically across the country and has been credited with jump-starting the careers of many of Canada's preeminent artists.

Dorothy Cameron might also be remembered by some as the only art dealer in Canada to be charged with



REG INNELL/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

**BUSTED:** Metro Toronto detectives pull nude art from the walls of the Dorothy Cameron Art Gallery in 1965, wrapping it in brown paper for use as evidence.

and convicted of showing obscene material. As a result of a single complaint, Toronto Police seized seven drawings by three artists from the Eros '65 exhibition. She fought the charges to the Supreme Court of Canada, but lost the case in a landmark ruling that sparked much controversy around art and censorship. Her trial and eventual conviction coincided with the closing of the gallery in 1965. Years later, she would reconcile the events, remarking that it was an eventuality, something that had to occur in Canada at that time.

In the 1970's Cameron traveled extensively. Cameron photographed and collected mementos from their travels that were later arranged in photo albums based on themes, imagery, colors, forms, and textures. These photographs would prove to be heavily influential to imagery in her artwork from 1979 to 1991. In 1978, she suffered from a detached retina and then a stroke that left her without sight in one eye. She began to produce artwork in 1979 under the influence of Jungian psychoanalysis and dream analysis that resulted in work that was highly self-fulfilling. She started painting and then began sculpting and creating 3-Dimensional imagery. In an interview in *Canadian Art* magazine in 1987, she described her eyes as getting worse and that the reason for her love of sculpting was due to her ability to not have to plan out a work, but that she could feel her way through its construction.

Interviews with Cameron in the 1990's show that she did not originally intend to show her work, acknowledging that it was naïve and never made with the idea of art in mind. In some cases, she succeeded in buying her works back from collections because she could not yet bear to part with them. Her artist statement from a 1986 exhibition in Toronto read:

I have been asked to say something about the source of my work. Seven year ago, at the age of 55, I felt compelled to work with my hands for the first time since childhood, in an effort to arrest and

shape the flow of memories, dreams and images that come to me from the unconscious. Since my first studio visitor, I have been amazed and gratified to discover that the personal is, in fact universal; that others' perceptions can expand and illuminate the symbols of a private world.

In 1991 she stopped making artwork altogether and passed away in 2000.

She wrote about the Lost Goddess (date unknown):

This piece based on a dream which I will try to interpret:

The ancient Goddess of Ocean, Earth and Sky is giving birth. With her head crowned in stars, her feet in the sea, her arms covered in leaves, her legs running with blue streams, her vagina like a red slit in a green hill, the Great Goddess is bringing forth... a shrimp.

Two thousand years ago, as Mary, she gave birth to the Christ, that divine male aspect of her being whose symbol was the fish.

Today she is giving birth to the long-lost child of her own nature, her feminine self, symbolized in this little shrimp... a fish so naked, so vulnerable, it must wear armour as its swaddling bands in order to survive. Seated on the Divine Lap, a diminutive woman with a fishing rod is busily hooking her own shrimp. If woman and Goddess appear to resemble each other, it is because they both reflect the restored radiance of female identity and self-worth.

Dorothy Cameron's sculptural works range widely in media, often incorporating found and donated objects. Her correspondences have shown that she was not concerned with lastingness or durability when she made many of these earlier works, but began experimenting with more durable materials so that the pieces would be more practical with their increased complexity; therefore the materials that Cameron has used for her main sculptural figures are worth examining. The records are not always consistent, but the compounds used range from unfired clay, plaster, and paper mache in earlier works. This was followed by an undisclosed self-hardening modeling compound used from 1982 through 1988 such is the case with *Kirkland Lake Breakfast* (1983-84) and *The Marriage Bed* (1986-87). The unknown modeling compound used in the *Lost Goddess* was identified through FTIR to be unfired clay (Kaolin with a small amount of Calcite). In one of her final works, *Carrousel*, 1988-1991, she makes reference to a compound called Plasmalegno and writes that it is "...partly polyvinyl acetate glue and partly sawdust, so that you can both model and carve and chisel it."

The unfired clay used for *The Lost Goddess* has been covered in some areas with plaster and painted with acrylics. The clay had shrunk substantially during its drying and there were structural cracks to the central figures and a lifting of the clay mound that they rest upon. Paint layers have also lifted, cracked, and peeled away from the clay surface. The overall condition of the sculpture when acquired by the Art Centre in 2003 was not great. It was felt that the work had obviously been utilized as a shrine, as the candles were burned, and at some point was potentially mishandled or mistreated, evidenced by black handprints and abrasions to the plywood panels. Heavy dust accumulation was found throughout, and there were fractures to the green figure's left ankle from pulling out the drawer as well as a loss of the baby shrimp's forearm on the left tablet as a result of closing the side panels onto the front.



*Colored masking tape was used liberally throughout the sculpture for linear decorative elements. Photo by the author.*



*Double-sided tape was used to assemble the sculpture. In most cases it was very visible. Photo by the author.*

As a result of the range of materials used in this sculpture, the overall approach was cross-disciplinary, involving conservators from both the paper and objects streams of the Queen's University Conservation program. The conservation measures included the documentation of the work, with an initial treatment proposal that was discussed in depth with the Curator of Contemporary Art from the Art Centre. All elements of the sculpture were dusted and after seeing reproductions of Cameron's other works in an exhibition catalogue and understanding the importance of the intense colors, the surface cleaning of the assemblies and figures was furthered after dusting failed to remove excessive buildup and soiling. The aqueous cleaning solution used was ammonium hydroxide in water adjusted to a pH of 8.5. Although aqueous cleaning is not generally recommended for acrylic paint films, it was felt that after years of neglect it was necessary, and preventive care would be maintained in the future by the Art Centre. Efforts were made to remove as much of the soiling, smudges, and abrasions from the panels as possible because aside from being

unsightly, it was suspected that if it were left slightly dirty, it could potentially lead to mishandling and mistreatment in the future.

It was agreed upon that the integrity of the work lies in part from its level of craftsmanship and specificity of materials used. Examples of this are the types of tape that were utilized. Most of the colored lines (edge trimmings and decorative linear elements) are colored masking tape that is very brittle and flaked off easily so it was re-adhered wherever possible. Many decorative elements are also held in place with double-sided tape, and while some was still adequately secured, others were not and attempts were made to reactivate the adhesive layer while introducing another adhesive at the same time. The adhesive used throughout the treatment was Jade 403 PVA.



*As constructed in 1980.  
Photo courtesy of Ronald Bloore.*



*As constructed in 1985/86.  
Photo courtesy of Ronald Bloore.*



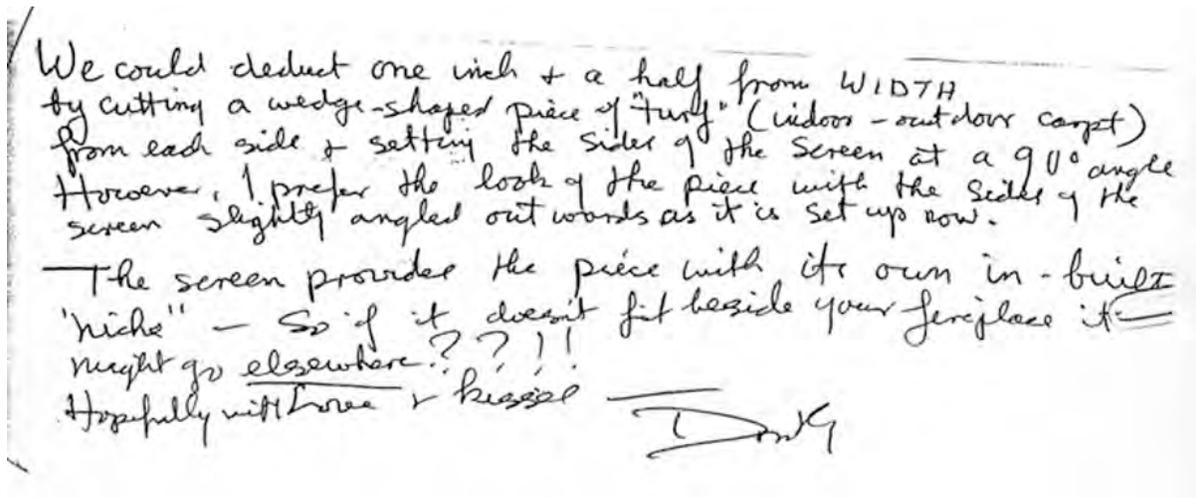
*As constructed in 1993.  
Photo courtesy of Ronald Bloore.*

The original proposal was to clean and make structural and cosmetic repairs to the figures and decorative elements and to provide methods for the work to be handled and exhibited safely. As a result of further research, there were options about the way that the piece would be displayed. Documentation of the work at various stages of its development over the past 25 years have been discovered; images were found that showed the artwork being built and its first initial arrangement in 1980, followed by an altered arrangement in 1985 for exhibition and then as it changed even further being installed in a private collector's home in 1993.

The first series of images found illustrated the work as it was being built in her studio in 1980. The second series of images were from the presentation of her works at her Studio Gallery showing in 1985. There was also written correspondence in 1986 to the Harbourfront Gallery in Toronto that the work was to be shown against a yellow wall matched to that of her studio. Other elements were also added to the artwork at this

time including the Astroturf on the floor, a fishing rod with a shrimp on a hook and a large photograph above the entire assembly. The smaller figure's positioning was also changed and this corresponded to areas of lifted paint on the green figure that could indicate the artist's attempt to make the positioning more permanent. A third series showed the piece being installed in a private home in 1993, similar to its present state. The most noticeable changes were the addition of the painted plywood panels that contain the piece, the Astroturf being cut to fit within the parameters of the plywood panels and the addition, omission and repositioning of some of the smaller accessories (such as the seashells and fishing rod).

In her correspondence with the private collector, she mentioned that a three-part screen had been made and painted yellow like the wall. Additions were fastened in place and Astroturf was cut to fit to make it relatively easy to install and move around without putting nail holes in the walls. Cameron also made suggestions of her preferred set-up to the collector in a written statement (date unknown):



We could deduct one inch + a half from WIDTH by cutting a wedge-shaped piece of "turf" (indoor-outdoor carpet) from each side & setting the sides of the screen at a 90° angle. However, I prefer the look of the piece with the sides of the screen slightly angled outwards as it is set up now.

The screen provides the piece with its own in-built "niche" - so if it doesn't fit beside your fireplace it might go elsewhere.??!!

Hopefully with love & kisses

Dorothy

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These findings led to discussions about the overall presentation of the piece and what should be replaced or recreated. The following points outline some examples of options that were discussed.

1. The recreation and replacement of the large scallop shell and the replacement of missing seaweed along the bottom edge.

2. Make an alternate cutout piece of Astroturf that would honour the artists' preferred way of viewing it (as stated in her previous correspondence).
3. The complete removal of all the components from the plywood panels and install them as originally conceived in the studio gallery (from 1985) with missing components recreated.
4. To leave it as is with only structural and cosmetic work completed until further research can be carried out.

The main ethical issue became to examine how to best represent what was felt the artists' wishes and intentions were while not imposing personal views of what stage of its presentation was aesthetically or artistically preferred. There was still not enough information at this point and the assumption had to be made that the changes were conscious because the artist has personally made these changes, setting up the piece similar to how it was received by the art centre; and to date there has not been any documentation found that would show her dissatisfaction with the work in this form. But the artist has personally altered the work to suit specific spaces in the past and one gets the general impression that it could be changed, as long as certain requirements were met (such as the specified yellow background). But because Dorothy Cameron is no longer living, it is hard to know what the right answer(s) are because the work has been changed so much and the specific circumstances are not known, nor are the artist's acceptable levels of change. In looking at how this piece should be treated, a level of compromise had to be reached at this point and the suggestion was to carry out the proposed structural and cosmetic measures only.

This does not mean that the amount of research done for this piece has been in vain. In this case there was the opportunity to conduct valuable research into the life of a very important figure in the development of Canadian art and a bit of an understanding of her as an artist has been achieved. Some decisions that the artist made throughout the creation of this piece were discovered and as a result we were in a better position to



*Photo courtesy of Ronald Bloore.*

understand the ramifications of decisions made during the treatment of this work. This artwork has also provided a venue for discussing one of the issues that are fundamental to the conservation of contemporary artworks that are altered over time; that of the necessity for clear records and documented input from living artists whenever possible; without this, we are definitely left fishing for answers.