



Translating Esther

Wendy Oberlander

The Koffler Gallery

March 20 - May 4, 2003
Curator: Carolyn Bell Farrell

OPENING RECEPTION

Thursday, March 20, 6 - 8 pm

ARTIST TALK

Thursday, March 20, 6 pm

BUS TOUR

Sunday, March 23, 1 - 5:30 pm

GALLERY HOURS

Monday to Friday 10 am - 4 pm

Sunday 12 - 4 pm

Closed Saturday

Closed April 17, 18, 20, 23, 24

Admission is free

Koffler Centre of the Arts

4588 Bathurst Street

Toronto Ontario

Canada M2R 1W6

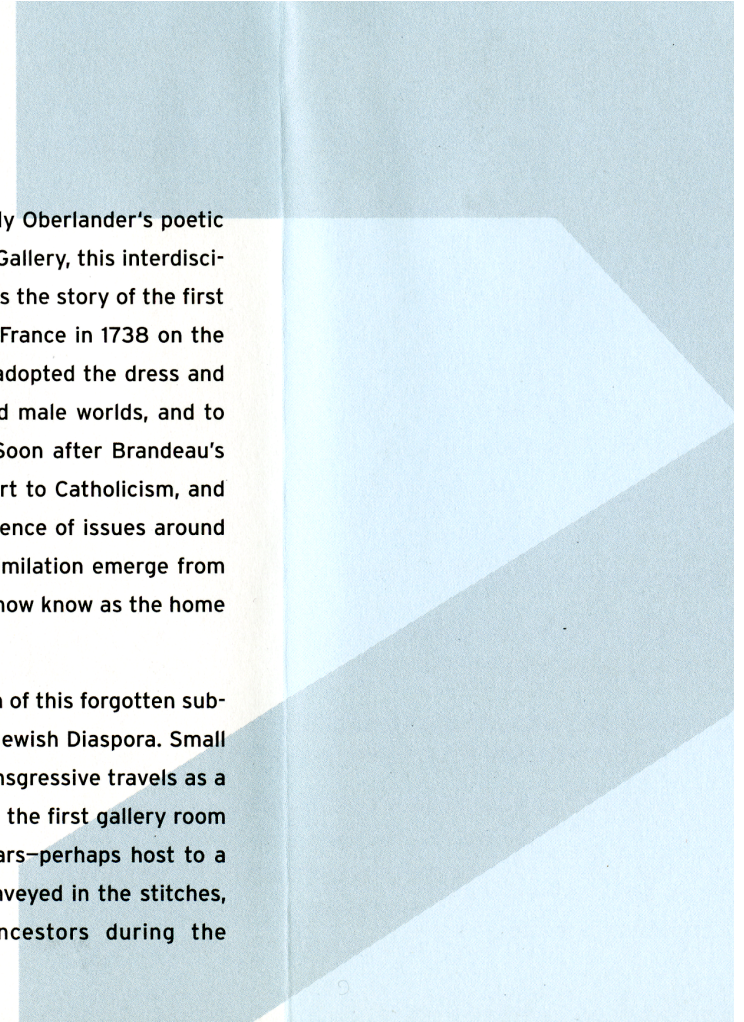
Translating Esther, production still, 2002, colour photograph, 19 x 15 cm
photo: courtesy of the artist


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Official histories of exile and Diaspora provide the backdrop for Wendy Oberlander's poetic excavations of personal, and often hidden, narratives. For the Koffler Gallery, this interdisciplinary Vancouver artist has conceived a new installation that explores the story of the first Jewish woman to come to Canada. Esther Brandeau arrived in New France in 1738 on the St. Michel. Assuming the identity of a man, Jacques La Fargue, she adopted the dress and customs that allowed her to "pass" unnoticed into the Christian and male worlds, and to circumvent the strict anti-Jewish immigration policies of the time. Soon after Brandeau's arrival, her identity was exposed. Ultimately, she chose not to convert to Catholicism, and was transported back to France at the expense of the King. A confluence of issues around subjectivity, gender identity, religious affiliation, oppression and assimilation emerge from her life-story—a narrative that leans towards the margins of what we now know as the home of the Other.

In *Translating Esther*, Oberlander offers a poetic and fluid interpretation of this forgotten subject in Canadian history—and another lost moment in the history of Jewish Diaspora. Small collections of video, audio and sculptural elements trace Esther's transgressive travels as a woman crossing the globe, assuming double identities. Upon entering the first gallery room a white skirt, comprised of hundreds of embroidered hankies, appears—perhaps host to a body lost in its swirls. Vignettes related to the life of Esther are conveyed in the stitches, stories that embrace the history of Brandeau's Portuguese ancestors during the





Inquisition, and the biblical narrative of Queen Esther of Persia. A pair of monitors marks the threshold between the two gallery rooms, suggestive of *mezuzot*—parchment scrolls inscribed with prayers reminding us of the Divine presence and mounted on the doorpost in small boxes, as prescribed in the Old Testament. On these tiny screens, bodies move through blue water. *Tzitzit* (ritual fringes of white and blue string knotted on a four-cornered garment) float past. As we enter into this second room, the walls and floor seem to rise and fall. A water line appears...

The root of the word 'Esther' in Hebrew is הֶסְתֵּיר ('hester'), which translates as 'concealment'—a coincidence that adds further resonance to this complex story of nationalism, identity and masquerade.

Wendy Oberlander's award-winning documentaries have been screened throughout North America and Europe. In addition to numerous gallery exhibitions, her past projects include a public art commission in Vancouver and a permanent installation at the Jewish Community Campus in Montreal. She teaches at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, Vancouver.

An essay by **Betsy Warland** accompanies this exhibition. Warland has written catalogue essays for Open Studio, Presentation House, Surrey Art Gallery and The Mendel Art Gallery, as well as reviews for *Border Crossings*, *CanadianArt*, *C* and *Blackflash*. She teaches in The Writer's Studio at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver.