

Entertainment

Julie Oakes: A life in art

Oakes has distilled at least four careers and as many lives into her art



Julie Oakes with her mixed-media piece ARK, at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo.

By: [Peter Goddard](#) Visual Arts, Published on Wed Apr 20 2011

Each delicate glass sparrow dangling high in the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery looks as light as a moon beam, until one of the 120 birds drops like a rock, smashing into brittle bits on the floor.

Welcome to a classic Julie Oakes moment — one with drama.

With this Canadian artist, drama always comes wrapped in swirl of emotion. “Swounds: An Installation in Glass” at the Waterloo gallery is no exception. Maybe a wisp of sadness is everyone’s initial reaction at seeing the poor little birdie in its pre-planned fall — fine, but with the crash comes that smack of adrenalin.

“It’s a ‘wow’ moment,” says Oakes over a spare lunch in a café. “It’s spectacular. People realize this is not the loss of a life, that it’s not even a loss of a bird. It’s smashing glass that has a whole different effect on our psyche. And people know it’s going to happen again.”

She practically growls the word “again,” her eyes tiger-in-the night bright. Oakes — who was Julie Cowan before her former marriage to Sir Christopher Oakes — can’t help being theatrical even when her intention is otherwise. “Swounds” includes other dramatic wounded critter motifs. In *The Weeping Monkey*, the bronze monkey lies in a pool of tears. *Unlucky Bunny* shows a porcelain female rabbit suspended, its back paws trussed together, looking as if were ripped out of a 17th century still life.

Oakes calls herself “petite” but it’s the way Edith Piaf was petite, when that meant several lives and a load of attitude were packed into one small frame. Oakes lets the attitude show and dresses theatrically. She’s in a clingy little black number, form fitting over her hips and cut dramatically low

in front. Her trademark bob is streaked in the coppery orange Tom Thomson used in painting maple leaves in fall. It soon dawns on you Oakes is the sort of woman for whom the little black dress was created by Coco Chanel, another “petite” woman packing plus-size attitude.

This inherent theatricality is certainly not compensation for a ho-hum existence. Over her 62 years, Oakes has distilled at least four careers and as many lives into her art. That art is always “autobiographical and based in narrative,” she says. “I’ve been who I want to be with very few impediments.”

Olga Korper, the noted Toronto dealer and gallery owner, sums Oakes up succinctly: “Her life is her art.”

As an artist, Oakes is now moving more into “clay, porcelain and glass work,” she says, after years spent drawing and painting. Having graduated from art studies in Winnipeg, she first saw herself as an installation artist. She once plastered a series of silkscreen posters throughout Venice as a “guerilla intrusion” at the 1997 Biennale.

Next to emerge was Oakes as latent hippy seeker drifter. Travels in the 1970s across Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India led her to consistently thread a spiritual dimension throughout much of her work.

“Biblical themes inform the pieces” in “Swounds,” says Jason Gutierrez in *The Glass Quarterly Hot Sheet*. Pointing out that the old hymn, *God Sees the Little Sparrows Fall*, accompanies the bird smash, Gutierrez adds that the show sees “a shift in focus from the Eastern religions that influenced her recent series, ‘The Buddha Composed.’”

At times, Oakes’ conception of a particular piece may dwarf the final execution, although her technical prowess is always apparent. She occasionally over-reaches since shoot-for-the-moon is her style. Titles of her shows can sound like ’70s concept rock albums. Yet equally evident is an element of self-mockery, especially when she churns out sweet if touristy Bahamas sketches under the signature, “Julie, Lady Oakes.” You take her too seriously at your peril.

(In becoming Lady Oakes, she connected with one of the most sensationally lurid unsolved crimes in all of Canadian, British and Bahamas history — the mysterious 1943 murder of Canadian gold mining baron, Sir Harry Oakes, Christopher’s grandfather, in his Nassau estate, Westbourne. The Duke of Windsor tried a cover up, an Oakes family feud blew up and various Nazis and Yankee mobster Lucky Luciano were implicated. It’s complicated.)

Julie Oakes has a religious side, which may come as a surprise to those who know her mostly for her erotic drawings and writing published some six years ago in a three-volume, limited edition series of erotica, *Human Sacrifice*.

In borrowing the names of her two central characters, the chaste Juliette (i.e. Julie?) and the sensualist Justine from the Marquis de Sade, Oakes gives the thinly fictionalized trilogy a certain leather-and garters torque. American feminist artist Judy Chicago’s presence can also be felt in Oakes’ illustrations with their morphing forms, mysterious openings and orifices.

Justine in *Quercia Stories*, the first volume, asserts she is “a hot blooded woman, flaming and flaring,

giving heat and consuming moths.” In *The Revolving Door*, Justine describes a sexual bout with her lover Tiziano as if Donatello were painting the tryst in real time. In *Conscientious Perversity*, volume three, Justine realizes that “love and knowledge can taint the perversity.”

Oakes’ interest in sexuality continues in a less personal approach with *Hook*, a recently finished novel due out next spring about prostitution in India, told through the stories of three women under the influence of “the malicious beggar master, Dilly Willy.”

Oakes’ “libertine lifestyle” blossomed after “the confines” of her 20-year marriage to Christopher Oakes ended “amicably” in 1998, she says. In truth, these confines were those years surviving the British Columbia wilderness, where the couple lived “beyond electrical power lines” while raising their kids, now 31 and 27. Both children live near Oakes’ own new home and studio in Vernon B.C., which she shares with current partner, Richard Fogarty. Christopher stays with daughter Greta when he’s in the area.

The Oakes-Fogarty residence also serves as headquarters for Headbones Gallery — specializing in works on paper and small sculpture — which has operated a Toronto space on Carlaw Ave. but only until the end of the month. Headbones also exists as an on-line service. Oakes herself continues to show at Toronto’s Lonsdale Gallery, exhibiting what remains of the bird portion of the Clay and Glass Gallery show in July.

“I will always maintain a presence in the world (beyond Vernon),” she says. “I feel I have a responsibility to translate the sense of wonder that I have. I have to live my work to further that.”

“Swounds” continues at The Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, 25 Caroline St. N in Waterloo, to June 26.

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