

## Rita Robillard—Geographies

The list of places where Rita Robillard has lived is varied. She has lived in the Pacific Northwest for fifteen years (in Portland for three), as well as Lacoste, France; the Bay Area; and Brazil. She was born and brought up in New York City. Her many homes—and making these places into homes—are at the center of her art, from the time when, as a child in New York, she used fenced-in Gramercy Park as a play-ground and club house, and as the physical ground for memory—the site for memorial services for pets. Finely attuned to a sense of place, Robillard's artmaking is a process that explores geography and identity. *Time and Place*, 2001, a project realized in her exhibition here, investigates a sense of place in Portland. Robillard asked thirteen different people, some of them native to the region, others new to the city, to walk with her in "their" Portland, in order to help her find, as Gertrude Stein once said, the "there" that is here. Other work on exhibit is in counterpoint: the artist has sought out and recovered images made by earlier eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelers—engravings in travel books. She has claimed and reworked them:

*I enlarge them as much as five hundred percent and then screen print them, sometimes in several layers to create new woven images of fantasy places. The photo images I superimpose on the screen prints are computer generated in new pigment-based technology. Combining these processes allows me to maintain the dialectic of past and present with marks, images, and technologies from different periods. The historical images break down, as memories do, yet also show through.*

Robillard's experience as a traveler shapes a visual language with a history in her art. A very early New York work, *A View from My Bedroom Window*, depicts a space blocked off by an air shaft into which the artist could not enter. Other prints of the late 1970s study inaccessibility—a hidden river running under a town in rural Brazil. In 1979, in a pioneering installation piece, Robillard outlined three college buildings' entrance doorways with electrical tape to exaggerate the one-point perspective vista of the hallway beyond it; she found that visitors enjoyed the extra possibilities for locating themselves and interacting with the space. Later, in a *Fire Lookout* piece, 1994-95, images altered on the computer screen commented on the hubris of projecting views onto landscape. In her recent series, *Essence and Artifice.- Views of Spokane*, 1998, Robillard poked holes in landscape and filled them in with views reminiscent of European formal gardens. What, she asks, is the significance of imported landscape? This group of works, Robillard notes, "combines the promise and ideal of the western landscape with the reality of human needs to establish a sense of place." Robillard invokes Oregon history in *View of the Gorge*, 2001, which alludes to the time of Lewis and Clark. *The "There" Here*, 2001, refers to the city of Portland, including the alleys of Ladd's Addition. Robillard uses superimposed imagery and color to map spatial perceptions of personal routes through the city's neighborhoods.

These pieces explore increasingly complex printmaking technologies that the artist uses to enlarge and laminate spaces. She draws and paints on the prints, and she collages photographs she has taken. The richly colored, dense, and textured surfaces that result from these processes attract the eye and the mind to the experience of looking that

itself can be a journey of sorts. Pixels from the original historic engravings are fugitive motifs that offer a new perception of the abstract patterning of old printing techniques; enlarging old engravings creates new spaces. Robillard's work, she points out, puts her into a dialogue with nineteenth-century printmakers. At the same time, the computer's printings and the marks of the artist's hand locate her "here" and ground the viewer. Printing and imprinting dots and lines and setting down pigment are ways of setting down roots. The photo-graphs disrupt—and add to—perception.

In doing the visual work of constructing space, the artist makes herself at home in her art. In *terra infirma: geography's visual culture*, Irit Rogoff writes about artists who, as Robillard does, take note of travelers (especially those who have been forced to travel), and who think about geography as a category of expanding knowledge. Robillard's search for what she calls "the visual textures of our lives in this time of migratory reality" contemplates the autobiographies and biographies inherent in space and place. Her art offers us the opportunity to, as Rogoff puts it, "jointly puzzle out the perils.., of belonging as well as... the tragedies of not belonging."

—Susan Fillin-Yeh

Art historian and former Director of the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College