It is the story
I am after
the secrets secure
in the
oxidized silver
lid hinges missing
the severed
arms of sugar pots
strange markings
an archaic
vocabulary
POLISH
MARY KAVANAGH

MEDICINE HAT MUSEUM & ART GALLERY
polish by Mary Kavanagh, exhibited at the Medicine Hat Museum & Art Gallery, was the final installation of a large scale project developed over the course of several years. A multi-faceted work, polish included hundreds of pieces of domestic silver at various stages of oxidation laid out on a long table; a surveillance camera which captured the interactions of a volunteer polisher and visitors; and polishing cloths encoded with the residual stains of tarnish, delicately stitched together into a large textile piece that was suspended from the ceiling and cascaded across the floor in an adjoining gallery. Time, labour, domesticity and colonial collecting practices are referenced, while public and private realms of memory underpin and drive the work.

It was a pleasure to work with Mary Kavanagh on the final installation of polish, and to be able, through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts, to preserve its memory and extend its life, through this catalogue. For her insightful consideration of Mary's work, we thank writer Betsy Warren; for his excellent design of this publication we thank Edisson del Camto. We appreciate Miranda Pearson's permission to enrich this document of Mary Kavanagh's work with the inclusion of her poem Silver Collection. We would also like to express our gratitude to volunteer polishers from the Medicine Hat and District Historical Society for their time, perseverance and goodwill, as well as volunteer installers Joyce Yamamoto and Val Cullen. We are indebted to the City of Medicine Hat and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts for their ongoing support.

JOANNE MARION
CURATOR OF ART
MEDICINE HAT MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY
Over the last three years, many people have participated in ways, large and small, to the making of polish. I would like to thank first Joanne Marion, Curator of Art, for her interest in my work and for the opportunity to exhibit at the Medicine Hat Museum and Art Gallery. It has been a pleasure to work with her and with the staff at the gallery. Heartfelt thanks go to Betty Warland for her evocative and insightful essays, and for putting me in contact with Miranda Pransky who agreed to contribute her poem, Silver Collection, for publication in this catalogue. This fine poem functions as a parallel piece to the installation, layering a voice resonant with memory and narrative onto the mending of the wares. I would also like to thank the members of the Medicine Hat and District Historical Society who performed in the project by polishing silver for long hours during the course of the exhibition. Liz Moore and Christy Schwager need acknowledgement for their contribution as performers in venues prior to this one. Liz Moore in particular deserves special thanks and recognition for her tracking of the stories that visitors shared with her as she sat polishing a good portion of the silver collection in Ace Art Gallery, Winnipeg. It was her dedicated and careful handwork that led to tarnish, the large veil of nearly 200 napkins that hung in the small gallery. The sewing of the tablecloth and napkins was done by Michelle Demours and Nancy Nielsen, and studio assistance at crucial times was provided by Kristin Bjornstad and Laura Kels. Without the assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts and the University of Lethbridge Research Fund, this project would not have been possible. Finally, it is always a pleasure to work with Edison del Canto whose catalogue design is elegant and succinctly in tune with the project, and who helped in numerous ways throughout the development of polish.
Few, if any objects are more inconspicuous yet inclusive in importance than the table. Representation of the table, however, has been rare throughout the history of visual art production. It is within the medium of painting that the table begins to periodically inhabit depictions of civilized human activity during the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch’s The Marriage at Cana and The Conjurer (1475–1480) included the table as integral to public gatherings. Florentine artist and engineer Leonardo da Vinci created his Christian narrative masterpiece The Last Supper (1495–1497), and, it might be argued, created the template for all other representations of extended, ritualized tables rendered ever since.

During these influential centuries, representations of the table are preoccupied with various forms of male economies—from the religious to the mercantile. The common conflation of these two economies can be evidenced in such paintings as Boschman Cornelis Anthonisz’s Banquet of Seventeen Members of the Civic Guard (1513) that replicates da Vinci’s template. Even within the seemingly domestic Dutch still life painting of the 17th century, evolving male economic sophistication and prowess saturates their compositions of floral arrangements, wine, food, and silverware. The luxury and abundance, even decorative—nibbled at and left amidst silver and linens—resonates.

A much later exception would be Swiss artist Giacometti’s sculpture The Stolen Table (1933) in which the female figure seems her leg is merged into the small, claustrophobic table’s surface. Her disembodied hand lies vertical on the table’s top. Giacometti’s sculpture exhibits an awareness of the complex interface of domestic and economic issues rarely evident in most male artists’ table art.

Contemporary Canadian male artists’ works such as Tom Dean’s Excerpts from a Description of the Universe (1984–1987), and Ian Carr Harris’ Narcissus and After Göhr (1989), engage more with the table yet the stance behind these representations reveals the carefully fashioned tables to still be
Kavanagh was well into making polished when she became aware of British artist Cornelia Parker's Thirty Pieces of Silver (1988–90). Both artists collected an extensive array of silverware from antique and second hand stores, garage sales, and individuals. Parker, however, laid them out in red carpet fashion on a small street in London to be crushed by a steamroller, then suspended them at skin height from the gallery ceiling in a series of circular torso-sized pools. Kavanagh, noting for her disruptive altering of objects from our daily lives, acknowledges, “Silver... objects are landmarks in people’s lives. I wanted to change their meaning, their visibility, their worth, that is why I flattened them, consigning them all to the same fate...” a fate like that of the knight, which we all eventually share.1

Kavanagh, like Parker, is deeply shaped by her Catholic upbringing. In the West, Catholicism continues to provide a rare environment for the powerful mix of belief, sacred objects, texts, and incantation. In polish and Thirty Pieces of Silver, Kavanagh and Parker girdle the gallery into a subtle hybrid of intimate secularity and covert sacred symbolism that affects us in ways of which we are not even cognizant. It took me weeks to understand Parker’s title—then I remembered the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas to betray Christ—and was struck once again by how we invent and use objects to “stand in” for our intentions and actions.
Although Parker typically violates her objects and Kavanagh alters our procedural, proportional and proximal relationships with objects, both disorient our socially-constructed relationship to objects and require us to activate a deeper, more accurate reading of their meaning. Kavanagh's instinct, however, is for preservation of a familial and cultural narrative that is "thin" for non-indigenous Canadians in comparison to centuries of preserved British narratives and literary production in the United Kingdom.

In polish, this was enhanced by the daily presence of a woman seated at the end of the table who polished for two hours a day and frequently engaged in conversation with viewers about memories prompted by particular pieces of silverware. Despite these conversations, the almost mythic enormity and essential solitude of the polisher's task was reminiscent of Psycho separating the large pile of poppy, wheat and millet seeds. Kavanagh further underscored the underlying ritualistic nature of domestic life by prescribing a polishing procedure. Although the polisher was free to select the objects she was drawn to cleaning, she was allowed to use only one 15 x 15 inch linen cloth for each, and use only a
total of five clothes during each performance. She also was required to remove the tiny identification label from each object when she completed its polishing, and re-pin it to its particular polishing cloth. These doubly "inscribed" cloths were then neatly piled on the right side of a sideboard table behind the polisher. The unsullied clothes were in an orderly pile on the left: the sheep and the goats? A video monitor with a loop of the polisher ceaselessly performing her task was located on the opposite wall realizing a perfect match of technology and myth.

Since the early eighties, a number of North American women artists have been creating a different formal and emotional relationship to the table. The components of a table, chair, sofa, performer, video monitor, and intensified
(often altered) relationship to personal objects are signatures of United States artist Ann Hamilton's extensive and remarkable body of work. Hamilton's first installation tableau featuring a live performer (other than herself) and a table was the Sib of unknown positions (1984). This was Hamilton's sixth body of work. Prior to this, however, was Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party in Feminist Art History which premiered in San Francisco in 1979. This astonishing yet playful prototype featured thirty-nine hand-painted china plates (framed by exquisite, hand-stitched runners) evoking the most notable women from history. The settings were on a triangular, vulva-referencing table that rested upon nine hundred and ninety-nine porcelain tiles inscribed with the names of other influential women.

With The Dinner Party, Chicago created a woman--imagined, altered template to da Vinci's Last Supper. The combined vision of Chicago and Hamilton has resulted in the introduction of new formal and conceptual territory. This is further evidenced by United States architect and sculptor Maya Lin's stunningly beautiful and moving Civil Rights Memorial in Alabama (1989). Inscribed into the glossy, black granite round table of the memorial are the names of forty women, men, and children who lost their lives while working for Black Civil Rights and the dates of significant Civil Rights events in the South. Over the granite surface—a thin layer of water continually moves. Water on stone.

In Canada, multi-media artist Janet Cardiff's table Te Douch [1993] stirred considerable interest. "Viewers" ran their hands over the old, scarred table's surface to activate nine different soundtracks of movie soundtracks, people talking, music and the sounds of people breathing. Cardiff's piece gave the table memory ("If the walls could speak"), or at least, acknowledgement of its centrality in our exchanges and activities.

Also in Canada, multi-media artist Susan Shantz introduced another surprising dimension. Discovering that tomato paste dried into a sensuous patina when applied to surfaces, Shantz populated the surface of her twenty-eight foot long elliptical, tomato-paste-patina table. Sentries (1998) with a vast array of tomato paste-covered domestic objects confounding and delighting viewers with the reversals of a thin layer of food not only defining and uniting disparate objects but converting previously ugly-surfaced objects suddenly into compelling, exotic shapes.

Kavanagh has worked within the nascent table tradition of all these women artists and like them, she has extended and complicated it. Her further reach into this tradition is clearly realized in the room adjacent to her table. Here she has fashioned another reference to the table: one comprised of all the soiled and labeled clothes she stitched together. They spanned ten and a half feet in width, with eighteen and a half feet of cloth on the floor, and twelve feet continuing on up the wall. The removed tannish and liquid polish marks on the clothes produced an intermingling of black, green-grey, grey, brown-grey, and off-whites. The interplay of these colours subtly changed the surface of the cloth evoking an almost imperceptible botanical effect reminiscent of dupples light or variable textures and tones on the surface of a bed of water, and briefly nodded at this table's painterly nature.
Here again, Kavanagh has shifted the given order and assumptions of our perceptual field. Wall is wall, floor is floor, yet, this "vestment" cloth-shape has unhinged their fixed, differentiated functions. Where are we? Looking at "relic" artifacts of healing hanging on a sanctuary wall? Or, are we inside a mouth, and is this the tongue with the marks of our tarnished lives? Are these dirty handkerchief or serviette receptacles of our body's embarrassing emissions, and antidesires—not to be kept discreetly out of sight? Or, are these the ritual communion cloths draped over The Host now revealing the "stains" they absorbed? With this vestment cloth, is Kavanagh nudging us into the table's ancient lineage of altar?

Tables always seek our presence. They are at the heart of all our multifarious activities. Therefore, the table's near absence as a central icon in visual art production may speak to another absence we so often feel when viewing art, particularly gallery-based art. Within these endless, interchangeable rooms without tables, without altars, without beds (another form of table) we are wary of no site of meeting. Encounter the work with our backs to each other, rarely exchange glances, seldom words. Might we long for a more shared perceptual experience that's impulsive rather than explosive and rigidly individual?

The tables of Chicago, Hamilton, Lin, Shantz and Kavanagh literally turn us around. Awkwardly yet achingly resonant us toward one another. Mary Kavanagh's use of elegant formalism in polish acknowledges the complex, highly refined visual narrative elements of Western civilization which we expect and are accustomed to yet her choice of shared site, deeply familiar gestures, objects, and maintenance enable us to recognize one another once again, and in this act—inhalt art.
I transfer the tarnish from one body to another, assigning the residue from spoon to cloth...shrouds of memory
SILVER COLLECTION

MIRANDA PEARSON

-A whisper - an echo - shadows - sound of last night -
and tomorrow

-pen and softly in the shadow, the silvery sheen around his eyes. 
He was always - [wrong

to say: white, like the pages of a book, wrong

to say: ivory]

-a quiet boy, soft blonde cuttings of hair lying on the floor around his chain.

He was soft:

say it - bent like the ink of society's newspapers

burnishing his hands;

coming off

on his hand-

(on the wall, a shimmering square of light,
a water-mark)
If you keep looking back it will paralyse you, turn you into a monument to your own grief.

Saskatchewan? What the foil Hat?

Remember those December?
a million tapers flaring bright from twisted silver wires, the goss and patent, the silver-flax, and the silver-doctor, also a very great favourite, set, silver times.

tail of red crescent, a body of silver tinsel entirely.

A five layer cake garnished with roses, white scalloped ribbons, a web of hard spun sugar. We were all gently hummed

and his eyes were a bright silverish blue.

Naplace is a monde-haus (lock).

At night, the curtains are left open, the sky tragic w/ charcoal clouds

burglars from Bromley or Sidcup

snag in the homeless dark,
maggies, scoping out the silver carriage clock,
the writing desk,
the white-flecked sea-scape.

Everything: an absence.

dance and get it boys.

Or, me, a peep show

railed in my mother's chair.
watching Reality on the telly (glued, let's face it),
it's got down to five of them now, locked in a house together

You are at once homesick and sick of home.

Mustard Pot
- small mustard pot with green lining and inside of pot
- brown pot like it has been in flour for years

Speak roughly to your little boy,
And beat him when he sneezes:
He only does it to amuse,
Because he knows it teases

(1) Mustard pot shaped like an onion, about 2 inches high, 'a smelly bit sweet, ammooy, pot Victorian)

These are things that make me nervous:

My dad,
standing to pee with the door open,
his shoulders raised, head lowered.
The loud flush.

A phone's
tremulous ringing, its thin, warning cry—

the arrogant thwack and call of Wimbledon
[living room's murky olive green, curtains drawn at noon—a school of fish might easily drift in—or out—through the French windows]

Collection of small objects:
- jam spread, Archive sheet
- super rings
- High (small mustard pot inside, I suppose jam or mustard)

The click of knitting needles
and a toilet's flush

Reaver's—vase of iron dragon design, two-handled
about 4 inches across and high.

While we sleep, the hams
are pyres.
In the morning there'll be
a photo of a lamb on the front page of The Telegraph,
the farmer raising it up like a price, the open,
tender wool of its throat—
clown feet hopelessly pedaling—

there is a sort of solitude that
haunts every traveler leaving home,
a melancholy
that lives deep within the excitement
or any purpose
that might prompt the journey

4-eggplant salt shakers by Estelle C. cow horn, good gauge, sturdy

My mother shakes her head as we drink gin and tonics
and watch the evening news together.
It's terrible, she says,
those poor creatures.
And the worst of it
is the landscape now—so
empty, so barren...

She tosses cubes of flour into a frying pan, it
sizzles and shrinks.
A beautiful bit of beef that, Mrs. Pearson, silver side.

/s/

Jane grows up
and forgets
how once she fed greedily
upon these breasts
[silver-sitting in the dark
the sky across the valley
blooming china-blue]

Language:
gathering, lining up in her mouth,
blurred sounds tapping at the icy window
Listen, her small fingers
mark the air—

In front lights illuminated with infrared-AF that go to Addie
I wonder the looking
You know it is a
fantasizing romance,
an unaffordable luxury.
Jane,
are you still up there in the attic, sitting in the dark?
what are you doing up there?

A hypochondria of the heart
that thrives on its own symptoms—

[Dissolved, hollow
under absolute neglect]

Wine-coaster, fitted with 2 handles and 4 stubby legs.
Fairly useless for a bottle as so big
but you might stand a plant on it.
Not worth the cleaning if you ask me

We had terrible smog that year, a real pea-soup one.
I knew I was on Regent Street but had no idea where;
then, I remember, I reached out my hand
and touched Liberty

—nostalgic love is rarely reciprocated,
and if your choice was fitting at the time,
spare yourself the guilt.

Tooth-marks.
Water-marks.
Water-babies.

Stains
that remain.
Remains
that bleed and blossom
all over the page.

I—a cold day, Trafalgar Square.
lines of women chanting;
tree abortion on demand!

Spectres of statues
black against October clouds.

My mother's soft belly, her stretch marks
a sheal of minnows trailing—

But knowing and being, all of it now.
Sticking silver with bone-handled,
pointed scissors, friends...

What if the silver-blue cord is the only reason to love?
Oh guilt! Spare me.

[Confidence — with guilt. Value to be confirmed]

—the home-curing did not cure her at all,
only aggravated the longing

Ladybird, ladybird.
Weren't you come on home?
Rivers of gin are streaming from your eyes

sots: a past of small kinds, 1956 (epigraph)

Aspens dear
the soft of water
rushing far away

the book
of ash

there is a word
for the single flaw
that makes the elegant whole
but look
the silver birch
its bright grey skin, its

Japanese negative space

how through broken trees
new ones push through—

[and still]

nutbush
will flit down
and feed
from your outstretched palm.]
I am lonely without you.
All the things I said I'd never be,
I am,

And the snow continues to fall
like some kind of wisdom

A wedding bouquet of lilies
my grandmother in her pearls,
her shining ivory silk touches the future
like silver, like a blade—

how our hands
are like birds
when bad news hits,
how they fly
to block our mouths, or
clapped together in useless prayer—

One for sorrow, two for joy—

A swirling leaf—
quick! Run across the bridge
and wait for it—

wanders the hoary Thames along his silver winding way—

Her milky cataracts
watching the grey
smoke rising from her tea—Lapsang Souchong.

She wears her cherished brooch of grief.
It keeps. It does not age.

The creak of knitting needles,
Smoke.
Dinosaurs.
Maggies.
The collapsing bodies
of books

—and through the thumb-nailed fingers glide
the silver-shining mirrors (a list of absences)
on you glide, till you reach the summit edge, then over

———

Miranda Pearson was born in England and moved to Canada in 1991. She received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia and has taught both at UBC and at Simon Fraser University where she is currently the poetry mentor in the Writing and Publishing Program. Her first book of poems is Prime (Beach Holme Publishing, 2001) and her next book, entitled The Miles, will appear in 2004.
I thought it would be elegant and serene but, it was monstrous.

impossible, hysterical, a kind of ritualized tribulation...
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This catalogue was published to accompany the exhibition, August 23 – October 5, 2003 organized by the Medicine Hat Museum & Art Gallery.

Curator: Joanne Manion
Text: Betsy Werland, Miranda Pearson and Mary Kavanagh

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Medicine Hat Museum & Art Gallery, 2003

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Photography: Page 1, 16, 17, 18, 20, 25, 29, 29, Rory Mahony,
Page 4-8, 30-32, Don Gilt, Page 10, 11, 19, 35, 36, Rick Fischer and
Page 2, 10, 21, 33, 34, 40, 41, 43, Maggie Ross

The Dinner Party,
© Judy Chicago 1979, mixed media, 48” x 42” x 3’.
Collection of the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation.
Photo © Donald Woodman.

Catalogue Design: Edisson del Canto DESIGN
Printing: Houghton Boston, Canada

ISBN 0-9691209-9-0