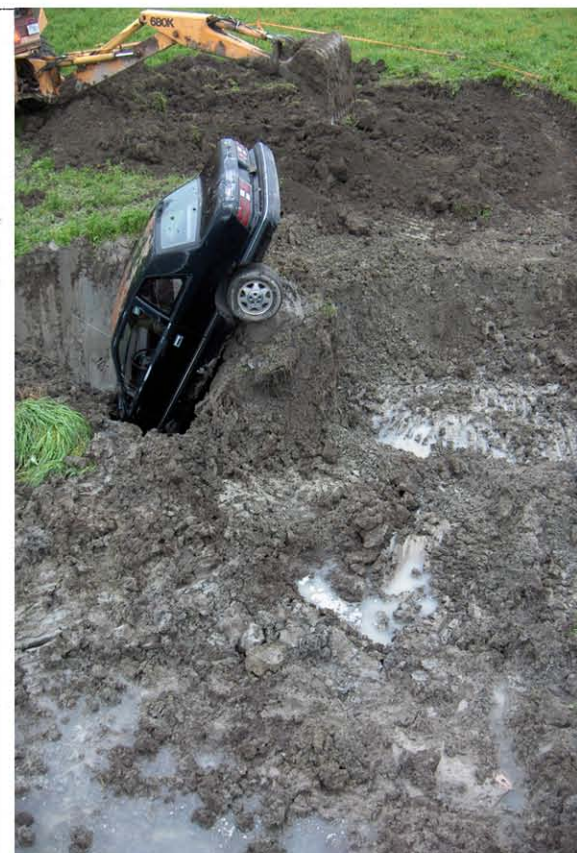


PHOTOS: COURTESY OF ELENA WILLIS

Two finished artworks (*I Saw Him Sitting There* and *Sweet Dreams*), and, at far right, a production still that demonstrates that the artist works without computer software to physically create a scenario to be photographed.



Interpretation of dreams in a most concrete manner

Elena Willis creates inner worlds, not with digital trickery but with painstaking construction of an imaginary scene

A dream which is not interpreted is like a letter which is not read.

The Talmud

CHRISTINE REDFERN
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Look at the work of Montreal photographer Elena Willis and the word that comes to mind is “haunting.” I recently had a chance to talk to her about the exhibition *Between Natures*, now showing at the Darling Foundry.

Q: All the photographs and the video in this exhibition are re-creations of dreams?

A: A reason why I’m doing this is that there are so many beautiful images and symbols and ideas coming to us through dreams. Somebody has got to talk about it and record it.

Q: How do you see dreams? Do you think they are trying to tell us something?

A: I think dreams are open for interpretation. There is no one way to read a dream, but I guess I absolutely believe they are trying to tell us something.

Q: So you don’t buy into the theory that it is your brain getting rid of the garbage it has accumulated during the day?

A: No, I think it is more assembling pieces that affected you, that were important to you and presenting them in these symbolic, abstract ways. For example, when I had the dream that inspired *I Saw Him Sitting There*, I was reading the *Elephant Man*. There was a visual in that book that really affected me – where the *Elephant Man* was put on display in a dark room on a bench and people would go in and see him. I was really struck by it and it stayed in my head. So I think the reason I dreamt this image (of a man in a suit with a pyramid of bricks instead of a head), had a lot to do with that book and how it affected

me. As for the bricks, it is what my family home was made of. ... So the experiences I had during that time and what I was feeling at that moment came together in this image, in this one man. That is a personal interpretation of a dream.

Q: That is so surprising – when I look at that image it is not at all what comes to mind. For me, it seems like the iconic image for a faceless corporation, the non-thinking corporate body.

A: Exactly. My view is totally opposite to what most people think, but it doesn’t mean it can’t have another meaning, or the meaning that it might have for someone else is not right. There is no right and wrong to any of this.

Q: If you had to pick one photograph to talk about, which one would it be?

A: I think *Gopa’s Dream* (about a premonitory dream told to Buddha in his early life by his wife, Gopa). What is interesting about this one is it sheds

some light on a part of history that is not spoken about when it comes to the Buddha and his story. His family, his wife, his children, his parents – all this he left behind and never saw again. Of course, it is amazing and wonderful what he did, the world wouldn’t be the same if he hadn’t, but there is just another side to the story and that’s not illuminated. This is often found in history: What do we talk about, what do we remember and what do we forget? That is a big reason why I wanted to do this image, to remember a little bit of her story and what she experienced and lived.

Q: How about the image with the horse and woman?

A: A woman who had an eating disorder told me this dream. Suffocated by her problem is how I see it. The horse is lying on top of her. And the fact that it is a horse and that lying down is something which they rarely do. It is unnatural, just like an eating disorder

is not going the way your body wants to go.

Q: I marvel at the fact that in all your work you physically create the scenario and then take a picture of it – especially in a work such as *Sweet Dreams II*. Here, instead of taking a picture of a car and a man in a lake and combining them into one image using digital technology, you actually go out and dig a hole and fill it with a man, a car and water.

A: You are talking about what is the most interesting thing for me about this kind of work – the challenge of doing it. I love if it is a challenging image to do. If it is too easy, I lose interest.

Between Natures is being exhibited until Sunday Dec. 2 at the Darling Foundry, 745 Ottawa St. For more information, call 514-392-1554 or go to www.quartierephemere.org or www.elenawillis.com