

IRENE F. WHITTOME

Sublimation

Active for over fifty years on the Canadian art scene, Irene F. Whittome has long made the museum—its tools, systems, and functions—the centre of her creative process. The gestures of classification and identification, and a concern for preservation and accumulation are characteristic of her installations and display cases, which are veritable little cabinets of curiosities. Her works present an opportunity to explore the museum as a site, not so much to uncover its blind spots, but to bring its imagination into play, using its rooms, languages, and sacralising strategies to tell stories infused with personal mythologies.

After moving to the Eastern Townships in 2007, Whittome built a studio and homestead on a former quarry, where she now channels her desire to transform the environments that inhabit her. It is there that, in 2009, she performed the act of burning the templates and leftover elements of many of her works from the 1970s and 1980s. Among these were encaustic-covered wooden and cardboard objects from her series *Vancouver* (1975-1980), an installation that was exhibited and reconfigured numerous times, hence the presence of shipping crates among the flames, visible in the photo documentation of the event. With this iconoclastic gesture—of the order of a spectacular and unproductive expenditure obliterating several years' worth of work—Whittome freed herself of its weight and gave herself a symbolic blank slate. The fire, which burned for an entire day, allowed her to physically inscribe her presence in the quarry: nine burial mounds of ash

and debris were arranged on the site of the blaze, like memorial markers. Two years passed before the traces of wax embedded in the soil had finally dissolved and been replaced by patches of resilient lichen.

Destruction and rebirth: two opposing states that unite to evoke the process of sublimation. In conversation with Whittome, this idea often returns, like a leitmotif, and she pinpoints it as a key element of her artistic impulse. She has never been afraid of destruction, sublimation's first stage whose finality is a state which, by substituting itself for the former, suppresses it. Fire—ceremonial, funerary, an offering—is also an apt reminder of the ritualistic and sacred nature of her entire practice. This is evidenced in her use of symbols such as the turtle, the cross, or the stupa, and the meditative atmosphere of some of her installations that use light and the tension between dissimulation and revelation to produce a sense of mystery. Her series *Shroud 1, 2, and 3* shows traces left by a liquid as it moves across and soaks a piece of linen. These ceremonies reconnect with Whittome's first love, printmaking, which involves transferring a design from one surface to another. Created with an iodine dye, a liquid with antiseptic properties, these works are like shrouds—fabric that wraps the bodies of the deceased—in that they intimately evoke rites of passage aimed at preserving and celebrating life. A life carried on in remembrance, in life's traces, and perhaps even beyond and before it, in sublimated form.

Anne-Marie St-Jean Aubre, Curator of Contemporary Art

IRENE F. WHITTOME

Vancouver, British Columbia, 1942

1. *Fire/Lichen*, 2009-2022

Ink jet print on Canson matte photo paper, 198.1 x 152.4 cm
Property of the artist

2. *Shroud 1*, 2021

***Shroud 2*, 2021**

***Shroud 3*, 2021**

Iodine dye on Belgium linen, triptych, 152.4 x 152.4 cm each
Property of the artist

FLOOR PLAN

3rd floor

Salle Famille D^r Richard Morisset

