

TORONTO REVIEWS

METAMORPHS

By Virginia MacDonnell
Eichhorn

**GAIL BOURGEOIS AT
WOMEN'S ART RESOURCE
CENTRE**

Placed on a shelf at the entrance to the room is a stack of small plates, heaped to overflowing with a pile of dried seeds. There's nothing very exotic about the seeds. No spicy aromas or exotic colours or markings. Their dried shells are very like the multitude of maple keys and various other seeds that we routinely step on, as they litter our paths. In fact, the overwhelming aspect to this pile of seeds is its very mundaneness. Why are they there? What is remarkable or significant about them? The first clue comes in the form of a poem which hangs slightly above the seeds. Titled *When I Recovered my Body, I was 40 Years Old*, and written by the artist of this exhibition, **Gail Bourgeois**, the poem is a reaction to /rewriting of Leonard Cohen's "When I uncovered your body". The text of the poem is superimposed over the image of a burning house.

Called *The Spice-Box of Age*, Bourgeois's show, which was held at the Women's Art Resource Centre in April 1997, deals with body image, transformation and aging. In her artist's statement Bourgeois states "In Eastern societies women gain respect as they mature and reserve the right to slow the pace of their lives. For myself, and other women producers, the pace of life has quickened and there is no end in sight." The pile of plates evokes the continuing process of work which most women live with. We cook dinners, clean up and the next day the process begins again. There is no "long-term" result but rather each occurrence is a part of the



Gail Bourgeois, *The Spice-Box of Age*, Installation

process which continues until the day we die. And often the process and labour that results in nice dinners and a clean home are invisible and anonymous.

The image of the burning house is a symbol - not of rejection outright, as we do all need to eat and we want to live in some degree of comfort - but rather is a symbol of a frustration with the limitations and confinement to which many women find themselves existing in. To "burn down the house" is symbolically to liberate oneself from these confines and to get rid of the "baggage" that we carry around with us and which, frequently, we have a love/hate relationship with.

The seeds are metaphors of the self. Seeds carry within them the potential to grow, to become something greater and bigger than what they are now. They are the incubus of what might be - some day. But these seeds on view are dead; their potential has been lost, never having had the chance to be realized. Whatever they could have been is trapped within the brittle, dried-out shells which enclose them.

In her poem Bourgeois writes "... I thought I understood that face because I had seen it twisted once or a hundred times, until I saw through to touch my self." In this she succinctly verbalizes the limitations that are fre-

quently self-imposed. Rather than needing affirmation and discovery from others, we must find it for ourselves within ourselves. Otherwise, like the seeds, we too will wither and dry out, never having reached our potential.

The second component of Bourgeois's installation is a series of 25 framed works which have been constructed from two mainstream commercial nature puzzles. The pieces from the two puzzles have been merged together to create hybrid works. Although elements from the puzzles are identifiable - sky here, tree there - the pictures work best on a metaphoric level. People are puzzles to themselves as well as to others, and it is often at times of transformation (i.e. puberty, giving birth, menopause) that we gain a greater understanding of what our bodies are capable of and how they work.

Bourgeois transforms these conventional landscape images into enigmatic semblances, which hint at what could be and which defy their own proscribed limitations and instead, metamorphose into something unique and singular. *The Spice-Box of Age* is a strong, evocative exhibition that deals with breaking out of our mostly self-imposed area of limitations and - without proselytizing - encourages the viewer to reexamine their own self and discover what potentials remain within.