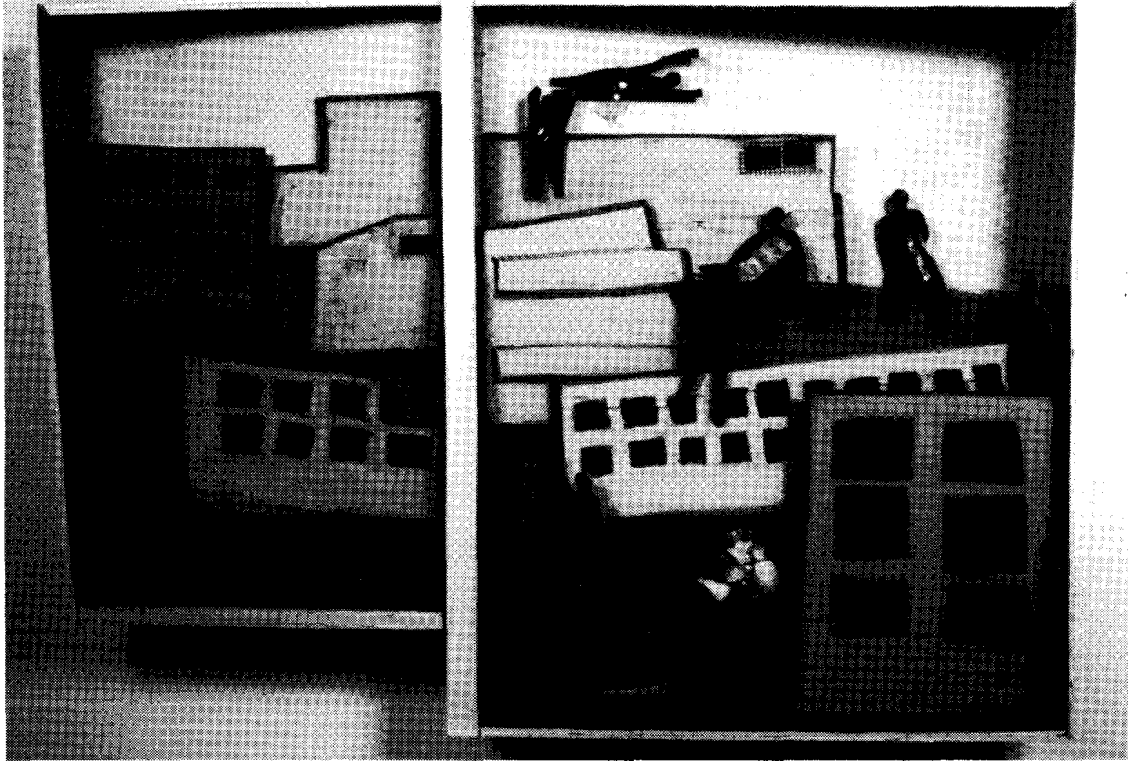


Sunnybrook

Sculpture and text by Persimmon Blackbridge

Photos by Susan Stewart



I got the interview at Sunnybrook because I put on my application that I had worked at a child guidance clinic in Ontario.

I went there dressed for success, in brand new panty hose, borrowed shoes, and a dress with nice long sleeves that covered the scars on my arms. I was interviewed by Dr. Carlson, the head psychiatrist.

I think he wanted to hire someone quickly and get back to his important work. It was a short interview.

"I understand you've worked with teenagers with learning disabilities," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"So you must be used to dealing with some pretty anti-social behaviour," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"But you've never worked with retarded people. Well. That's unfortunate. But you do know behavior mod?"

"Oh, yes," I said.

"Good. Very good. Well then. I feel I must tell you: the girl we hired last month for this position quit. One of the residents bit her. Quite badly."

He looked at me. I didn't flinch, and the job was mine.

Actually, I had been a patient there, but I knew the jargon and I knew the routines, so what the hell.

I know behavior mod.

I liked Ward D. There were lots of friendly people there—Shirley, Pat, Geneva... In fact everyone there liked me except for Mary. Mary liked to sit by herself and look out the window. She didn't like people bugging her.

But I had to bug her or I'd get fired for not doing my job.

Dr. Carlson got me a book on American Sign Language and told me to teach Mary to sign.

I had a few days to study my book, and then I went to meet Mary.

Nurse Thompson, the head nurse on Ward D, took me over to where Mary was staring out the window. Mary glared at her for a second, and then looked away.

"You do know behavior mod?" Nurse Thompson asked.

"Oh, yes," I said.

"Well behavior mod is a little tricky with kids like Mary. And not just because she can't speak or hear. The form of negative conditioning we like at Sunnybrook is withdrawing attention."

"Of course," I said.

"On Ward B, that means a few hours in the sideroom, which is your basic solitary confinement."

"Right."

"Here on Ward D, we put them on a chair in the hallway and everyone ignores them for awhile. It's humane, it's effective. Except with kids like Mary who are so anti-social they'd just as soon be ignored." Nurse Thompson laughed and shook her head.

"In cases like Mary's, we use good old positive reinforcement. It's really just as effective."



It didn't matter that no one else on Ward D knew how to sign. It didn't matter that I didn't know how to sign. I could learn from the book and teach Mary. Then she would have a way to communicate, in case anyone who did know sign happened to drop by the ward.



I knew it was a strait jacket, even though I had never seen one before.

It had to be the sideroom and it had to be Janey.

I could understand her being anxious. I was feeling a little anxious too, and I had keys and no strait jacket.

I was at Sunnybrook for a couple of weeks before I started on Ward B. But when I reported in to the office on my first day, Nurse Jones told me Janey was locked in the sideroom.

"She'll be there for another hour or two. You might as well take a break."

I sat in the staffroom. No one else was there. I didn't feel like reading old magazines, or writing my weekly report.

I went back out to the dayroom. It was nothing like the dayroom on Ward D. Ward B had a bare concrete floor and no TV, no pictures on the wall, no curtains over the barred windows.

But there were lots of people and they were all shouting except for the ones who were sitting in corners with their eyes closed. There was an orderly sweeping up broken glass. He nodded to me and kept on working.

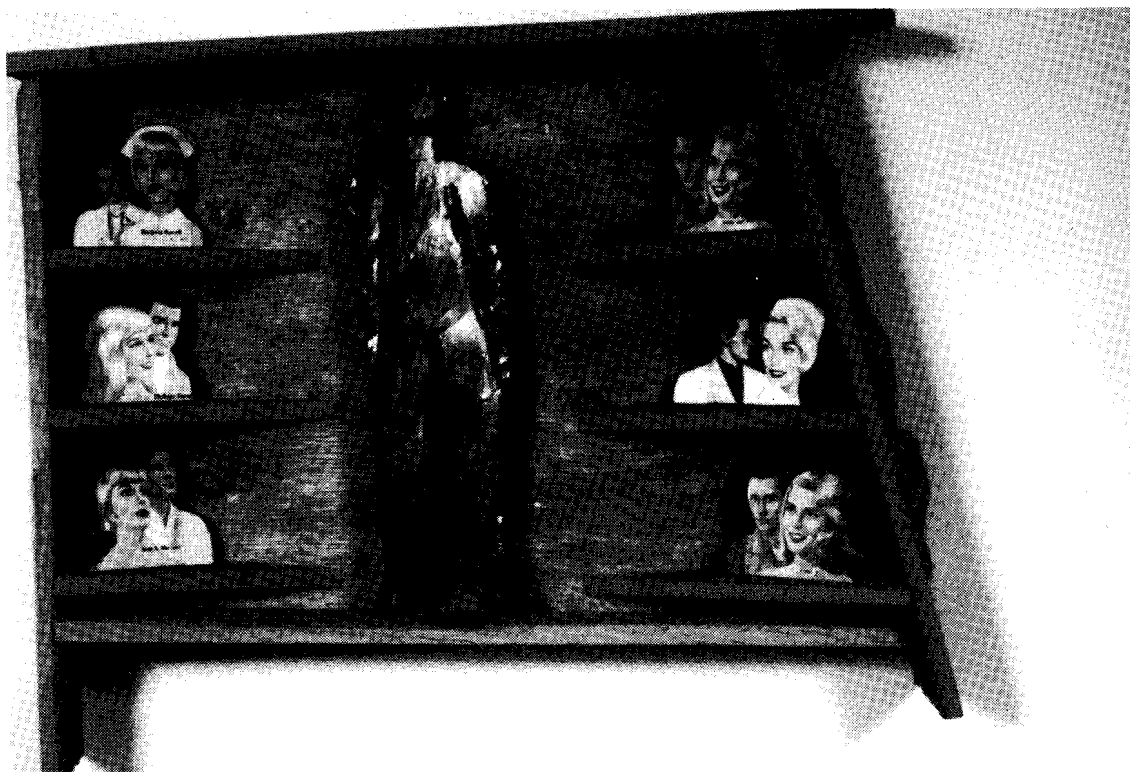
I went back down the hall, past door after locked door. One door had a window in it, with bars and safety glass. Inside, I could see a woman in a strait jacket.

The room was small and square, with a tiny high window that didn't let in much light. The woman was singing.

I stood there for a minute and then I unlocked the door. It locked behind me, automatically, like all the doors in Sunnybrook.

When she saw me, Janey started to scream, kind of a high quiet scream through clenched teeth. An anxiety scream.

I backed into the corner by the door, and we stood on our opposite sides watching each other. After a while she stopped screaming.



One of the best places in Sunnybrook was the staff washroom in the basement of the administration building. No one ever used it, not even the maintenance staff.

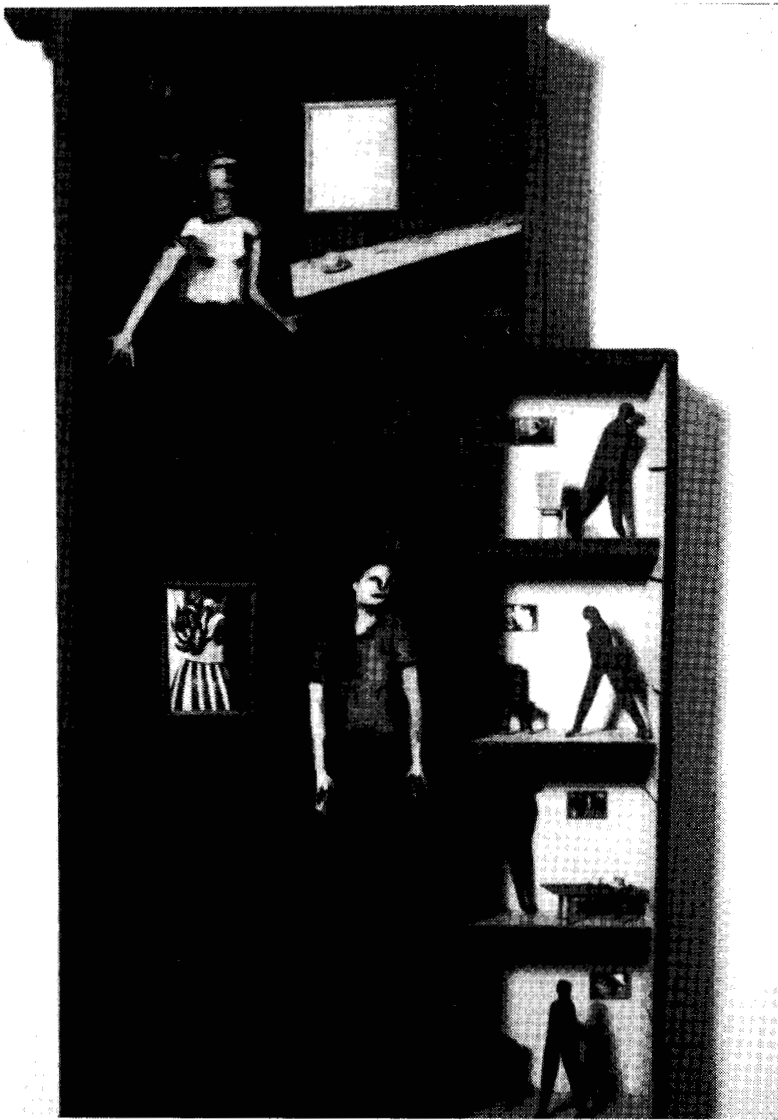
If you had keys you could go in there and close the door and know that no one would ever come in, or even knock on the door. I used to go down to that washroom for my breaks or even my lunch hour. I would just sit there, doing nothing, thinking nothing.

The only sign I ever saw that anyone else ever went there was when I found a book on the back of the toilet. It was called *Honeymoon for Nurse Holly*.

At first I ignored it, but when it was still there after a few days, I started reading it. It was a little bit boring, but also kind of soothing. Like you knew just what was going to happen, and you didn't really care.

Or maybe I would cry.

The story was about this woman Holly, who graduates from nursing school and comes to work in a big hospital. Right away, she starts having trouble with this handsome but arrogant doctor.



"Jesus, Persimmon, it makes me so mad!" my girlfriend said, typing furiously on my weekly report.

"Mary doesn't belong in that place!"

"None of them do," I said.

"Well yeah, but Stuart and Janey...it sounds like they really are seriously brain damaged. You know? And Mary isn't."

They shouldn't be in that place, I thought to myself. After a few minutes, I said it out loud.

"Yeah, but what's the alternative?" my girlfriend asked. "Do you really think they could get along in the outside world?"

I was silent for a long time and then finally I said, "Things could be different. Like big things. It's possible."

"Yeah," my girlfriend said. "Don't hold your breath."

The reason she called me Persimmon was because it was my other name, the name my friends called me. No one but shrinks and landlords and people at work called me Diane.

She could type and talk at the same time. It was impressive.

I had already considered this problem. It was the main unworkable element that had forced me to abandon my kidnapping scheme.

Janey, your
arms are
scar on scar.
Toothmarks
track you
layer on layer
year on year.
I've seen you
tear your
skin to blood
and skin
is strong.
How can
someone
bite
that hard?
I guess
you use what
you can get.
I use
a razor.



I was finished for the day, walking across the grounds and down to the main gate, like every day, the long walk down to the gate, clutching my keys.

I had a key to the main gate. I could get out. I could leave whenever I wanted to. I wasn't an inmate.

Dr. Carlson told me I was doing a good job. At our last meeting, he said the nursing staff was pleased with my work. He said he liked my reports. He acted like it was really true.

Maybe I was doing a good job. I considered that possibility as I walked down to the gate. Maybe they'd keep me on, even after the government took away their one to one counsellor money. It could be real, like a career, and not just one more in a long series of short jobs.

I could take night school classes, even. My girlfriend could help me type papers, and I could learn how to write things with footnotes.

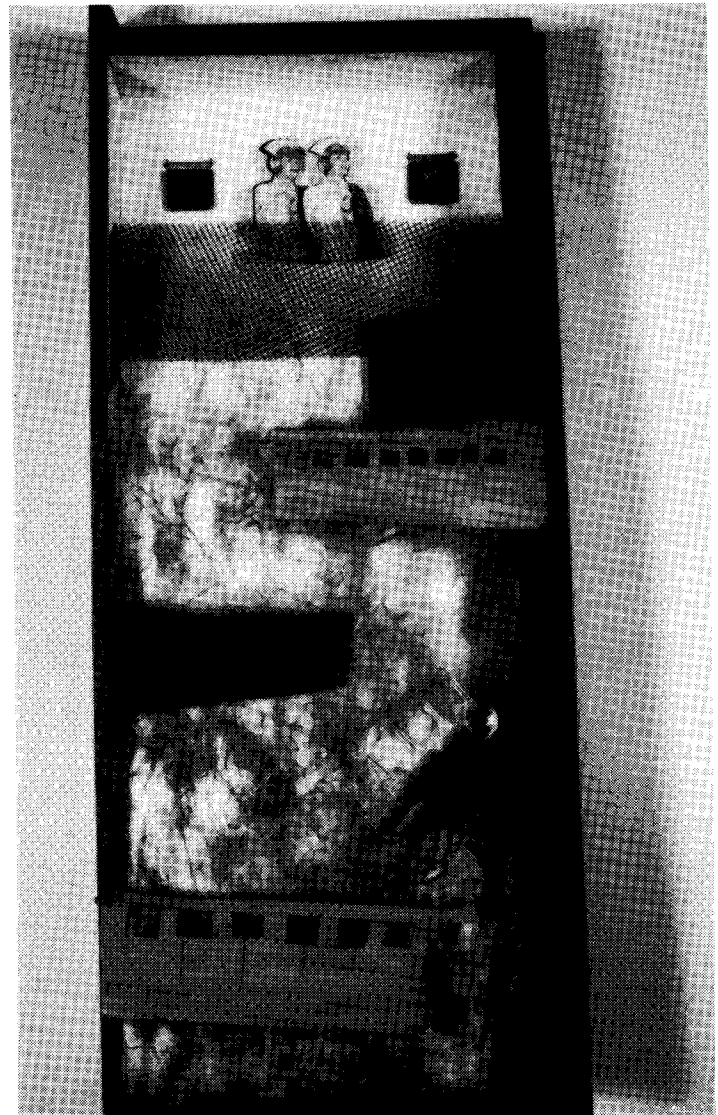
And look up things in the library.
And read serious books.
And memorize things for tests.

Or maybe I wouldn't take a class. Maybe it would be ok if I just kept faking it. They seemed to like the way I was faking it, so far.

There was a security guard near the gate. If he asked me what I was doing, I'd tell him I was a staff person going home. I'd show him my keys. I'd quote Shakespeare: *Out, out, damned spot. See, I know Shakespeare, I'm on staff, I can prove it.*

The guard nodded to me as I unlocked the gate.

"Goodnight," I said, with my best Nurse Holly smile, and made my escape.



You can do it. Come on. Everyone has trouble at first. Just try. Just try harder. You're not trying. You're lazy. You're selfish. You're irresponsible. Just try. Try harder. You're not trying.

Sunnybrook is not written from the perspective of a good-intentioned social worker. It is written from the perspective of a woman with learning disabilities (myself) who fakes her way into a job at an "institution for the mentally handicapped." Sunnybrook isn't about a sympathetic staff person who disagrees with the hurtful things that she is required to do to inmates—it's about a person who is required to do the same hurtful things that were done to her, in order to keep a job that could be her ticket out of the minimum wage ghetto.

Persimmon Blackbridge has worked as a part-time housecleaner and a part-time artist for the last fifteen years. Sunnybrook was recently exhibited in the Charles H. Scott Gallery at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver, B.C.

Artwork used within the sculpture by: Shani Mootoo, Jo Cook, Deb Bryant and Susan Stewart