

Babel raises some towering ideas

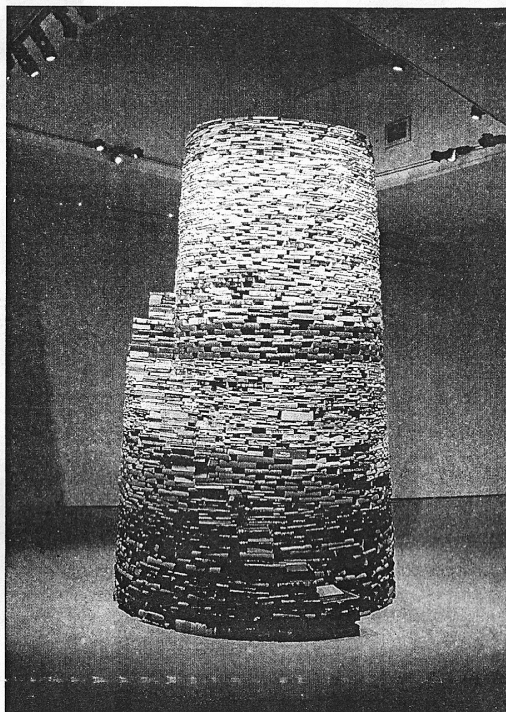
GALLERY GOING

GARY MICHAEL DAULT

In order to mount her exhibition, Babel, now at Toronto's Koffler Gallery, senior curator Carolyn Bell Farrell took two already brilliantly realized bodies of work, by Toronto artists Tom Bendtsen and Simone Jones, and juxtaposed them. The whole of Babel is greater than the sum of its parts, but the parts are terrific.

Let's think of the Bendtsen work as the first part. His piece is called *Argument #6*, and is a spiral tower more than three metres high, carefully built from 7,000 stacked books. Stepped as well as spiralled, the tower appears to offer the viewer the possibility of a dizzying climb, up and around and around and up, into the realms of light provided by the gallery's skylight high above. This is a possibility that gives one pause, however, when you consider how the brick-like books have been laid atop one another (the mortar here is simply gravity's downward crush) and how you can see the chinks between them. The tower is, in fact, both monumental and epic in scale, and at the same time is fragile, tenuous and propositional.

Bendtsen clearly knows something about architecture — or is it engineering? The load-bearing books at the bottom are big, heavy, fat books: encyclopedias and reference books. And, as befits their role as foundation, they are sombre, serious and given to earthy colours. The fact that the lower reaches of the structure are banded with them makes these stalwart bedrock books read like rings in a tree, as if the venerable tower's age could somehow be computed, and its accumulated meanings interpreted, by noting their thickness and colour and placement. As the tower rises, the big reference books peter out and are replaced by scholarly books, then novels, and, near the lighthearted top, trashy popular romances.



Tom Bendtsen's *Argument #6* is composed of 7,000 books and is more than three metres high.

Where does this leave us imaginatively, metaphorically, symbolically? With rich possibilities for interpretation, I'd say.

Does reading and learning, lead to ascent? Or do we merely run roughshod over meaning in our scramble to get somewhere else? Is *Argument #6* a sermon in paper about how language and meaning fail us and how we fail them? Or is it

a hearty hymn to the way learning leads us ever upward toward wisdom? Is transcendence even possible? Or, like the workers building the biblical tower of Babel, are we doomed always to misunderstand one another as we blindly overreach ourselves?

The three Simone Jones works are also about transcendence, and about overreaching ourselves.

Jones, who is a visiting professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, makes mechanical extensions of herself: prosthetic machines that allow her to realize, in an endearingly clumsy and partial manner, her dreams.

Her handsomely crafted *Mobility Machine: Water*, for example, is a catamaran-like, strap-on vehicle that allows the artist to walk on water — or at least sort of shuffle laboriously over it. Similarly, with her Leonardo-esque *Mobility Machine: Air*, if the exquisite, slow-motion film accompanying the exhibition is to be believed, her wooden, dragonfly-like wings permit her to hover (sort of) above the ground.

So much work for so little payback. But how moving is the desire that powers these machines! How universally we wish, with Jones, to fly beyond our limitations. And how tragic-comic it is when we are always brought to earth. "A man's reach should exceed his grasp," wrote poet Robert Browning, "or what's a heaven for?" Or, as some wag rewrote the line, "or what's a metaphor?" Until Aug. 19, 4588 Bathurst St. 416-636-1880, ext. 258.

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VISUAL ARTS

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BABEL. To Aug. 19, Koffler Gallery, Bathurst Jewish Community Centre, 4588 Bathurst St. 416-636-1880, ext. 268.

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Jones's three works are about over-reaching ourselves. Her hand-somely crafted *Mobility Machine: Water*, for example, is a catamaran-like, strap-on vehicle that allows the artist to walk on water — or at least sort of shuffle laboriously over it. The whole of Babel is greater than the sum of its parts, but the parts are terrific.