

Michaele Jordana Berman: With Resolution Flaring

Commentary by Julie Oakes

The subject of the series *Cyborg, The Human Condition* is Michaele Jordana Berman's flesh and blood. Her daughter, Ramona, is so like Michaele Berman as a young woman as to bring to mind the word 'clone'. She is also so beautiful as to be worthy subject matter for further cloning as is hinted at in the recent *Cyborg* series. Berman, the artist, is therefore very present in the work but with degrees of separation. Berman, the artist, is tangential to *Cyborg, The Human Condition* and this provides a correlation between the large paintings from the seventies that are also featured in this exhibition and the *Cyborg* work. In both series there is insertion of the artist into the imagery in a manner that brings the message inherent in the imagery forward with more poignancy. This insertion of the persona acts much like the taking of a vow before the public. It attests to a moral and ethical commitment. It underlines her work. It is the bold insistence to wake up, take stock and notice. Berman challenges us to spar.

Berman planted her first punch with her exhibition *Oceans of Blood* at the Isaacs Gallery in 1976. She presented a pictorial documentation of the killing of whales, translated through her sensibility, which is a subtle sensibility. She had personally witnessed oceans of blood and the fleshy volume of slaughtered whales was for her, a painful awareness. Sensitised towards a more spiritual and less financially utilitarian take on the killing of whales, Berman reacted to her experience by painting the large works. She managed to formulate the imagery within succinct compositional structures and with a technique that was flawless. She depicted the massive killing, appropriately, on a monumental scale – a *Guernica* about whales – but whereas Picasso dealt his blow with the rough edged, masculine sword of abstract expressionism, Berman regarded her subject from the vulnerability of tears - both her own and the tears of whales. She air-brushed the scene, applying wisps of colour with a gentle touch, a caress to carcass. Berman eulogised in paint.

The response to *Oceans of Blood* is now historical. The sixteen foot painting, *I Cry Tears of Blood*, was acquired by the National Gallery of Canada and the exhibition was documented in *Sights of Resistance, Approaches to Canadian Visual Culture* by Dr. Robert J. Belton. Of greatest importance – the exhibition *Oceans of Blood* formed an indelible impression on those who saw the show. The paintings are huge, the subject was a current hot issue and the execution is note worthy. Alongside of these great works, inserted within them, stood the artist, as in *Drifting on Arctic Ice with Muktuk* where Berman is seen *drifting*

on the same flow as the dead whales – a young woman, soft spoken but firm, inspired, talented, intelligent, and intellectual. Berman has painted herself as spare and fragile but with resolution flaring as an aftermath of her traumatic witnessing. She has a piece of whale meat in her hand, as limp as a gauntlet ready to slap. Her face is a portrait of sad acknowledgement. It is the look that says, "They know not what they have done". It is a look that challenges as it forgives. This connection is made clearer in her self portrait, *Michaele*, 1995.



Although she had been recognised by the powers that be as a tour-de-force, Michaele Jordana Berman moved to the side. The premise of a humane perspective, spoken only to the culturally elite, fell short and so she stepped out into a limelight that was more accessible to a larger populace as the lead singer and lyricist for the new wave, punk band, *Michaele Jordana and The Poles*. Berman's stage presence was charismatic and powerful as the sylph-like, big-eyed woman opened the hearts and minds of Torontonians to environmental and social issues. Again, there was an acclamation of historicity. The persona, *Michaele Jordana*, became the memorable icon with her lyrics intoned as her audience widened. With attention to the lyrics, it became clear that the message she had been putting across with *Oceans of Blood* remained in tact as her appeal broadened. She was adamant in her reiteration of the damaging division between humans and the ongoing health of the planet.

Cyborg is a brilliant gelling of Berman's intense vision. It maintains her belief with a righteous perspective but it doesn't come across as a negative harbinger. Berman's main character, the wide eyed cyborg, discourages negativity even in the presence of human alienation for the fact that the beautiful, seductive female figure is derived from photographs of her daughter sets the tone that was established in *Oceans of Blood* for Berman's approach to the human condition is respectful. This is, after all, her own daughter and her sliced arm, inserted electrodes, wired and hooked up cyborg is still her child, her offspring. She is but a younger flower, a different spring or another 'take' in the cosmic movie

but she is also the same ethical and moral reminder to get real. Berman's digital paintings are made through many laborious manipulations that are as painstaking and precise as the airbrush work in *Candy* or the layering of colours to create the bloody blush radiating from the water in *Oceans of Blood*.

Berman presents us with a female avatar. There is a force behind the wide clear eyes of this female cyborg that attests to an impeccable aim. She will shoot if you come too close or poke too near her secrets. This female was created in her own likeness and she will roll more of 'herself' off of the assembly line. She is a Stepford wife who has no need for a husband for she is self sufficient. Yet this female that Berman has created is feminine and attractive with features made to lure and entrap. She is a siren whose feminine, intuitive song is so intense that self sacrifice becomes an option.

With the series, *Cyborg, The Human Condition*, Berman presents a state of being. This state is not necessarily the present, nor is it an unavoidable future. Berman depicts a potential. There is nothing didactic in her alluring imagery but ethics and morality are skirting around the periphery.

Cyborg, The Human Condition is a peek behind the veil. What is the pretty lab technician blocking us from witnessing in *Surveillance Station*? Her hand shields us from the process for on the monitors the cyborg is being implanted.

Berman is posing the essential question, one that has occupied artists, philosophers, scientists, theologians and those who continue to mull on humanity. What is behind the human condition? Who are we? This is the essential crux of ethics and morality. Humanity is defined as we attempt to answer.