

Margaret Priest: The Monument to Construction Workers

Margaret Priest's *The Monument to Construction Workers* (1993) is a giant backboard, endstopping the subtle, shifting pedestrian vectorings of the new Bay/Adelaide Park by Baird/Sampson Architects in downtown Toronto. The great horizontal plane of wall stands at the top of a massive system of ramps, and sweeps sideways from architect Barry Sampson's observatory-like greenhouse and superb tripartite waterfall over to the street seventy feet away. The monument is, as Priest has suggested, a sampler — a sculptural/painterly/architectural extrapolation of those framed passages of stitchery Victorian and Edwardian women once worked up to show off their proficiency with the needle.

The sampling offered in Priest's highly dramatic monument is a carefully ordered patchwork, a sort of architectural quilt, the giant panels of which are given over to a celebration of the skill and achievement of one or another of the building trades. Designed by Priest, and fabricated by members of the relevant trade locals, the twenty-five panels range

from aggregates of bronze pipe, zinc roofing, granite and studded sheet metal, through marshallings of brickwork and copper shingles, to picture-like surfaces of stucco, terrazzo, etched glass and so on. A certain number of neutral panels punctuate and aerate the collection, setting up — in tandem with a number of punched-out, see-through window "panels" — a quiet, rather ponderously pulsing rhythm, a majestic push-pull that animates the wall laterally at the same time as the individual panels perform their own pictorial advances and recessions.

Taking as its premise the idea that the city is fashioned from the structures we can see



Margaret Priest
*The Monument to
 Construction Workers* 1993
 Mixed media
 Photo: Steven Evans

and the construction we cannot see, Priest's program has been to turn the raw stuff of building inside out. It is as if these now almost glamorous construction tidbits were a sort of precipitate from the supersaturated densities of the towering office buildings that thrust up into the clouds all around this genial oasis of a park. "A parallel will be drawn," Priest has promised, "with the appearance of the city." And so it has been.

Gary Michael Dault