

Laura St-Pierre, Yves Louis-Seize
Litter and Loss

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Laura ST-PIERRE, Yves LOUIS-SEIZE : Litter and Loss

Tai VAN TOORN

Sculpture and installation art impact and are impacted by the physical dimensions and ambiance of exhibition sites. By orchestrating dialogues between art objects, architecture, space and lighting, sculptors elicit a range of affective and intellectual responses from viewers. Montreal's Circa Exhibition Centre is an independent artist-run centre devoted to displaying contemporary three-dimensional works that inventively inhabit and appropriate the gallery space. The latest event organized by Circa explores the potential of the gallery as both a container and a participant in relation to installations by showcasing contrasting means of integrating art works within an architectural environment. In one room, the Centre featured a six-part installation entitled *Dwellings* (2007) by Laura St-Pierre, a recent fine arts graduate from Concordia University who creates sculptural environments from found objects.

Le regard absorbé... à Aurélien (2007), by Quebec sculptor and ceramist Yves Louis-Seize, occupied the adjacent room. Since the 1980s, he has shown his works in North America and Europe.¹ The deliberate pairing of these artists reflects Circa's recent policy of fostering exchanges between emerging sculptors and established artists through group exhibitions.²

St-Pierre uses both garbage and the gallery as her sculptural media. *Dwellings* sprawls across a spacious exhibition site covering roughly 240 square meters. Her choice of materials consists of brightly coloured, discarded household items, including white bleach bottles, orange and blue plastic jugs, green, red and pink plastic caps, as well as rickety fragments of wooden furniture. The artist transformed the gallery setting into a whimsical, playful landscape of ramshackle structures by incorporating strategic parts of the room into the materiality of the installations. Consequently, the works both partially cover and emphasize banal details



Laura ST-PIERRE,
Dwellings, 2007.
Detail. Mixed media
installation. Photo:
Guy L'Heureux.

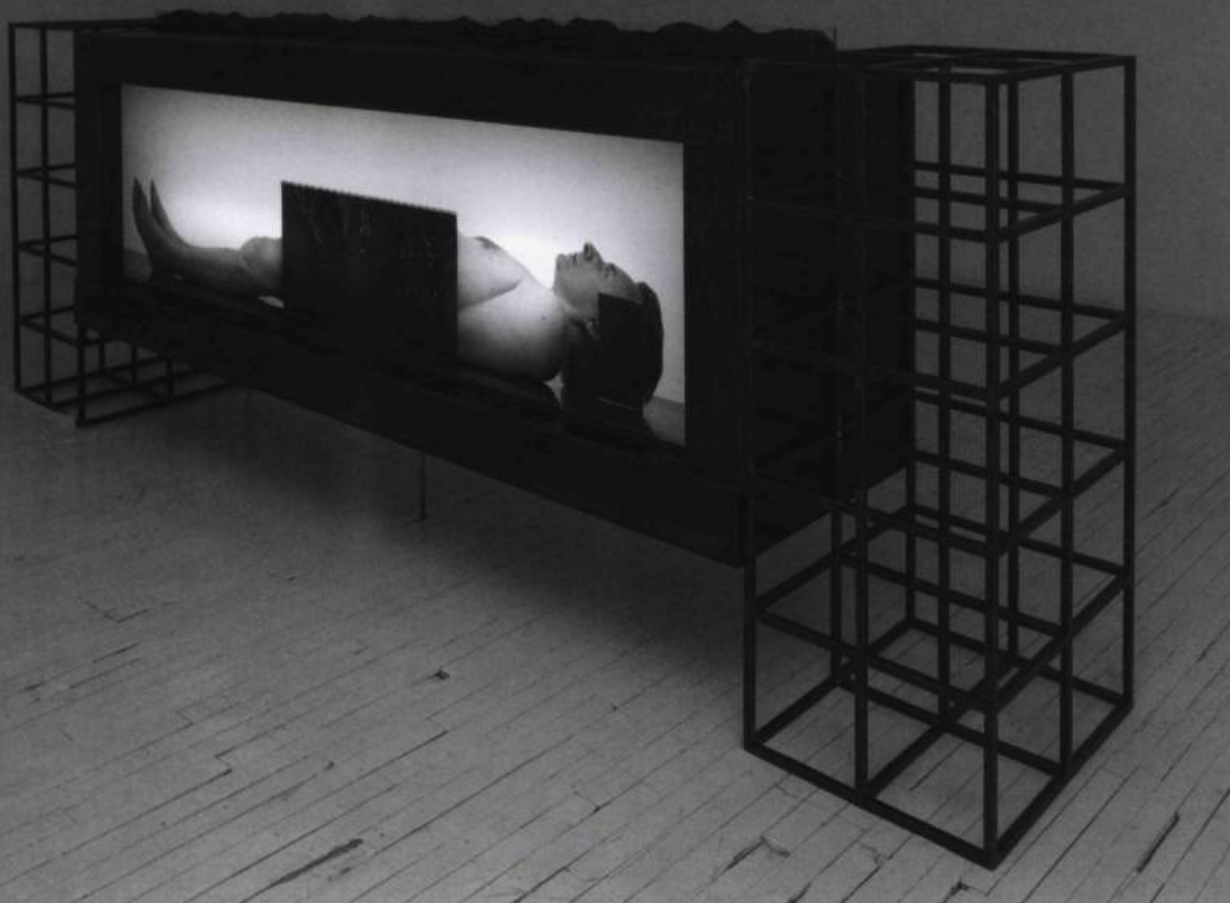
of the gallery's architecture often taken for granted. For instance, a heap of bottles and wooden slats appears unexpectedly at the base of an unadorned, anonymous column. In another installation, St-Pierre drew attention to the gallery's heating system: she had tied one end of a green string to a radiator and threaded the other end into a fence-like structure of sticks and planks ornamented by plastic lids. *Dwellings* makes full use of both the solid forms and

empty space which Circa offers: the works frame the entrance, sit on the floor, climb up the walls and occupy the corners of the room. A canopy of bleach bottles, evoking a tree house complete with a flimsy ladder, drapes precariously from the ceiling. Meanwhile, muted indoor lighting and covered windows contribute to an intimate, cozy ambiance for this fantasy realm/ eccentric playground appealing to the viewers' sense of curiosity.

Despite the levity pervading *Dwellings*, the works also probe the more troubling implications of household products. By recycling used objects, St-Pierre's work implicitly conveys an ecologically conscious critique of the materialism, expenditure and polluting waste of a post-industrial consumer society dependant upon disposable items. As critic Randall Anderson notes in the essay accompanying the exhibit, St-Pierre's work aims to "discover a



Laura ST-PIERRE,
Dwellings, 2007.
Detail. Mixed media
installation. Photo:
Guy L'Heureux.



Yves LOUIS-SEIZE,
Le regard absorbé... à Aurélien, 2007. Mixed media installation.
Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

utility for waste."³ Furthermore, the fragility of these miniature dwellings proposes an apt metaphor for the current state of the biosphere. Yet, *Dwellings* is not merely a straightforward attack against rampant consumerism and pollution. The works exude an irrepressible fascination with the aesthetic potential of the anonymous and the banal. Impersonal objects morph into unpredictable forms and configurations in the exhibition venue; familiar products acquire an unfamiliar new life as art works. All items have been delabelled, cleaned, meticulously attached with plastic ties and arranged in pleasing colour combinations. Clusters of pink and red caps ironically recall floral arrangements. Hence, the dwellings straddle the decorative and the dilapidated, the readymade and the ruin.

A sharp detour through a corridor leads to a site whose atmosphere departs strikingly from the cheerful *Dwellings*. In a smaller room, measuring one sixth of the larger gallery showing St-Pierre's creations, Yves Louis-Seize's *Le regard absorbé... à Aurélien* occupies an otherworldly zone. At the centre of a windowless room painted entirely in white stands a glowing, transparent sarcophagus enshrining a nude man. This container is actually a metal frame-

work whose sides are large-scale photographs illuminated by a light source inside the art work, recalling the light boxes of Canadian artist Jeff Wall. The surreal images depict the artist as if reposing inside the coffin, while opaque boxes shield his eyes and loins. Above him, a row of trees grows upside down.⁴ Dirt has been loosely placed on top of the "casket."

In a brief written statement, the artist explains that the installation presents an "introspective reflection on vision," created after the death of his father.⁵

Le regard absorbé interacts with the gallery's space primarily through lighting effects. This luminous coffin turns the surrounding room into an eerie, ceremonial space bathed in soft white light reflected by the walls and floor. Hence, the artist stages an ethereal, dream-like ambiance. As this chamber lacks distinctive architectural features, Louis-Seize incites viewers to turn their gazes away from the aesthetic barrenness of their surroundings to engage more intensely with the denizen of the enigmatic vessel. The title's reference to the absorption of vision refers both to the observer's experience of the work and the man's covered eyes. Such an obstruction of vision signals an exploration of the hidden depths of the life of the soul and the mind, detached from

outside reality.

By uniting the works of St-Pierre and Louis-Seize, Circa has crafted a subtle and thought provoking dual exhibition which experiments with the creative possibilities of diverse media, themes and aesthetic strategies for inhabiting the physical space of the gallery. The written documentation furnished by Circa for visitors, consisting of two pamphlets, concisely elucidates certain key ideas and intentions fuelling the artists' creations. However, these texts address each installation separately, thereby ignoring the creative dialogue that Circa originally intended to stimulate between the artists. Visitors would have benefited further from an explanation of the curator's motivations for juxtaposing these contrasting displays.

As a starting point, a few connecting threads may be woven between the themes broached by *Dwellings* and *Le regard absorbé*. Both works explore how human experience has been historically shaped by the body's relationship with diverse types of homes. As the title of *Dwellings* indicates, the forms of St-Pierre's fantasy structures are reminiscent of earthly abodes which temporarily shelter the body, such as tree houses, shanty town hovels, shacks, tents and igloos. Some of her installations also evoke parts of houses

that possess symbolic and psycho-analytical significance, including doors, gates and windows. While the *Dwellings* are delicate, ephemeral places of residence, Louis-Seize displays a solid, immobile vessel, a resting place mediating between the present world and the beyond.

In addition, these works address issues of time and memory. *Le regard absorbé* conveys a meditation on the passage and fleetingness of life while grappling with experiences of loss, mourning and melancholia. This introspective work is also preoccupied with recollecting and eulogizing the departed. Nevertheless, the living appearance of the body and the thriving trees imply a transition from the earthly realm to a new plane of existence. In contrast, *Dwellings* probes the life cycle of objects. The plethora of bottles and caps had reached the end of their brief existence as useful items and were discarded by their previous owners before being rescued from the litter heap by St-Pierre. Inanimate things, stripped of their mundane functionality, are thus reborn as art materials. By adopting different tactics, the artists challenge the shifting relation between installation art and the sites in which works are installed. ←

Laura St-Pierre, Yves Louis-Seize
Dwellings and *Le regard absorbé... à Aurélien*
Centre d'exposition Circa, Montreal
13 January to 10 February, 2007

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NOTES

NB All translations from the original French into English are by the author.

1. For an introduction to these artists and their work, consult their web sites: www.laurast-pierre.ca and www.yves-louis-seize.qc.ca.
2. Regarding the mandate and policies of Circa, see www.circa-art.com/historique/historiquetexte.gif. [accessed 1 February, 2007.]
3. Randall Anderson, "Dwellings: Le cercle des perdants." Translated by Maurice Achard. Exhibition pamphlet. Montreal: Centre d'exposition Circa, 13 January to 10 February, 2007.
4. The photograph on the other side of the work represents the same figure, yet lacks the presence of the trees and the box covering the man's eyes.
5. Yves Louis-Seize, "Le regard absorbé... à Aurélien." Exhibition pamphlet. Montreal: Centre d'exposition Circa, 13 January to 10 February, 2007.