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METALLIC PEACE : ALEX MAGRINI'S ARMISTICE

Alex Magrini, *Armistice*, Simera-Signe Galleries, Maastricht, Holland; Galerie Arte Coppo, Verviers, Belgium; Signe Gallery, Aachen, Germany; Galerie Koma, Mons, Belgium. 27 March - 11 November 1993

Alex Magrini's solo show *Armistice* ended its European tour at the Galerie Koma in Mons last November amid media attention,¹ conveniently organized to close on Remembrance Day in a city liberated by the Canadians during World War II. Magrini spoke to a crowd that had gathered at the construction site of Mons' future *Musée de la Guerre*. In the presence of representatives of NATO and the Canadian Battalion of the National War Museum from Ottawa, the Mayor of Mons and other government officials, the sculptor stressed the importance of his artistic and social endeavors. The *Guns-for-Art* campaign in Liège had been launched two days earlier and was proving to be more successful than that undertaken earlier in the year in Maastricht.² *Armistice* presented recent sculptures and installation pieces, as well as an album of four serigraphs entitled *Armistice 1993-19...*, a collaborative work involving three fellow Quebec artists, Jean-Pierre Gilbert, Michel Goulet and François Vincent.³ With the unifying theme of "non-violence," the firearm prevailed as object and theme.

By destroying guns to create art in times of peace, Magrini acknowledges the past while making amends with the present.⁴ His works deal almost exclusively with disarmament; moreover, the theme of violence is examined in relation to its many social conditions, from poverty to global conflict. Magrini complements his artistic creations by a *Guns-for-Art* campaign, whereby an awareness conference and a gathering of firearms with the aim of disarming the domestic household are undertaken in collaboration with the appropriate legal authorities.

The installation *Une malheureuse corne d'abondance* (1992) displays three revolvers, each piercing through a metal box, and placed along the wall at eye-level. Close by, a large and weighty cornucopia, though empty, totters atop the four thin and rickety legs of its support. The lack of symmetry, precision and equilibrium generates an inner dynamism within each component. Presented in their own metal casings, the revolvers stand individually as trophies of strength. As if detached from the whole, their permanence on the wall surface counterpoints the precarious position of the cornucopia. Beyond the formal elements, the issue of poverty and its problematic position in relation to the weapons and their potential violence prevails.⁵ The link between poverty (and hunger) and the violence of firearms is survival: humanity's quest to survive, with food and without crime.

The themes explored are communicated in a manner that does not limit them to a time or place. In *La pinède* (1992), the current social issue of native rights is addressed. Although directly related to the Oka Crisis of the summer of 1990, it pertains to the claim and unresolved quest for land of any North American Natives.⁶ Magrini comments on the fate of North American Indians who have been denied their riches, those of the land and their tradition. The message has a universal appeal to any native people who claim an inherent right to their past.

La pinède is a three-walled house with a rifle partially encased on each interior wall. The firearms have been kept whole, though rendered harmless by being soldered to the surface. The effect is striking and very suggestive of sentinels standing on guard. Once again, restraint is the key to understanding that violence may be a possibility. The fact that violence plays an integral part in deterrence and the defence of one's property or rights seems to be the critical message of this work. But the ownership and eventual intention of these weapons are called into question. They can easily be attributed to those who demand the pines, *La pinède*, or to the owners who are equally involved and armed.

Its small size (less than one metre high) does not deny a very sturdy and massive presence. This underlying ambiguity pervades Magrini's three-dimensional sculptures, for it beckons the beholder to circle the works, to view them from different angles, and to look closely at the textured and chromatic surfaces. Made of sheet metal, the apparent weight is deceiving. The inherent smooth appearance of this material is sanded and textured in hope of imitating polished cast metal. In some cases, the surface is enriched with a rich veneer of tints.

The unity and block-like composition of this sentry-box is broken by the inclusion of a sinuous, organic form. Tinted ever so slightly green, it recalls the location of the incident: the pine trees. Also reminiscent of the bow of an archer, it may further suggest the confrontational place of the traditional ways of the North American Indians in modern society. Once again, accentuated asymmetry occurs, keeping the viewer in a state of precariousness, where violence might play an integral part in the outcome.

Inspired by actual historical accounts or simply illustrating a recurrent form of violence present in our daily lives, Magrini sought beyond an inquiry of the *milieus* of violence to a better understanding of the psyche of the aggressor and victim.⁷ The feeling of restraint or temperance



Alex Magrini à Maastricht (Hollande), le 23 avril 1993.

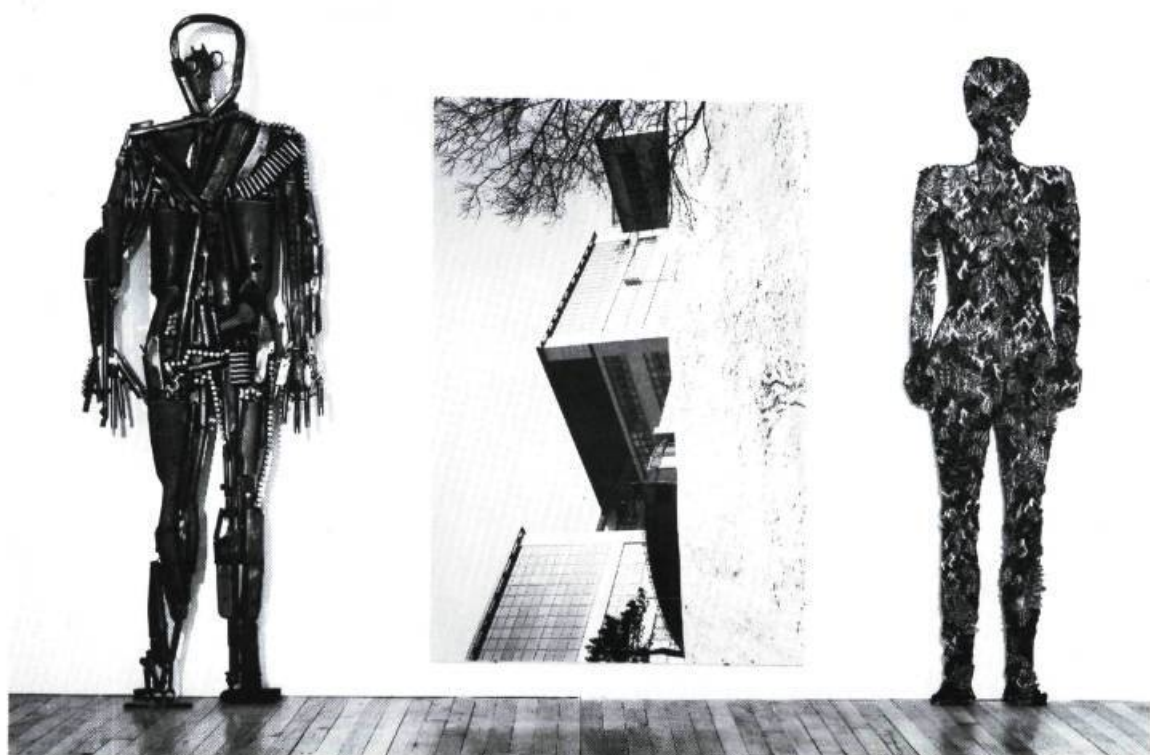
that permeates Magrini's works arises from his desire to address a variety of issues without imposing any solutions.

Nevertheless, his three recent sculptural groups⁸ assert the artist's position on homicidal violence and sexism. The most compelling is *Polydrame* (1993) which recalls the tragedy of fourteen women murdered at the Polytechnique of the Université de Montréal on 6 December 1989. In his exploration of the psychological drama felt by the victims on that fateful day, Magrini's imagery attempts to illustrate how these targeted women, selected on the basis of their sex, must have prayed for camouflage. Like a prey from the hunter, the female form hides under leaves. The pathos of the situation is heightened by the clearly identifiable silhouette and the artificiality of the leaves. The impossibility of hiding, of *not* being a woman, has been emphasized. The point is furthered by the juxtaposition of a photograph of the Polytechnique building; its concrete and glass rejecting any cloaking benefits offered by the foliage. Denied her identity and action, the female figure confronts the steel and wood assailant on the left - a hard, metallic, abrupt and crude shape made from cut-up rifles. The readily identifiable fragments serve as reminders of the original object and its function. The bodily entity constructed with the tool of the hunter has been clearly denoted as male. Magrini makes a

of the coldness and detachment of the aggressor in contrast to the more approachable female form. Her silhouette displays her arms set to her sides in a pose of resignation. Is she not committed to act for herself, or is she representative of anyone's inability when unarmed and faced with the menace of a firearm? The isolation of the individual components from each other accentuates the imperturbable detachment between the sexes.

By placing the photograph on its side, Magrini has once again given a moment of insecurity to the work. Even if the individual components appear steadfast, the lack of footing and horizon in the image causes viewers to reassess their position in relation to the work of art, that dreadful moment at the Polytechnique, and their own reality. This further disengages the two life-size figures and the beholder; consequently, all three become anonymous, identifiable only by their sex. The building remains devoid of any characteristic signs, identifiable only by those who are aware of the specific event and place.

Moving from the violence with firearms in the city, the beholder of *La cible* (1993) is faced with global conflict. A cut-up world map lies on top of a podium-like structure. Next to it, five gun shells are placed before a landscape photograph depicting a wooded area. Lacking any



Alex Magrini, *Polydrame*. Photographie en couleur, fragments d'armes, feuilles synthétiques sur bois.

distinguishing aspects, this place could be anywhere and everywhere. A tilt to the image appears yet again. This establishes a certain tension, which is amplified by the presence of warheads before, though not touching, the landscape. The small though unsettling shadows produced upon the photograph may well pinpoint the target, as suggested by the title. Magrini proposes that global conflict results not only in a “*planète éclatée*”, but also in ecological devastation.

The works appeal to the social consciousness and Magrini petitions the public to react. In the re-enactment of daily situations where the menace of violence is taken for granted, the sculptor always offers a promise of hope. The works of art cause us to reassess our views and we are summoned to act upon them. We are told that the problem of violence and its the solution lie in our hands. Beyond the sculptural form and the philosophy lies the action of disarmament. The gesture of a concerned inhabitant to surrender a firearm to the authorities⁹ or the ceremonial burying of weapons, as was undertaken at a Mons cemetery, where a Belgian child and a Canadian veteran respectively threw war toys and actual weapon fragments into a hole in the ground, go beyond the symbolic image of consummate peace and will, one hopes, remain a lasting renunciation of our belligerent past.

ROYA ABOUZIA

NOTES

¹Armistice began at the Simera-Signe Galleries in Maastricht last March. Then it travelled to Galerie Arte Coppo, Verviers, Belgium, and Signe Gallery, Aachen, Germany. Armistice returned to Belgium in October 1993 (Galerie Koma, Mons.)

²It should be clarified that Geert-Jan Driessen, owner of the Simera-Signe Galleries, had procured the approval of the Minister of Justice for a gathering of weapons. However, the Procureur-general halted this event due to a conflict with Dutch laws. In Holland, the law stipulates that the owner of an unregistered firearm is officially declared an outlaw. Therefore the hesitancy to surrender a weapon, even to the police authorities, has become compounded by a fear of condemnation.

³The introductory text was written by Louise Poissant.

⁴Magrini considers the *Colonne de la Grande Armée* at the Place Vendôme in Paris the foremost historical precedent for his creative intent. In commemoration of the Napoleonic victory over Austro-Russian forces at the Battle of Austerlitz, it was made with 1 200 canons taken from the vanquished. In turn, the monument is honoured in Magrini's serigraph.

⁵This concept was explored in *Entre la faire et la fin* (not exhibited) where two bags of wheat were placed before a dining table with two chairs (built chiefly with cut-up rifles). It implied the endorsement of violence over food for the hungry. (See cover illustration of ETC MONTRÉAL #16, Fall 1991.)

⁶Magrini's awareness of growing tensions at Kanesatake and Oka prompted him to create *Plumes d'Oka* (winter 1988-89), a large, organic, half-crescent-like object with red-tipped curved blades inserted along its upper edge.

⁷In *Le fireur tiré* (not exhibited), the conventional, though erroneous, idea of “immunity” to violence, as well as our definitions of hero and victim were reconsidered.

⁸The theme of camouflage and the confrontation between the sexes have been used in *Paysage d'hiver* and *Camouflage* (both 1993). The formula uniting a female silhouette covered with foliage, a photograph, and a male form built from rifle pieces has remained. The tropical environment in *Camouflage* may appear as the ultimate setting of natural disguise; however, the small female figure jeopardizes her cover by raising her arms, as in the position of arrest.

⁹Following a press conference held by Magrini at the Simera-Signe Galleries last April 23rd, the artist, accompanied by gallery representatives and members of the press, walked to the city's oldest bridge, where a symbolic gesture for disarmament ensued. A Maastricht inhabitant dropped his firearm into the Meuse river, and Roya Abouzzia in return, Magrini offered him his serigraph. These events made the front pages of two major Dutch newspapers, *De Limburger* and *Volkskrant*, as well as *The European*.