

**Manon Labrecque, *L'origine d'un mouvement*, AxeNéo7,  
Gatineau, April 1 to May 2, 2015**

**Judith Parker**

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Number 101, Fall 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/79823ac>

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**Publisher(s)**

Les Productions Ciel variable

**ISSN**

1711-7682 (print)

1923-8932 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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**Cite this review**

Parker, J. (2015). Review of [Manon Labrecque, *L'origine d'un mouvement*, AxeNéo7, Gatineau, April 1 to May 2, 2015]. *Ciel variable*, (101), 90–91.

The word “numinous” was coined by the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto and discussed at length in his highly influential book *The Idea of the Holy* (1923).<sup>1</sup> According to Otto, the numinous experience installs the *tremendum* that brings on fear and trembling, a quality of unfettered *fascinans*, the tendency to attract, fascinate, compel – and terrorize.

Somewhere between brutality and sophistication, Lefort shows the personal quality integral to the numinous experience, a feeling of being somehow in communion with something altogether outside himself, something replete with alienness, outside the circles of time, savage and unnameable. He succeeds in evoking the *mysterium tremendum* – the once and wholly Other – in his images of an unforgiving sea, and his own fragility in the face of it. The sea itself is the inimical Great White Whale, and the *Pequod* pursues it like a transcendent mystery across a radius drawn by the artist himself in space, time – and textures of light.

Lefort’s images seem to have been shot at the helm of a wave-drenched binnacle, with compass and octant close at hand, and all is in a state of irredeemable flux, as the ship pitches and rolls on the face of the deep and fateful cusp of jeopardy that is the open sea. The fact that he is in a kayak and not at the helm of a large sailing ship is not immediately apparent. There seems



*Abysses 2*, from the series *PEQUOD* ('pi:kwad), 2015, inkjet print on Barite paper, 102 × 81 cm

to be a porthole – a window, as the late, great photographer Charles Gagnon would say, between inside and outside, and, more importantly, between shifting epistemologies of seeing and seen. Serendipitous light leakage in the bellows

of his 4 x 5 camera yielded a ghostlike shape at the left side of the images, which seems related to an arm thrown up defiantly against the hegemony of the sea and the nameless perils of the deep.

He conjures out of raw experiences of being “at sea” a curious collision of the Romantic sublime and its Gothic counterpoint: Romantic because his quest for the numinous is heroic and enduring; Gothic because the observing self is obviously in jeopardy and subject to surreal visions and fractured perspectives. A palpable sense of threat and imminent collapse (capsizing) and vertigo hangs over all. To hold these very different species of the sublime in balanced counterpoint is no easy task. Yet Lefort makes it seem effortless – a bravura high-wire act second to none.

Here is a photographer bravely and even obsessively in pursuit of his own enigma, his very own Great White Whale; I mean, the numinous truth of the photographic image itself, and all that it conceals, implies, and portends.

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* [Das Heilige, 1917], trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923; 2nd ed., 1950).

The writer and curator **James D. Campbell** writes frequently on photography and painting from his base in Montreal.



*Touchée*, 2015, black-and-white HD video installation, drawing on tracing paper

The artist’s body as a site for the investigation of the internal dualities of the self is the subject of a compelling exhibition of video projections, kinetic sculptures, and drawings by Montreal artist Manon Labrecque. As she was trained in contemporary dance and visual art, many of Labrecque’s recent works engage the gesture of touch – the energy and physical contact between the hand and the body – to communicate a deeply sensed corporal and psychic experience of being.

Curated by Nicole Gingras, the exhibition occupies three spaces, each with its own distinct mood, media, and spatial presence. First, I stepped into a gallery infused with abundant natural light in which six oversized drawings (1.3 metres x 1 metre) on heavy paper, *Les uns* (2008–15), were displayed on slim easels arranged in the centre. Two drawings greeted the viewer; their primal human figures were sensitively rendered in the manner of an untutored child – but in fact were drawn by the artist with her eyes closed, relying on memory.<sup>1</sup> They conveyed a lively spiritual presence – a subconscious depiction of the self or, in this case, selves. For in each of the sinuously delineated graphite drawings there are two semi-

merged or semi-joined female figures, suggestive of psychic companions or the inner duality of being. One drawing is reminiscent of twins conjoined at the head and hip. In all of them, the unclothed bodies have exaggerated and enlarged limbs, hands, fingers, feet and toes, creating a sort of haptic map that traces the sensation of touch, feeling, and memory of the body itself. Fingerprints, handprints, smudges, and other direct hand marks in a vibrant range of oil-pastel colours, probably made with eyes open, accentuate and narrate these bodies. The marks include ovals above the head suggestive of coronas of light, inner female organs, and smiling lips that generate fields of positive psychic energy.

However, there is also a sense of unease and the uncanny in the dissolution or non-resolution of body parts in relation to the whole. In one horizontal drawing, a set of “twins” engage in a fight – bodies separate and fall, arms flail, and mouths grimace – it’s a primal battle of the selves. Interestingly, Labrecque’s title, *Les uns*, part of the expression *les uns et les autres*, meaning “one another” or “each other,” alludes to the forever intertwined and inseparable parts of the self.

## Manon Labrecque

**L’origine d’un mouvement**

AxeNéo7, Gatineau

April 1 to May 2, 2015

Following this introduction to Labrecque's artistic vocabulary, I entered a room with video installations. *Touchée* (Affected, Touched; 2015, 4 min. 50 sec.), comprises a small, intimate video screen suspended in space, visible from both sides, with a drawing of two hands on one surface. A slightly unfocused black-and-white video shows a woman in a plain dark dress (the artist), her eyes closed, her arms and hands outstretched, slowly moving and seeking with hand gestures a sketch of her hands in magenta ink – clearly visible in front of the viewer. Sensing her way, the woman eventually discerns the correct alignment of her hands on top of the drawn ones. How does she do this? Evidently, the artist has tapped into the capabilities of her haptic, sensing body.

A large video projection, *Apprentissage* (Apprenticeship; 2015, 5 min. 56 sec.), presents two overlapping and aligned representations of a mute woman. One, a magenta outline drawn directly on the wall, remains upright and static, while the other, a very blurred black-and-white video image of the same woman, a ghostly "memory woman," moves; she holds and feels her head and torso, then crouches and lies down in slow motion. The two bodies become misaligned but nevertheless remain joined at the feet. The now-motionless horizontal figure is suggestive of death, and the question of two selves also becomes one of body-memory connections that have inter-generational implications.

The third room presents three kinetic sculptural installations that lie still, dark, silent, and in waiting, ready to surprise the viewer who triggers their audio and visual sequences on entering the space. It's a bit like entering a carnival funhouse: the cacophonous



*Moulin à prières*, 2015, kinetic and sound installation

overlapping, amplified mechanical sounds and rhythms are insistent, playful, and nonsensical; moreover, the room is sporadically illuminated by rotating transparencies depicting fragments of a woman dressed in red, enlarged and projected on the walls. The works' title, *Moulin à prières* (Prayer Wheel; 2015), references Buddhist prayer wheels rotating on spindles, the same motion as the revolving still images of the artist. In one work, she covers her face with her hands; in the second, three rotating images show

hands gesturing – clenched, open, and extended as if giving or receiving; and in the third, two images separate the upper and lower body; they all swing rapidly into view and then recede as if flying through the air into darkness. The overall effect is ironic; what do all the mechanical gestures and rituals amount to? They appear empty of genuine spiritual meaning and speak more of alienation and dislocation, while nevertheless maintaining an honest individual human presence.

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**Judith Parker** is an Ottawa-based curator and art historian. Recently, she completed a residency at Elsewhere Living Museum in North Carolina and co-curated *Beyond the Edge: Artist's Gardens 2014* at the Experimental Farm, Ottawa.

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1 A description of the artist's drawing method is found in the exhibition statement, footnote 9, written by curator Nicole Gingras. Labrecque refers to these drawings as "sensation images."

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## Andrew Wright

### Untitled Photographic Pictures

Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Montreal  
March 20 to April 28, 2015

In recent years, Ottawa-based artist Andrew Wright has produced numerous bodies of work that propose new readings on the ontology of the image. In particular, Wright's exhibition at Patrick Mikhail's new Montreal gallery space, titled *Untitled Photographic Pictures*, presents a series of large-scale photographic works and two mixed-media sculptural works that underscore the artist's continued effort to use classical motifs and methods as a means to access broader questions concerning the medium of photography itself.

In this series of photographs, Wright opens up a rich interpretive space by taking the motif of the empty landscape



*Untitled Photographic Pictures*, 2015 inkjet print, 152 × 229 cm