

Gareth Lichy. Gabion Tower

Gabion Tower, Cambridge Sculpture Garden, Cambridge,
Ontario, September 2012 – September 2014

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Number 107, Spring–Summer 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/71948ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McElroy, G. (2014). Review of [Gareth Lichy. Gabion Tower / Gabion Tower, Cambridge Sculpture Garden, Cambridge, Ontario, September 2012 – September 2014]. *Espace*, (107), 64–65.

matière d'un édifice voué à la destruction?. Avec *Cathédrale*, Pocreau fait référence à Matta-Clark dans l'idée du geste destructeur qui attaque la surface lisse de la photographie. En fait, Pocreau travaille la lumière dans un contexte de galerie, détruit une image pour construire une mise en scène, s'éloignant ainsi du contexte dans lequel opérait Matta-Clark, c'est-à-dire sur des bâtiments existants. Si l'image de Pocreau avait été laissée telle quelle, sans artifice, elle n'aurait pas eu cet effet déstabilisant. L'emploi de la lumière artificielle ajoute de la profondeur à cette installation photographique. Les débris de la destruction, laissés au sol, donnent un indice de l'intervention de l'artiste sur le lieu et confère à l'ensemble un effet post apocalyptique.

Plus en marge, dans la même salle, la série *Traversée* réunit trois œuvres sous boîtier lumineux. Chaque œuvre est composée de cinquante et une cartes postales représentant les églises parisiennes de Saint-Laurent, de la Trinité et de Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, collées et découpées à la scie. Ces images superposées les unes sur les autres créent un volume que la découpe vient transpercer. L'artiste agit comme un archéologue qui cherche à faire émerger dans les strates du temps la lumière du passé. Celle-ci y jaillit en une fine ligne, se réfléchissant sur les parois de la vitre qui crée un halo faisant écho à l'installation photographique *Cathédrale*.

Autant dans ses œuvres du début que dans les plus récentes, Yann Pocreau opère un dialogue constant entre la photographie et l'architecture. L'intégration de l'installation dans sa pratique actuelle lui permet de sortir du cadre de la photographie en tant que telle, présentée dans des formats précis. En explorant également l'objet photographique, l'artiste interroge la nature même de l'image en soulignant son caractère construit, que ce soit par l'appropriation ou par d'habiles mises en scène de la lumière qui façonnent l'espace d'exposition. Avec ces *Projections*, Yann Pocreau tire un fil historique en réactivant les notions de lumière, d'architecture et de corps, propres au gothique. Le rapport au corps, celui du visiteur, est d'autant plus marqué qu'il est pensé en fonction du lieu. En ce sens, la petite galerie de la Fonderie Darling agit en tant qu'espace d'expérimentation permettant à l'artiste de créer un ensemble cohérent où la lumière devient le sujet principal de cette recherche fructueuse sur la spatialité.

1. L'artiste avait fait le même exercice dans l'exposition *Anarchitectures* présentée en 2012, à VU, à Québec. Dans ce cas-ci, il avait retranché une section du mur qui accueillait une de ses photographies. Cette soustraction de l'image, devenue alors objet, la déplace dans l'espace d'exposition pour révéler son caractère illusoire.
2. Ce bâtiment devait laisser place au futur Centre Beaubourg.

Manon Tourigny est historienne de l'art et auteure. Elle a rédigé de nombreux articles et textes pour des revues spécialisées (*Ciné bulles*, *CV photo*, *esse arts + opinions*, *Espace* et *Inter*), en plus d'écrire des opuscules pour différents organismes (centres d'artistes, centres d'exposition et musées). Depuis plusieurs années, elle s'implique activement dans le milieu des arts visuels, notamment au centre d'artistes DARE-DARE et à VIVA! art action. Elle fait partie du collectif de commissaires N. & M., qui centre ses recherches sur les collaborations, les processus artistiques et la contamination entre les artistes, les œuvres et le rôle même du commissaire. Elle travaille actuellement au Centre d'art et de diffusion CLARK.

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GABION TOWER
CAMBRIDGE SCULPTURE GARDEN
CAMBRIDGE, ONTARIO
SEPTEMBER 2012 –
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For an artist who is a sculptor by training, background and inclination, Kitchener-based artist Gareth Lichy does an awful lot of weaving. His work – typically large-scale and installational in nature – tends to foreground weaving in an aggressively sculptural way that transcends the quiet and aesthetically reserved two-dimensionality characteristically associated with the medium. So for a two-year site-specific installation mounted at the Cambridge Sculpture Garden, he utilized one of weaving's distant industrial cousins as the primary aesthetic element.

At first glance, *Gabion Tower* (2012) isn't an overly impressive work. Just under three meters high, it stands atop a slight rise of land in the middle of the garden. Some trees and bushes form a backdrop, shielding it from an adjacent roadway. A pathway curls around the other side, and a nearby bench offers a place to sit and contemplate the work.

But there's really not all that much to look at. Essentially, *Gabion Tower* comprises a thick metal pole that rises up out of the ground and is encased in what looks like a circular cage. This is made out of chicken-wire and becomes quite bulbous at the top of the work. It's a shape that's reminiscent of an old incandescent light bulb, or maybe an onion. Hardly stirring stuff.

But it's a shape that's ubiquitous in much of southwestern Ontario (and elsewhere, for that matter). In much the same way that grain elevators once distinguished virtually every community on the prairies, being by far the tallest things in town. In this part of Canada, the towns and cities tend to be distinguished by massive water towers that visually dominate their skylines. And they look pretty much like Lichy's work, though of course on a much larger scale and constructed of steel and concrete.

So Lichy has transposed a civic shape, sculpturally reworking it on the grounds of a small, pleasant urban park along the banks of the Grand River in downtown Cambridge. And here, unlike its bigger kinfolk, it really dominates absolutely nothing. It's far too small to do that; though rising higher than a person stands, it's still pretty tiny in comparison to the surrounding trees and nearby buildings. And the fact is, given its context – a small but lovely patch of reclaimed urban land overlooking a river – it's actually a bit of an aesthetically ridiculous-looking thing, comical, even. In many ways, *Gabion Tower* is the proverbial fish out of water.



But here's where the passage of time becomes critically important in terms of shaping a meaningful aesthetic response to the piece, and it has everything to do with what the sculpture is fabricated from. The almost make-shift chicken-wire appearance of *Gabion Tower* is actually due to its being constructed out of so-called "gabion baskets," woven-wire enclosures that are hugely important in the realm of civil engineering. Typically filled with rocks, these baskets, stacked one atop another and/or laid in rows, hold back hillside soil from eroding away, or safely channel the passage of water along rebuilt creeks or storm sewer systems. All but unnoticed, they are literally on the front line in terms of how our environments are reshaped to suit our purposes.

Which, at one level, is precisely what Lichy is doing here in the middle of a sculpture garden. This narrow green space, after all, is a relatively new phenomenon, displacing whatever had been here previous that displaced whatever had been here before that, etc. This is a constructed environment, deliberately reshaped to fulfill a specific role and for a

specific use. So why not make manifest that truth in an aesthetic way by working with one of the fundamental devices employed in making our remodelled landscape?

Problem is, though, that unless you know what a gabion basket is, and that Lichy has in fact used them to build his sculptural tower, you would very likely miss that level of possible meaning. The piece still looks like chicken wire wrapped around a tall pole. And finally, here's where time aesthetically figures in a very big way. In the days and months since its erection, the force of Nature has transfigured *Gabion Tower* through accumulation, into something of a large, rather oddly shaped trellis. Virginia Creeper, a species of ivy native to the region, was planted in the ground at the base of the sculpture, and over the course of time has grown up and through the work, using the woven wire of the open, unfilled gabion baskets as proverbial toe-holds as it makes its genetically predisposed climb upwards towards the sun.

And that, as they say, changes absolutely everything. Whole new levels of aesthetic meaning suddenly become available. *Gabion Tower* transcends its limited, slightly ridiculous-looking construction, and at last becomes something other. Now, it speaks to ideas and processes such as the entropic quality of the world, about how Nature inevitably reclaims our works, breaking through, for example, the carefully and expensively lain pavement of a roadway to flower into something we've tried very hard not to allow. Or, here in an expensively reclaimed bit of land in the heart of a busy urban environment, overcoming a sculptural intrusion by slowly, incrementally, and quite intentionally enveloping it courtesy of an aggressive species of climbing ivy. With *Gabion Tower*, Lichy has presumed to give Nature the final say; given enough time, little of his work would be visually evident to us, having been completely and utterly subsumed to the slow, quiet imperatives of the natural world.

And of course that means there is another form of weaving going on here, one that's way beyond Lichy's wired-together sculptural network of basketry. Nature has grown in and through and around it all, rerooting itself, just as intended via Lichy's simple, profound gesture of planting a seed that will, in a sense, utterly consume what he has wrought. The weave of the world has been made manifestly present.

Gabion Tower is about many things – some of them indeed purely aesthetic – but perhaps foremost amongst them is that it speaks volumes about letting go of artistic and aesthetic intentions, about the idea of allowing the negation of an artefactual thing. Here, in Cambridge, Ontario, in a small garden overlooking the Grand River, Gareth Lichy has all along been shaping a true aesthetic of disappearance.

Gil McElroy is a poet, critic and independent curator living in Colborne, Ontario.