

English Report

Volume 50, Number 201, Winter 2005–2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/52581ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN

0042-5435 (print)

1923-3183 (digital)

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Cite this review

(2005). Review of [English Report]. *Vie des arts*, 50(201), 74–79.

SACKVILLE, NEW BRUNSWICK

FULL SPACE: MODERN ART FROM THE FIRESTONE COLLECTION OF CANADIAN ART

28th October–18th December 2005
The Owens Art Gallery
61 York Street
Mount Allison University
Tel. 506-364-2574
www.mta.ca/owens

This exhibition features a selection of works from the Ottawa Art Gallery's Firestone Collection of Canadian Art and was put together by Emily Falvey, the Ottawa gallery's present curator who is a former Mount Allison University art history student. Falvey also edited the excellent catalogue for the exhibition that features two fine essays: one by Esther Trépanier, Director of the Ottawa Art Gallery, and the other by Gemey Kelly, Director of the Owens Art Gallery. Kelly's essay, *A Definite Image: The Representation of the Social in Canadian Art of the 1930's and 1940's* speaks to the essence of the exhibition which is the transition of Canadian art from its emphasis on the landscape to a focus on urban imagery. There are also works in the exhibition that invoke the beginnings of Modernism in Canadian art, mainly through the paintings of the Automatistes, but that Quebec-based movement occurred in the 1950s and outside the scope of Kelly's essay.

Canada, in spite of its vast wilderness, is an urban nation, however, the landscape paintings of the Group of Seven were central to how we saw ourselves as a nation in the first three decades of the 20th century. Increased urbanization and the Depression were to change that vision. In this carefully curated exhibition these changes are reflected through art. The large Firestone Collection is the cornerstone of the Ottawa Art Gallery's collection and, in fact, has a very large number of Group of Seven works. Falvey looked at the less popular, but important, works in the collection for the exhibition, such as the urban landscapes of underrated Montreal artist Philip Surrey. Many of these Surrey works are Montreal street scenes of working class neighborhoods. Social

Realists, and Surrey is a prime example, are often overlooked in our art history. It is easy to see why as many of their works appear drab when compared with the easy going landscapes of the Group of Seven. A little ink and watercolour such as Surrey's *Factory*, which is in the exhibition, is not the kind of thing many collectors of the time would have liked to put on their walls when they could have lovely landscapes. Social Realism also later lost out when it was identified with Marxism, Communism and Socialism, but there was a period prior to the Second World War when many of our artists clearly identified with these very values. The Red scares of the 1950s and the post war boom changed all of that, and our artists had to look elsewhere—that where was Modernism.

This exhibition has three very fine small paintings by Jean Paul Riopelle, Paul-Émile Borduas and Marcelle Ferron, all done between 1955 and 1958. In fact, all the works in Full Space are modest in scale which, to my mind, is not such a bad thing, as it proves that artworks to not have to be large to be important or good. The three works by these Automatistes clearly demonstrate a new direction for Canadian art in the 1950's. It is pure abstraction and painting for painting's sake, with no reference to social issues. This is not to say that these artists were not interested in social issues. Their art was very much a part of the Quiet Revolution that was to follow in French speaking Quebec, but that is a whole other topic and there is no room here to get into details. Borduas and his followers are a very important part of the history of Canadian painting. Borduas could achieve results in a small painting, such as his *Formes oubliées*, 1958, in this exhibition, that many other Modernist painters could not in wall sized works.

There are other pictures in the exhibition by artists who were well known in early second half of the last century such as B.C. artists Jack Shadbolt, who is represented by two fine paintings *Night Harbour Image*, 1959, and *Italian Town*, 1961. These paintings are more abstractions than the non-objective works of the Automatistes, but they are Modernist paintings none the

less and strong ones at that. Along the same lines are a pair of early paintings by Fredericton, New Brunswick artist Molly Lamb Bobak, who is one of the few artist in Full Space, if not the only one, who is still alive and active. The artists in this exhibition were the familiar names in the Canadian art world when I moved to Canada in 1967 to teach art at the University of Alberta. Now they seem to have faded from sight and become footnotes in the art history books. They are better than that and this exhibition was a good way to look at them again and understand how modern art came to the fore in Canada. Contemporary Canadian artists owe a debt to these pioneers who deserve a hard second look.

Virgil Hammock

QUÉBEC CITY

LUDMILA ARMATA: LETTERS FROM THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

Engramme
501, rue de Saint-Vallier Est

At the heart of matter there is matter. At the core of the earth—there is some unseen force, an energy that abounds. We can only imagine what the sources there are or could be. We cannot define, have never seen the centre of the earth. Nevertheless the seismic shifts and tectonic plate movements affects our lives. However brief in intensity, these phenomena can generate tsunamis, earthquakes... Ludmila Armata's *Letters from the Centre of the Earth* series (2005), her etching *Poem from the Centre of the Earth* (2005), the *Shadow & Shape* series (2005) created in boxes with pins and fragile tiny cut-outs a la *Henri Matisse* in white paper on black and *vice versa*, or black on black and white on white are like entomological and exemplary exercises in aesthetics. Also on view are the large scale *Tectonica* (2005) series of etchings that can be assembled in a variety of ways on a wall. Armata's *Tectonica* series emphasizes the surface of things, and the traces that are felt or even left by energy, even the way life's traces are ultimately ephemeral and exist at a moment in time, or can be



left behind after the life has ended. They also interpret all powerful earth forces, as registrations, tiny lines and exaggerated striations. The surface may be that of an artwork for the artist, but the carries allusions to more universal physical forces. Whether in biology or geology, or astrophysics these forms are transitional as they are universal.

Working on steel plates, or delicately assembling miniature works in boxes after cutting them out, Ludmila Armata integrates a sense of time, of the density and shape of time, and of the perpetual changes that seismic movements enact, as much sound as matter. The seismic shifts on the surface of earth become a digital dance, with scatological notations, scratchy effects,... vertical vortices open up and then close. There is a repetition of line in many variations. The lines are like voices that speak to us from some distant and inhuman, less than conscious source. The ongoing change is an effect of motion, or affect of energy. All this passes through the earth and is paraphrased in Armata's art. Energy moves towards a surface and speaks to us, Armata's art seems to suggest. The energy, eventually moves onward, and dissipates, dissolves altogether. Her art has this aspect of sensitivity for the dissolution of things, even of histories, and this is the personal and autobiographical part of her art, all abstract even so. What a metaphor for life itself! With this art, we can fully understand how time can be a metaphor for life, (particularly as it affects the physics of the world we are in).

Ludmila Armata has created a body of work that not only references the unseen, the invisible by drawing sometimes fluid, other-times nervous, very physical motions in a push and pull tug of war battle with the surfaces and density of the matter she makes her art out of. Her art achieves this resolution of the elemental and primordial, and elucidates on nature's essential force with a visual eloquence that is based on observation of very real things—the geological layers, the chasms of a gorge, the layers of things, even the growth form of a mushroom or tree root. We sense that life does not ultimately imitate art, but that art can imitate life in Armata's *Tectonica* works. We see here a visual language that often resembles what we discover around us in *landforms*, or *growth forms*, or body details, and cannot put to words, or in images. There is also a conceptual edge to Ludmila Armata's play on and with variations of surface effect, energy and design. The cartoon-like character that emerges as a description of effect is an aesthetic that seeks to build bridges between the mind-body split. Armata achieves this with a tactile and visual interweave.

Letter from the Centre of the Earth is a show that proposes a communication between elements of nature, including ourselves. These forms are ultimately not abstract at all, but as hidden poetic epigrams from some concealed space, even an existential place of origin, Armata's artworks are symbols of intuited experience. As mediaworks, these works on paper challenge the stereotypical belief that technology is the only source for contemporary artistic process. The physical and natural world is a very real source for art as *Letters from the Centre of the Earth* makes clear.

John K. Grande

MONTREAL

URBAN TERRITORIES

Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
October 7, 2005–January 8, 2006
185, rue Sainte-Catherine Ouest
www.macm.org
Tel. 514-847-6226



Pavel Pavlov
Paysage avec cabanes II, 2004 (detail)
Digital color print
35 x 45cm

Curator Réal Lussier's approach emphasizes the historically close relationship the city and its environs have had with the medium of photography: the flat, documentarian approach of photography has always melded well with the rapidly shifting constructed environment most of us inhabit.

Isabelle Hayeur, Pavel Pavlov, Miriam Yates, Christian Barré, Emmanuelle Léonard and Martin

Désilets are all represented with their various takes on the city and it's discontents, as well as it's startling, harsh beauty and disorienting vision. With largely new contributions, three of the six have contributed works in medium that is now almost a contemporary museum cliché: video installation in an hermetically sealed environment.

Pavel Pavlov has the most intriguing offering, melding medium and subject in a video installation entitled *Drive-In* (2005) from the point of view of Angrignon Shopping Center's parking lot. Four numbered light poles fix the center of each projection, surrounding the viewer. As the landscape dissolves and changes slowly, a new perspective emerges from the same parking lot, but in a different position with suddenly differently numbered poles that retain the same position on the screens.

The effect of traipsing through various states of urban space—both temporal and mental space—is again represented in all the works present. Isabelle Hayeur's large digital prints of cityscapes and construction sites are endowed with an eternal Wagnerian gloom effected by digital intervention. In *Nuit Américaine* (2004), a scrappy condo building site is given a twilight-of-the-dodge-tool effect, a deliberate romantic's touch on a mercilessly shifting environment.

All the artists represented address urban space in what seems to be a largely romantic way that belies the harsh technological medium utilized. *Urban Territories* leads the viewer's nose through the nooks and crannies of the contemporary western cityscape, offering up surprisingly new odors.

Cameron Skene

VIVA VITTORIO !

Maison de la Culture Mercier
October 22nd–January 8th 2006
8105, rue Hochelaga
Té. : 514-872-8755
www.ville.montreal.qc.ca/maisons/maisons.htm

Born in 1932, Vittorio Fiorucci, widely known as Vittorio, moved to Montreal in 1951. Upon his arrival, the young photographer, caricaturist, and poster artist met a wide

spectrum of artists such as Robert Roussil, Armand Vaillancourt, and Jean-Paul Mousseau, among others. Largely self taught, Vittorio defies categories, yet helped to pioneer a certain bold pictorial and symbolic style. This exhibit is a must-see retrospective that begins with Vittorio's early graphics and photographs, and traces his career through to his recent contributions to the world of cinema and theatre. Vittorio the artist worked with and for the best and the brightest minds and creators of the 1950s and 1960s. This show is a national treasure trove of documents related to the Pop culture explosion in Montreal during that era.

In an enclosed chamber are an exquisite array of large size photographs of a nude, and portraits of models in classic 1950s garb. These photos are of the finest calibre both compositionally and in their tonal range. Along the perimeters of the gallery are a selection of Vittorio's masterful posters announcing the work of an artist or theatre production, or even a 1976 Olympic Games proposal. One salient characteristic of his work is an unabashed exuberance for form and the mystery of association between symbols. Of course, Vittorio's irascible caricatures for the Just For Laughs Festival are included, but what's most appealing are his visual puns.



For the International Exposition of Pornography (1967) a female torso against a pink background has a key shaped exclamation point. On her belly is a Napoleonic hat and a circular eye alluding to some male gaze. Funny, and to the point, the poster gets you even though it has been through the so called politically correct meat grinder. The aftertaste still lingers, and it is a good one.

Isak "Beau" Augustine

ZILON/SONIC2 PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS: IN GOTH WE TRUST

November 2nd–20th
Galerie Yves Laroche
4, rue Saint-Paul Est
Tel.: 514-393-1999

Renowned Montreal artist, Zilon, has attracted many fans and detractors alike over his bold handling of controversial themes and imagery over his career. This exhibition at Galerie Yves Laroche is an in-your-face tour de force. About ninety large and small paintings and drawings line the walls in available spaces in the gallery. Much of the imagery is a continuation of work done in the beginning of the 1980s, with various forays into Goth and death imagery, and photos scrawled with text.

Zilon has been called the "Cocteau of the Back Alley", an apt description for an artist who gained early notice for his ghostly face portraits seen all over the downtown of Montreal. They became a very visible signature of his handiwork. In an interview, Zilon remembers being in a Montreal basement nightclub early one morning watching gay men having sex and shooting up drugs. The sight compelled him to paint a face on a wall, signifying a redemptive angel in the midst of decadence and misery. This "presence" of the face acts as a mediaval putti might in a Renaissance scene of violence and destruction. In the present show, the face theme runs abundantly through much of his works. The linear face images circumscribe the associations suggested by the other works dealing with sexual, political, and fashion victim issues very effectively.

As a working artist, Zilon has an obvious fascination for the morbid, but a respect for the underlying black humour beneath the dramatic content. Along one gallery wall one can see a series of silver, black, and red works done in high Gothic camp. *Les Freres Maudites*, a comic like portrait of two boys in black under a silver atmosphere. Smiling, they look like a mischievous Edward Gorey creation. Blood trickles down one of the boys' chins. Other such works on the theme of death and doom line the same wall. Rooted in the gay aesthetic of fashion and outrage at injustice, Zilon writes text upon a photo of a sports car... "Garage Beton/\$ex Pla\$tique/ Blow Job/Univer\$ell/Action/Anarchie/Super Marche?BigBigBu\$ine\$\$."

Whether the subjects of Zilon's love and hate are AIDS, global destruction, fashion victimhood, S&M, or all of the above and more, the man's staying power over the years is remarkable. Painter, filmmaker, musician, poet, and designer, Zilon addresses society's ills, and his own obsessions, with vital insouciance. In another age, he might have tackled these mandates like Daumier, working representationally. However, Zilon mediates his environment by fixating on narcissism. For him, this is the only permissible aperture through which change can occur—the adolescent gaze. Zilon is a punk musician who plays his paintbrush like a violinist.

Isak "Beau" Augustine

I AM PHOTOGRAPHS: GABOR SZILASI

Les Impatients
100, rue Sherbrooke Est
www.impatients.ca



Gabor Szilasi is one of our best-known photographers. Remembered mostly for his panoramic shots of Monet's *Giverny* gardens commissioned by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, he is at his strongest when focusing on the human condition. Whether documenting rural Quebec, or exploring portraiture, his sensitivity to what lies behind the image transforms his black-and-white photographs from narrative to homage.

This intuitive sensibility underlines Szilasi's latest exhibition at Galerie Les Impatients. Organized in collaboration with la *Fondation pour l'art brut et l'art thérapeutique du Québec* which houses the exhibition space, the show presents a series of photographs of the patients that seek art and music therapy at the centre. A project that took close to a year saw the photographer participate in the daily sessions, discreetly taking his celluloid notes. The result is a moving pantheon of figures, unique human beings making up the *I am* series, faces that will remain with the viewer for a long time.

Who am I? That basic philosophical question remains unanswered. Perhaps the answer lies in the search itself, these pictures suggest. This intensity, and the need to understand and be understood, is but the first impression one gets from the photographs. Behind it are layers and layers of tangled personal history, of joys and despair and hope. One must have hope to pose with such faith for an invisible eye of the lens, to allow to be seen. It is to the credit of the photographer to have made friends with the damaged beings that turn to art for solace and companionship, thus priming them for the shooting sessions.

No premeditation was employed, and Szilasi even allowed some of the models to take the picture themselves by pressing a remote button. "With those who were reserved and shy I made no attempt to put them at ease, preferring to capture their timid expression—their real character—on the photographs," Szilasi comments in the exhibition catalogue preface. These people are young and old, male and female, some look perfectly happy, even casual, while others have the haunting look of the lost.

Art brut that gives name to *Les Impatients*, is a term coined by French artist Jean Dubuffet to describe art made by those outside of the established art world, children, loners, prisoners, people with psychiatric disorders. Outsider art, as it is commonly known in English, is characterized by spontaneity and originality, unfettered by tradition or training. Szilasi approaches his latest series with the same intuitive abandon, allowing the sitter to "become" an artistic portrait naturally, without a preconceived strategy or posing. The photographs have been compiled into a book form catalogue titled *I am; Gabor Szilasi's journey into a world seldom visited*. The catalogue includes drawings and quotes by the patients Szilasi photographed. That section adds a powerful new dimension to viewing the series, making this creative project more than just an artistic endeavour.

Dorota Kozinska

BOBBIE BURGERS: CULTIVATING THE SOUL

December 8-19, 2005
Galerie de Bellefeuille
1367, avenue Greene
www.debellefeuille.com

To call a painter decorative seems like a slight. Yet, ultimately, all art becomes a decoration once hung on a wall, be it still life or abstract. After what seems like an eternity of conceptual, often visually disturbing trends, young artists are focusing once again on producing works that please the senses, in the process rediscovering the endless inspiration of nature and the pure joy of painting. Flowers, the most graceful of subject matters, have been painted by artists from the very beginning, and their captivating *ethereal charm endures*. Imbued with myriad interpretations, from religious to sexual, they are the epitome of perfection, seducing and stimulating the creative imagination.

From van Gogh's psychedelic sunflowers and elegant irises, to Georgia O'Keefe's stylized petals, they weave through the history of art like a colourful organic thread. B.C. artist Bobbie Burgers picks it up with flourish, immersing herself in



the heady palette of her own garden, spilling the bouquets harvested by her eye onto the canvas in great gushes of flora. Her latest series of works, on display at Galerie de Bellefeuille, offer a visual feast, where what we see trickles into our psyche like sweet honey.

Flowers, and nothing but flowers; in all their glory, spilling out of vases, strewn petals in abandon, jostling for attention in a flutter of multi-coloured floral orgy.

Painted from flowers growing around her house, "things that appeared miraculously", these acrylic on canvas works look like fragments pared off from Renaissance paintings or those of the Dutch Masters. "It is about the dialogue between nature, its mysterious ways, how the beauty of it feeds the soul, and how there can sometimes be divine intervention," the artist says of the series. "These paintings try to capture the spontaneity of nature's ways and the glory of 'giving birth' to something so beautiful." Most of her compositions focus on lush tops of lilies, irises, peonies and so many others, their various shapes and colours offering endless visual entertainment. Textured, fluid, painted with sweeping brushstrokes, the flowers in Burger's works speak unabashedly of beauty. These paintings are slivers of an endless mosaic, interchangeable yet unique. Together they form a dense tapestry, delicately

textured and infused with light. Burgers is a marvelous colourist and an accomplished technician. Her canvases are boldly executed, the composition solid, leaving spontaneity and play to their floral subject matter.

Dorota Kozinska

OTTAWA

CHRISTOPHER PRATT

National Gallery of Canada
September 30, 2005–January 8, 2006
www.nationalgallery.ca
1-800-319-ARTS

Renowned for having designed the Newfoundland flag, Chris Pratt and his wife Mary are painters of the super-realist mode *par excellence*. His compositions have been emblazoned into the Canadian psyche, and

yet for this remarkable show at the National Gallery, curators have established a regionalist, colonial paradigm for his art that it does not deserve. His paintings are superbly crafted, accessible to everyman and woman, and act as windows onto and into our psyche. For all their so-called realism, they are edited, pared down like an apple so that our psyche begins to ask questions about what is really real. In this sense Pratt's paintings develop their scenes—whether a boat in dry dock, a clapboard siding of a house, or an empty bedroom—in a theatrical way.

Forlorn and empty, these scenes lullate light and perspective. These paintings are beatific, yet as exciting as watching paint dry, and yet, they propose questions about familiarity, the everyday, and how it touches upon us. The familiar becomes a touchstone, a cue card, for broader eternal questions. Pratt mentions in the catalogue that geometry is used to confirm his intuitions, and this engineered characteristic betrays his early training as a pre-engineer at Memorial University. Group of Seven painter Lawren Harris—the most esoteric and quasi-spiritual of that gang of 7—likewise taught Chris Pratt at Mount Allison. Both paint coldness very coldly. Pratt is even more rigid and structural than his teacher Harris. Indeed, all that inflexible composition seemed to engender a movement on the east coast, with Alex Colville, and other advocates... The rigidity and frozen formula of this realist—not so real at all—brand of painting—almost feels colonial, pre-confederation—for its clasp the straws of a realism and familiarity—even for a nostalgia of place that is not so real as one might imagine. Isn't folk art and surrealism far closer to the vernacular

of popular culture and the unconscious than painstaking whimsy and duller than dull chronicling of material culture with a paintbrush. One should not compare apples and oranges, but give me a Nova Scotian folk artist Maud Lewis painting any day over this! If there is a heaven and a hell, these paintings are idealizations of a hell I would never want to visit. It leaves no room for atmosphere, for oxygen, for accident. It may engender violence but we would never see it in these screened scenes.

Chuck Close and Richard Estes investigated the American vista as photorealist painters in the late 1960's, and like Chris and Mary Pratt their works have a photo-like look. Banal subject matter becomes a window or door to self-questioning of perception, of interpretation of what is called real. Even Fitz Hugh Lane and the Luminist movement in early America achieved the same effect with a magic sense, as does Alex Colville.

A contemporary problem with Super-realist art arises when billboards, and virtual reality infuse our physical and psychic environment daily with photo and video imagery and visual and photo illustration to an extent where the philosophical is no longer the main issue. McLuhan wrote about this as early as the 1950s. Though no one seemed to listen then, they sure know what he was commenting on now! New questions arise about economies of scale in visual media, and art, and the role of the artist and even of imagery in today's world. Escaping into an ideal world, an edited down reality—is mere nostalgia for an everyday world that has greatly changed—if it ever was the way these paintings claim. Devoid of people for the most



part—aside from the highly hierographic female portraits Chris Pratt's paintings reflect an order that could disguise an incredible inner disorder and confusion about the state of the world. If this work reflects some vision of a regional culture, it is ultimately interpreted in an asexual, denaturalized, isolated, and unfulfilling way for art. Give me a Henri Matisse instead of this anyway, even if all our lives lived are ultimately regional.

John K. Grande

TORONTO

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL ART FAIR AND ALTERNATIVE ART FAIR

Metro Toronto Convention Centre
www.tiafair.com
info@tiafair.com

The 2005 Toronto International Art Fair (TIAF) again raised the profile of contemporary and modern art. Presented in the Metro Toronto Convention Centre but moved further into the back of this immense structure. As usual the event attracted a broad range of art dealers from across Canada as well as international dealers from Europe, North America China and South America. Among the Montreal

dealers were Galerie Trois Points, Sandra Goldie, Pierre-Francois Ouellette, Lilian Rodriguez, René Blouin, Galerie Orange, Galerie d'Avignon, and the largest exhibit in the entire fair was Galerie de Bellefeuille. This huge event attracted a wide range of media ranging from kinetic sculpture, to painting, mixed media, printmaking, video and photography. It helped draw public audiences to familiarize themselves with the most recent trends in art. There were also more traditional modernist works... a Stanley Spencer preparatory mural drawing, a very rare Edvard Munch lithograph, the inevitable Picasso and Matisse, and others. Flowers East Gallery from London featured some remarkable painters and Toronto's own Ed Burtynsky whose China Photographs have been attracting worldwide attention. Goedhuis Contemporary gallery from London/ New York & Beijing featured the remarkable photos of now abandoned and disintegrating Communist public spaces such as meeting halls, theaters, a cinema by the Beijing based husband and wife team of Shao Yinong and Mu Chen.

Gallery going in such a concentrated venue tends to overwhelm the viewer, but it all depends on what one expects and this always raises that eternal question "What is Art."

There were brief glimpses of the best Canadian art can offer—a large Jean-Paul Riopelle painting that sold for \$1,000,000., Canadian portrait painter and former editor of the early 20th century *The Rebel* magazine in Toronto—Barker Fairley for reasonable prices. Other gallery from Winnipeg stood out as one of the most affordable and up-to-date venues for Canadian art with prices for original artworks in the hundreds of dollars. Curated by Clara Hargittay, the video lounge viewers were witness to recent projects by Paul Wong, Tom Sherman, Norman Cohn/Zacharias Kunuk and Vera Frenkel among others.

The Toronto Alternative Art Fair (TAAFI) was held at 2 hotels—The Gladstone and The Drake—on Queen St. West. This was more fun, adventurous, and there were notable surprises, affordable art, and interventions just to shock. Among

the best was an entire faux-finish installation featuring Silverback Sasquatch and his mate made entirely of fun fur, wire, wood, styrofoam and standing on a home made latch hook rug. This was definitely the place where kitsch met kitsch with wondrous and imaginative results by Allyson Mitchell (Paul Petro Contemporary Art). A video by Christina Zeidler featured video imagery of a tiny red deer set amid the real nature surrounds of mountains, flowing streams—all this to conjure up feeling of what real nature and the Romantic ethos—great background music! Nicolas di Genova had some truly fun and quirky art/illustration works well worth collecting, while Lonsdale Gallery featured Adam Brandeis's Genpets Series (if you are into cloning or mass breeding and need user friendly pet people in your home) and a Francesca Vivenza *Lost in Transit* bag, ain't affordable, while the Canadian Photographic Portfolio Society (www.cppsonline.com) from Vancouver had portfolios for sale by Liz Magor and others. Fastwurms self-installed art was cheeky as ever. All in all the TIAF and TAAFI widened the scope on what art is or can be, and is developing a new public for Canadian art—very contemporary!

John K. Grande

PLATTSBURGH, NEW YORK

CHANNELLING GHOSTS: MARION WAGSCHAL PAINTS THE FIGURE

October 1st–November 13th
Plattsburgh State Art Museum
101 Broad Street
clubs.plattsburgh.edu/museum

While the subject of Marion Wagschal's painting of people are often set in bedrooms or living rooms, her art is something of a sleeper in the art world. Not yet fully recognized and a mature artist, it is quite amazing her art has not been snapped up by a Canadian or American museum for a major catalogued retrospective. What is more Wagschal has stayed true to her own vision. This remarkable show of her portrait works includes some very significant group portrait works.

These function not simply as likenesses recorded but alternatively as real life reckonings of the history and experience of the peoples being brought to life in paint. We sense that these paintings are neither exposed nor clever realist captions. (Instead these works are psychological renderings, and resemble Leon Golub's for their atmospheres of sometimes tragic otherworlds densely charged social anomie. They also can be compared to the paintings of Lucien Freud for their febrile, wavering lines that become synonymous for a certain psychological uncertainty. But despite the smell of impending death and the absence of fresh air, even the sense that these old peoples worlds are shrinking and moving inwards, have little to do with any reality these are ultimately hopeful visual experiences. The bodies and environments literally grow outwards confirming a state or states of being.

If Jean-Paul Sartre were to see them he would understand for they express the wartime experience and the desolate nature of relations after incredible destruction. It is not the experience itself now, more the inherited memory of all that. These paintings have an edgy admixture of fate and destiny. After all, what is identity after so much has been removed. And what is a relationship even if the people are there when the potential for memory and place are displaced, removed, relocated. It is a hard scene to work with, particularly as an artist no longer in Europe, whose family survived the European Diaspora. The scene is set with Marion and her mother lying on the same bed together. In front of them is a set of spoons, the only object from the past brought to North America after emigrating and we can also see a tipped glass and stain, and a document with Star of David. The mother is quite resigned, arms crossed and half asleep, while the artist daughter looks at us the viewers. A lot of these people look exhausted like *Raincoat Portrait* (1999) with a man seated barefoot in his armchair or the incredible *Woman* (1997) a small sharp portrait, or the nude man with towel in the austere surrounds of *The Footbath* (1998).



Silverback Sasquatch by Allyson Mitchell installation at Gladstone Hotel TAAFI 2005



We are forced to deal with this awkward state of emotion. It is one that persistently resurfaces throughout Wagschal's production. Indeed, what is awkward is likewise what gives these works something human—the faces and bodies are in a listless state of suspension. These people literally hang in a non-space of

the artist's creation. In one of the most intense and lasting images of a couple I have seen in quite some time, *Attachment* (1998) the folds of sheets and bedding literally form an interior landscape. The pose is formal, even classical, but one has the sense of time moving along and of the quiet anxiety of daily life. The

man looks downwards into space his legs stretched out. The woman in her nightgown has her arms around his neck. The distended space in this and other paintings becomes a metaphor for the way these aging people identify and build reason in an ultimately irrational universe. Space moves inwards. Their bodies extend outwards. Hence these are likenesses, but that have their own atmosphere, often grey, pallid, solemn, covered in sadness or the pallor of repetitive events, survival being the ultimate miracle of it all. These people's lives are not fulfilled, just lived, endured, and the successes seem small despite the effort but remain great for what they are. The monumental painted subject of a fallen man astride a fallen horse in *Ur* (2005) one of the most recent works in *Channelling Ghosts: Marion Wagschal Paints the Figure*

Has a sense of play even when the painterly risks are great, as do the two fighting boys next to father who is asleep in *Spill* (2000). There

is even a tinge of symbolism to one or two of these paintings. As in *Woman with Still Life* (1998) where an elderly seated woman poses adjacent to a human skull that sits in a pile of drapery.

There are likewise a series of small to middle sized portraits that include several egg temperas on boards paintings, one of fellow artist Judy Garvin, another of Sandra, and yet another of a lawyer. *Cyclops*, an older painting from 1972 could be a nightmarish self portrait of the artist as monster. We see a woman painting entirely nude, with only one eye visible in her slippers. All in all, Marion Wagschal remains one of Montreal's best kept secrets and one who deserves much more exposure than she currently has received.

This is one of the best recent exhibitions of her work—well worth seeing. We look forward to a major retrospective from one of Montreal's main public museums...

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