Michel Goulet and the 400th anniversary of Québec City: An Ode to the New World

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AN ODE TO THE NEW WORLD

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On June 14th in Québec City, in the presence of a large number of spectators, Michel Goulet inaugurated his public artwork Rêver le Nouveau Monde. Offered by the City of Montreal to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the founding of Québec City, the award-winning piece is a gift commemorating the links of friendship and solidarity that unite the national capital with the metropolis.
The choice was not easy. Following a lengthy research which included scouring anthologies of Quebec poets, from the time of the founding of Quebec to the present day. Dated and marked with the name of the author, these chairs-poems are also chairs-memories, offering the viewer the pleasure of imagining the source, of contemplating it, and even of its re-contextualization. Two chairs placed at an angle at the entrance facing a boulevard, are linked by a bronze element, representing a scaled-down image of the Saint Lawrence River flowing between Quebec City and Montreal. According to Michel Goulet, this emblematic segment of water symbolizes the lifeline between the new land of America and the rest of the world. At the opposite end of the installation, two other chairs close the bracket. They are installed side by side, facing the entire ensemble of forty chairs. Under one of these chairs the viewer will find the Earth's globe and underneath the other, a replica of an old Quebec house with a slanting roof and skylights. In the words of the sculptor, these two objects signify the opposing poles of a public and a private space. The spectators strolling along the corridor housing the installation become themselves players, whose role it is to "dream the New World", for this complex and demanding artwork cannot transmit its full message without the participation of the viewer.

While the chair is a recurring element in many of Goulet's sculptures, an involvement with literature and writing is a constant in his work. He has engraved texts that in their entirety reflect the New World imagined by the soul and language of its poets, past and present. The choice was not easy. Following a lengthy research which included scouring anthologies of Quebec poetry and academic manuals, 160 names were selected, and from those, forty were ultimately retained. The process involved, on the one hand, covering 400 years of literary output, and on the other, keeping in mind the different poetic genres.

A reflection on the language leads to a reflection on thought and a dialogue with history. As the sculptor himself notes, the forty chosen excerpts and the names of their authors are as much historical and cultural artifacts as the archeological fragments buried beneath the installation site, representing the fragmented memory of our history. They present in a coherent way the themes tied with the evolution of the poetic language as well as the interpretation of history.

The work is accompanied by a publication, and all that is left is to allow our senses to be seduced by this creation and its invitation to journey and to dream the new world.

Bio: Michel Goulet born in Asbestos, Quebec, is one of Quebec's greatest sculptors. He has garnered numerous awards in his career, including the 2008 Governor General's Prize in the field of visual and media arts, and the 1990 Prix Paul-Émile Borduas. Also well known for his stage design, Michel Goulet has worked on theatrical projects in Quebec, France, and Switzerland. In 1993 he received the Prix de l'Association québecoise des critiques de théâtre for the best set design (for Roberto Zucco), and in 1994, l'Académie québecoise de théâtre presented him with a prize for the same project. In 1997, he received the Prix Gascon-Roux du Théâtre du Nouveau Monde for Le Passage de l'Indiana and, in 1999, the Mask for his set design for the play Urfaust, tragédie collective. Michel Goulet has had over 30 exhibitions and participated in close to one hundred group shows. His works can be found in major national museums in Quebec, as well as regional museums such as the Musée d'art de Joliette, in Rimouski regional museum. Under the heading of public art, Michel Goulet has produced over 30 works in Quebec, across Canada and in France. In 1968, he represented Canada at the Venice Biennale.