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Pascal Grandmaison, Galerie René Blouin, Montreal, November 27, 2010 to January 8, 2011

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Blue-tinged icebergs? Handmade plaster sculptures? The sleek, cool signature of Pascal Grandmaison is hard to discern when we first enter his recent exhibition at Galerie René Blouin. His new works hold several surprises; while he continues his investigation of the mediated photographic act, the figure-ground relationship, and the representation of the invisible, the three works included here are rich in metaphor, melancholy, and artistic modesty.

The “icebergs” that occupy the main space are collectively titled Desperate Island (2010). Cast in Hydrostone plaster, they are undeniably massive and unmoving, and yet they appear light, as if floating on the gallery floor. Like over-blown crumpled paper balls scattered by some disgruntled writer, or sculptures by John Chamberlain without the chrome and gloss, the nuances of their creases and shadows quietly await exploration. The passage of time is more geological than performative in face of these “islands,” which has the effect of making our own movements seem manic and disconnected. This effect is central to the conceptual integrity of Desperate Island: Grandmaison used blue photo-studio background paper to make the moulds, traces of which are embedded in the surface. However, if we extend the logic of the actor’s dissociation with the matrix of action that background paper is designed to facilitate, then not only are these islands awaiting their contemporariness as an unexplored ground (rhetorically represented by the paper), but they themselves also embody the figure of the castaway, lost in the ground of a context-free white cube.

Unlike islands “desperate” for human action, the islands featured in Grandmaison’s latest video, Soleil Différé (2010), were literally built as a stage: Montreal’s Ile Sainte-Hélène and Ile Notre-Dame – the latter the site fabricated for Expo ’67. Shooting in documentary style with a (seemingly) dispassionate eye, Grandmaison offers a subject in question? [An image reveals his iconoclastic gesture seems to be asking, How can an image-maker in today’s hyper-mediated cultural milieu succeed in isolating a subject worthy of critical attention and mobilize the out-of-frame in a way that harnesses (and liberates) its potential to disrupt our understanding of the very subject in question?]

In this small sampling of work, Grandmaison demonstrates once again that, at its best, his work is both formally exquisite and theoretically rigorous. These three new works cohere in the subtext of their own limits of representation, thus suggesting the necessity of a sustained artistic engagement with the nourishing but frightening uncodifiable real.


Anja Bock is a contemporary art historian and critic whose research focuses on the spatial turn in visual art since 1960, with an emphasis on immersion, subjectivity, sculpture, and curatorial intervention. Her published writings can be found in national and international periodicals.

“Shadow Catchers” takes off from the tradition of camera-less photography initiated by William Henry Fox-Talbot, whose photogenic drawings, first displayed to the public in 1839, preceded photography with a camera – a “little bit of magic realized,” as he put it. And we sense his influence on photographers who followed, such as Christian Schad, Lucia Moholy, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and Man Ray, whose photogenic drawings, schadographs, photograms, and rayograms played with forms, springs, mechanical objects, garbage, tickets, rags, and other objects on photographic paper. In “Shadow Catchers,” an ingenious array of contemporary responses to this environmentally sensitive medium, we learn about photographers who are extending the range of possibilities and subjects available to camera-less photography.

Floris Neusüss is a romantic of sorts, who studied mural painting before turning to camera-less photography in 1954. Best known for his Körperfotogramms (full-body photograms on silver-bromide and auto-reversal paper) of the 1960s and 1970s, which are on view in “Shadow Catchers,” Neusüss has extended his practice to include shadowy metaphorical images of couples on photographic paper. Ephemerual, evanescent bodies become a dialogue on life and death. In this image of a woman in a fetal position in Untitled (Körperfotogramm, victims and victims as well as the artistic modesty. This effect is central to the conceptual integrity of Desperate Island: Grandmaison used blue photo-studio background paper to make the moulds, traces of which are embedded in the surface. However, if we extend the logic of the actor’s dissociation with the matrix of action that background paper is designed to facilitate, then not only are these islands awaiting their contemporariness as an unexplored ground (rhetorically represented by the paper), but they themselves also embody the figure of the castaway, lost in the ground of a context-free white cube.

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