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Space Invaders: Contemporary Montreal Sculpture

JOHN K. GRANDE

Billed by its organizer and curator Joyce Millar as a show that presents the work of sculptors who not only are involved in producing public sculpture commissions in Quebec, but equally have a more private output and production destined for collectors and patrons, Space invaders provides Montreal audiences with a look at five Quebec sculptors active in the field: Liliana Berezowsky, Linda Covic, Andrew Dutkewych, Gilles Milhaicne and Claude Millette. While sculpture has always maintained a public profile, whether it be in the form of public commemorative monuments or in that of the more contemporary 1% sculpture commissions in our era, we seldom get to see such a collection of sculptures and maquettes produced by a range of Montreal artists like those presented in this show.

Joyce Millar proclaims that sculptors seem to work in two parallel universes — the public, in which they provide site-specific commissioned work that will be seen daily by those who work, study or generally pass through the spaces they are destined for, and the private studio, where they initiate works independently. Originated in 1961, when the Quebec government enacted a policy that one percent of the cost of each new municipal or provincial building should be used for art to enhance the architecture, the “1% program” has been much maligned, and sometimes for good reason. For example, some sculptors produce superior public sculpture without any government support, and with a stronger vision. Public or community input into the 1% program is minimal. Juries tend towards a cloistered, club-like atmosphere, encouraging the same artists in projects that do little to further spontaneous art creation. By its very nature, the process of jurying, selection and subsequent production mitigates against spontaneity. That said, the 1% does give mature sculptors the opportunity to enact their ideas on a large scale, in spaces frequented by a broad range of people.

Perhaps more importantly, a much neglected area of the contemporary arts scene — sculpture — gets much needed and permanent air and space play. The sculptors learn a lot through this process, which can contribute to their more private production. In the best-case scenario, their private production can feed their public art. Some contemporary sculptors find themselves working to create permanent works while adhering to notions of ephemeral and impermanent artworks, which can create a conflict in the final result. In a way, official public sculpture has been left behind by a broadly based movement towards vernacular, popular, and temporary artwork that shows no signs of receding. The 1% also tends to fulfill the requirements of the architect and planner, while the sculptor plays a secondary role in the process.

Gilles Milhaicne’s 1998 Autoportrait de Dieu (pour mon Pere) is a fascinating, compressed-looking assemblage of castaway wood elements from chairs, with a selection of assorted wooden details. Densely contained and vertically arranged, the piece has three distinct sections that build a harmony and rhythm out of the burnished, coloured or natural wood fragments inside. Designed after a snowman, the kind kids build in winter out of that Zen-like material that freezes and falls out of the sky, it resonates with an emotive density, ripples with imagination. As Milhaicne comments: “The representation of the divine has preoccupied sculptors for centuries. (L...) GOD CREATED MAN IN HIS OWN IMAGE. My statue is a self portrait of God that could have been made by him.” This
cosmological figure has three heads. Are these rounded forms a container, a structure, or a cage for all the intricate recombinations of wood within? Even the pedestal it stands on is an assemblage, as if everything is tentative, abstract, could fall apart or recombine in an instant. There is beauty in this work!

Andrew Dutkewych's blindfolded figure stands on a real carpet. A smaller figure stands in his hands. Like an allegorical story within a story, the piece engages us to recreate some posited meaning out of a mysterious figurative and sculptural presence that is vulnerable, yet moves forward nonetheless, as if in a state of temporal and spatial suspension or dislocation.

Linda Covit's Buddhist-looking La cloche apôtre (1997) is a curious bell form made at Est-Nord-Est in St.-Jean-Port-Joli, out of linden wood, wrought iron, and preserved with oil and pigments. Created in response to travels in Japan, where she visited various Buddhist sites and read broadly on the subject, this large, pure elongated bell extends from ceiling to floor, exuding a sublime spiritual air. The serenity, passivity and wholesome beauty of this work seem at odds with its impressive size. Plum Blossom and Bell, an accompanying open book that we can leaf through with white gloves, is a "book" presented in a neatly fabricated wooden box, was produced in collaboration with Arturo Silva in 1997. A text reads: "When we gaze into the darkness that gathers behind the crossbeam around the flower vase, beneath the shelves, we are overcome with the feeling that in this small corner of the atmosphere there reigns complete and utter silence; that here in the darkness immutable tranquility holds sway." This past-sage could effectively describe the wooden bell. Photos of trees, ropes, a tipi-like structure, and slaves project. Is this a military-industrial production metaphor? It defies its own look because it is has no ultimate function or purpose. This ingenious device is designed as if it were a cog in a larger machine; put together as it is, however, it becomes a curious aesthetic riddle. An earlier Berezowsky, from 1994, When I say I love you, I am looking at my reflection in your eyes, is a volute, and La tour lumière. Some of these forms involve grills that are folded, or tripich shaped. Mihalcean's series of columnar pieces created for the Pavillon Adrien-Pouliot at the Université de Laval comprises a conglomerate of forms and materials. These evoke a strong sense of history and civilization building upon itself, as if in multiple geohumanistic layers. The industrial and natural are juxtaposed to create a balance between human culture and the culture of nature. Claude Millette's L'enveloppe d'Coile (2000) created for CHSLD Vaudreuil and his Fébrilité (1999) for the Symposium International de l'Estrade in Granby are, like the larger piece in this show, comprised of sections of modular sculpted Corten steel, a jumble of allegorical cubes, again blasted apart with TNT after casting.

The most effective of all the 1% pieces is, to my mind, the 1992 bronze Andrew Dutkewych created for the archaeology museum in Pointe-à-Callière, in Old Montreal. A vessel-like, hybrid shape reminiscent of an ancient amphora or vessel beautifully synthesizes and integrates form with a superb Cragg-like sense of sculptural fusion. An elongated stone section and pot near the main piece carry an echo of the central piece further into the surrounding steps and environment of the museum entrance.

Dutkewych's composition builds a tension of mystery, or rediscovery, as the form(s) and function(s) reinterpret their meaning by establishing an overall continuity, just as an archaeologist might do with elements found from the past, layered under the ground. Here is one of the most successful 1% public art projects I have ever seen in Montreal, for it integrates an aesthetic and theme that directly relate to the purpose and function of the archaeology museum it stands in front of, but does it with style and a clear vision of the Pointe-à-Callière archaeology museum's theme. The spaces invaded by the works of these Montreal sculptors — the private studio and public domain — are so distinctly different; they are like two separate worlds. Though each sculptor's style persists in either realm, the sculptures they make for their own edification are more revealing!

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Stewart Hall Art Gallery
Pointe-Claire