Espace Art actuel

Contes muets by Michèle Lapointe
Denis Longchamps

Sculpture & procédés
Numéro 80, été 2007

URI : id.erudit.org/iderudit/9391ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)
Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN  0821-9222 (imprimé)
    1923-2551 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article
Contes muets by Michèle LAPOINTE

Denis LONGCHAMPS

Il est difficile d'approcher l'exposition Contes muets sans une première lecture, une première immersion dans le monde qui y est présenté. Il est aussi difficile de ne pas y voir une tentative de revisiter le conte, de le revisiter, de le lui rendre, de le lui rendre vivant. Car les contes de fées, ceux que nous avons lus et ruminés depuis notre enfance, sont des récits remplis de poésie, de magie, d'aventures qui nous ont fait rêver.

Michèle Lapointe a choisi de travailler avec le conte, de le faire vivre à travers l'art contemporain. Elle a créé une exposition qui ressemble à un conte de fées, mais qui est bien plus que cela. C'est une histoire qui se déploie dans une galerie, dans un espace dédié à l'art contemporain.

Il est difficile de ne pas y voir une tentative de revisiter le conte, de le revisiter, de le lui rendre vivant. Car les contes de fées, ceux que nous avons lus et ruminés depuis notre enfance, sont des récits remplis de poésie, de magie, d'aventures qui nous ont fait rêver.

Michèle Lapointe a choisi de travailler avec le conte, de le faire vivre à travers l'art contemporain. Elle a créé une exposition qui ressemble à un conte de fées, mais qui est bien plus que cela. C'est une histoire qui se déploie dans une galerie, dans un espace dédié à l'art contemporain.
moment, than discussions of a football game the next, all the while cooking the family meal and helping the kids with their homework. In a world where our individualism reigns supreme, we suppress the tragedies of others shortly after the essential minute of sympathy and outcry, followed by a fleeting sense of remorse before our powerlessness to prevent such disaster — then immediately suppress further thoughts.

Next to Contes muets is an installation of twelve glass pillows arranged in three separate rows of four. Titled Le Dortoir (The Dormitory), it immediately brings to mind the scandals of priests abusing children in orphanages here and elsewhere — the infamous case of the Mount Cashel orphanage in St. John's, Newfoundland that was widely covered by the media in the early 1990s to mind here. The glass pillows are mounted on wooden boxes that reference inexpensive dormitory beds. Each box is filled with a collage placed among limbs and parts of dolls and other found objects. The collages contain photographs of broken dolls, walls, garbage, and graffiti, some taken by the artist along Montreal railway lines, while others are of abandoned fields. They invoke ideas of mutilation, abandonment, malice, and cruelty. Here too, the glass pillows skew the images and one has to look from various angles to ascertain what is underneath.

Likewise, the last installation uses glass pillows and refers directly to Alice in Wonderland through its title, Les murmures des petites filles de Madame Liddell (Mrs. Liddell's Little Girls' Whispers), and imagery. The debate on Carroll's possible abuse of the Liddell girls, it also begs the question 'how many more innocents were abused by a supposed loving parent, family friend or a relative who may have recounted or read stories such as Alice's Adventures in Wonderland to gain the trust of their young victims?'. In these three installations each glass pillow is perfectly clear yet, due to their forms, they distort.

These installations of distorting glass pillows can also be considered a metaphor for memory since the human memory system has its own mysterious process of blurring events, forgetting and/or remembering others. As historian François Hartog argues, "memory operates as a vector of identity [...] an identity in search of itself, to be exhumed, assembled, or even invented." Memory, here is a haunting of self in constant evolution revolving around a "dialectic of remembering." Indeed, these poignant installations offer a material example of scholarly debate on memory as a "meaning-making" reservoir. At a recent workshop on memory held at York University one of the participants noted that one needs to forget the pain of a trauma to be able to remember the event. How then, the pieces ask, does a child construct his/her own identity when part of that life is blurred, obliterated, repressed by years of abuse? The issues at stake are too complex to yield easy comprehension, yet these works insist: they must receive consideration.

The two other installations deal with the same issue but use a different approach. The first one, Alice, Lorina, Edith et les autres (Alice, Lorina, Edith and the Others), consists of twelve glass funnels while Les Ampoules des nuits interminables (Light bulbs of Endless Night) is composed of six large format light bulbs. In Alice, Lorina, Edith et les autres, the funnels are presented upside down on top of a photograph of a doll's head. Emerging from the stem of the funnel is a steel rod on top of which a small paper boat has been mounted. The glass funnels are inscribed with provocative citations from various biographies on Lewis Carroll or from his personal correspondence such as "I hope that you will authorise me at least to photograph Janet in the nude; it is absurd to have some scruples about the nudity of such a young child." On the small paper boat, the inscriptions come from the twelve chapters of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland thus foregrounding the paradox of wonder and horror, of amazement and bewilderment. The last installation of the exhibition, Les Ampoules des nuits interminables juxtaposes miniature dolls, limbs, found objects and pages of a miniature dictionary cleverly opened or read telling pages containing such words as innocence or purity, inserted into the mechanism of the light bulb. The title and the work itself refer to endless nights where the illumination of innocence is darkened by abuse.

Michèle Lapointe's Contes muets explores a difficult subject, and she does it without falling into sensationalism or pity. Each object — glass pillow and glass funnel — is exquisitely crafted, scintillating, like the glittering of many diamonds, in disturbing beauty and fragility under the ambient gallery lighting. As a whole, the exhibition reminds us that unfortunately and sadly, not all children are protected as jewellery store gems. It is in this paradox, between the beauty of the objects and the messages they carry, that the success of the exhibition resides leaving us with an unsettling discomfort that confronts us with a reality that should not exist. As such, I think that no one will be able to look at their pillow in quite the same way — ever again.

Michèle Lapointe, Contes muets: Maison de la culture Rosemont-Petite Patrie, November 18 – December 17, 2006

Denis LONGCHAMPS is the administrator of the Cap and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art at Concordia University, in Montreal, where he is also a PhD candidate in art history.

Notes

1. The Maison de la culture Rosemont-Petite Patrie includes, among other things, the gallery where the exhibition Contes muets was presented from November 18 to December 17 and the Petite Patrie Public Library.
2. It will be presented by curator Virginia Eichhorn at the Clay and Glass Museum in Waterloo in November 2007.
3. His real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, but we will use his more famous pen name throughout this essay.
9. For example, while I was researching this essay I came across an awareness raising publicly on child abuse that shows a doll face-down with a broken limb; and on the front page of a Concordia University newspaper a full-spread colour photograph of an old and damaged doll head with the headline "Tourisme sexuel" (L'Oeil, vol. 2, no 5, November 28, 2006).
10. Mount Cashel orphanage was run by the Christian Irish Brothers of Canada. The television movies: The Boys of St. Vincent and The Boys of St. Vincent 15 years later were loosely based on that specific case.