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The north gallery of The Robert McLaughlin Gallery is a large, chilly space that spans the entire width of the building. It's capacious and ample, qualities that make it an ideal venue for art of certain aesthetic persuasion: large paintings created with such spaces in mind, or installational works of some degree of theatricality. It's your basic white box, albeit one especially amenable to work that demands a heightened sense of scale.

Mary Ann Barkhouse chose to transform it into something even slightly homey, if in an 17th century Versailles sort of way. Clustered down towards one end of the gallery space, sparingly inhabiting just a part of it, were five separate sculptural/installational works that referenced an exotic form of the domestic—the cross, say, of Louis XIV aesthetic sensibility and New World substance. This is a story, then, of how metaphor is constructed.

It goes something like this: juxtapose the apparently incompatible so as to create unbearable tension where mutually exclusive significations are semantically irreconcilable. In the words of the late French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, metaphor

(or what he called "deviant predication") emerges from "the collapse of... the meaning obtained if we rely only on the common or usual lexical values of our words."

In Barkhouse's work, those apparently incompatible elements are references to two distinct realms: the titular "boreal" of New World North America, and "baroque" of *Le Roi Soleil's* Old World France. *Sovereign* (all works are from 2007) exemplifies such a juxtaposition in perhaps its simplest form: on an ornate chaise longue covered in green velvet, a sculptural bronze fox reclines, entirely at home.

The obvious references, here, of course have everything to do with power: the fox, very much at ease and at home on a piece of period furniture that clearly denotes wealth, privilege, and prestige (the accoutrements of power). And, of course, the realities of history fit in here: the *ancien regime*; the plundering by European powers of the resources—initially furs and fish—that the New World afforded; the consequent destruction of an ecological niche and the decimation of the peoples who lived as a part of it...

So, then, does Barkhouse's

bronze fox function as the equivalent of something like a bowling trophy, as a signifier of victory meant to be set on the proverbial mantle and admired? Or is it a pet, tamed of its wildness and become accustomed to the finer things in life? Or is she perhaps suggesting something along the lines of the fox as a symbol of self-serving collaboration? It is worth noting, of course, that the fox is an Old World animal as well, so maybe there are no implications of worlds in collision with *Sovereign*. Maybe, instead, it's all about a metaphoric bridge, about that which bound together the old and new.

We have no such questions about the beaver. We overwhelmingly regard it as a New World species (though it was once indigenous to Europe as well), and was of course prime pickings for Old World exploitation. The beaver, in short, is at the very heart of the colonial story. With *The Skins of Our Fathers II*, Barkhouse situates three sculptural beavers of various sizes on a confidante (or gossip) sofa, an ornate, tri-cornered chair divided into three seats—your basic piece of Old World furniture not really intended for your average middle-class living room.

Each beaver occupies its own wedge of the sofa. One—gold coloured, and seemingly quite at ease with its surroundings—sits apparently aloof and distant from the others, two stuffed, silk beasts arranged as if interacting with one another across the arm that separates their adjoining seats. The tableau they present is underscored by small pillows on which are printed maps of the New World depicting early French, English, and aboriginal geographical concepts of this land.

Such juxtapositions are all apropos, demonstrative of pertinent and meaningful associations. But the work is devoid of the surprises of metaphor that might have made it something far more than simply the sum of its parts, something "other." *The Skins of Our Fathers II* accomplishes what it sets out to do. But, in the end, it doesn't seem like all that much.

The far wall of the gallery space was dramatically theatricalized by the installation *Succession*. It comprises three wall-hung tapestries that extend out across the gallery floor, and three small benches, each set atop with a pillow and a sculptural hare. Colour references, here, are important: the different colours of the hares (two

made of porcelain, one of bronze) denote cyclic, seasonal changes in their fur, the pillows the time of year associated with those changes, and the colours of the tapestries, seasonal changes that Barkhouse has juxtaposed with silhouettes of moose—a mother and her calf on one, two males doing battle on another, and a lone male in a stand-off with two wolves in the third. The hares set before them on the benches all strike the same pose: heads bowed in a position we would tend to read as indicative of shame or atonement, but which is in fact a posture of predator-avoidance. Again, all the particulars are here, but *Succession* lacks that crucial nudge that would have pushed us, as lookers-on, past passive unengagement.

The self-evidence of Barkhouse's associations between discursive elements, the aesthetic ratios that she chooses to establish between cultural and social references, leaves a kind of indifferent blandness to *Boreal Baroque* as a whole. The issues around which she constructs the show are not unknown or unexamined—we all have some degree of familiarity with them—but the work doesn't push us to see them anew or establish new metaphors by which we might be entirely reengaged. There's no paradigm shift, here.

Well, not quite. Outside The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, on a tiny patch of lawn next to the front entrance of the building, Barkhouse gives us *grace*. While not part of the exhibition per se (it's a permanent sculptural installation commissioned by the gallery), the work transcends what was inside the gallery. Barkhouse has set a bronze trio of the creatures atop a goodly sized chunk of granite. Out of their natural habitat, they're ungainly, awkward-looking things, and Barkhouse gives them to us preening. Maybe it's the harsh juxtaposition against the adjacent roadways, parking lots, and modernist gallery architecture. Maybe it's the fact the gallery sits at the bottom of what was once a floodplain for the creek that still runs behind it. And maybe it's the probability that beaver—the real things—once actually preened here. Courtesy of a host of potential contexts, *grace* works, and it works big time. ←

Mary Anne Barkhouse: *Boreal Baroque*
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa
April 20–June 17, 2007

Gil McELROY lives in Colborne, Ontario.



← Mary Anne BARKHOUSE, *Sovereign*, 2007. Bronze, velvet, beech, 88 x 160 x 61 cm. Photo: Michael Cullen.

← Mary Anne BARKHOUSE, *grace*, 2007. Bronze and granite, approx. 304 x 183 x 127 cm. Photo: Michael Cullen.