How to Train a Dog — the 2010 Sobey Arts Awards
Prix artistique Sobey 2010 / Sobey Art Award 2010, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MACM) in conjunction with the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, October 8, 2010-January 4, 2011

John K. Grande

Sculpture et vie privée
Sculpture and Private Life
Numéro 95, printemps 2011

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/62950ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Citer ce compte rendu
How to Train a Dog – the 2010 SOBEY ARTS AWARDS

John K. Grande

Billed as Canada’s pre-eminent prize for a young Canadian artist, the Sobey Art Foundation’s Sobey Art Award is awarded annually to an artist 39 years old or younger who has shown their work in a public or commercial art gallery in Canada in the past 18 months. As the 2010 Sobey Arts Awards catalogue introduction by Ray Cronin, Director and CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia states, the Sobey Award was created by the Sobey family to “spark public discussion about contemporary art.” Each year’s winner of the award receives $50,000. For 2010 the long list consisted of 25 artists. From that selection, works from the five finalists, Brendan Lee Satish Tang, Daniel Barrow, Brendan Fernandes, Patrick Bernatchez and the duo of Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby were on view at the MACM.

One of the real issues associated with the Sobey Art Award is not which artists are selected as finalists, but who is on the jury. For 2010, the jurors included three established institutions, a sure fire event, and the ambiguity of those remembered or fabricated stories about the arts establishment for not accepting their own aesthetics biases. Born in Kenya, but of Indian ancestry, Brendan Fernandes’ installation and video work is the easiest to access, and most readily understood of all the works in this display. Consisting of plastic deer, the kind found in hunter’s stores all over North America, and with each deer wearing a white mask, Fernandes’ Neo-Primativism II (2007) plays beautifully on irony, and the very hybridity of identity in a society undergoing rapid influxes of peoples from all over. Fernandes reminds me of a much younger version of Shonibare whose headless 3-D sculptures of figures derived from Gaismborough’s portraiture likewise reinvented the post-colonial wheel. The Masai spears, symbolic of tribal culture, form rational lines on a wall. Silhouetted like an IKEA display, the spears are graphic, sharp and very contemporary. All about migration, and the ambiguity of those remembered or fabricated stories about homelands, countries of origin or the country we now live in, Fernandes’ Neo-Primativism II (2010), with its mask graphics on wall-placed monitors, communicates clearly how similar we all are, ultimately, as a species, though the cues are geo—and bi-species.

Another Canadian of hybrid ancestry, Brendan Lee Satish Tang was born in Ireland of Trinidadian parents. He now hails from Kamloops, British Columbia. Tang’s amazing hybridized, sexually charged objects recall the great days of ancient Chinese and colonial porcelain and pottery. Tang integrates all this together in ingenious post-colonial, innovative ways. Oddly, his art forms share something in common with Shary Boyle’s ceramic collages now on view at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art in Toronto. Marga Ormolu merges Chinese Ming dynasty vessel forms with techno-Pop art forms, recalling the way the French in the 18th century gilded ormolu objects, modifying them into curiosity pieces for aristocrats. Now the 21st century, artist Tang integrates the Manga stylistic of Japanese comic and picture books to subvert the 18th century elitist hybridity with a street-smart, very accessible Pop culture vernacular of our times.

Performance artist Daniel Barrow, (this year’s Sobey winner) created an installation titled Helen Keller in Sculpture Garden (2008) that for all its object abstractions, low-tech awkwardness, and stretched metaphors is...
The complexity of his approach mirrors the sheer volume of materials used in this far-ranging installation "about the angst of growing up, the beauty in the ugly and the rejects of society." He could be called a "maximalist." The opposite of what minimalism sought in the 1960s. Post-Millennial art seeks to use and abuse materials in grand scale and with an ever greater dependence on the latest techno-tools. While this is neither good nor bad, it reduces the artist’s ability to work freely, unobstructed by extraneous costs, as he or she jumps through the hoops and loopholes of gadgetry. Daniel Barrow accumulates object elements, some images are projected on the walls, others on mini screens, with projections based on childhood stories like Hans Christian Anderson’s The Little Mermaid. It’s a child’s garden of derelict referencing in a digital age, oddly nostalgic in its weird dissonant juxtapositions… a Kleenex box with butterflies, vases with wilted flowers…

For the volume and range of materials, Barrow’s art speaks of that unrelenting material deluge that fills the void of our spiritual emptiness these days. And you can change the image being projected manually by placing another piece of Perspex on the light box/table. These self-inspired narratives are difficult to interpret or decode, and out of focus as North American culture is these days. So there you go! God Bless!

Montreal’s Patrick Bernatchez has a heavy and heady "culture sensitive" approach to what he calls a "chronicle of a death foretold." The complexity of modern-day life. Bernatchez’s Crystalides (2006-2008), filmed on location at the Fashion Plaza where the artist now has a studio, was inspired by mould patterns from a found notebook. The videos deal with death, decay, entropy and the passage of time. Animal and vegetal elements intertwine in Bernatchez’s drawings. References to death, a universal theme in art, can be found in five mirror paintings. Goldberg Experienced Ghost Chorus, Variation no. 2 (2010) uses an automated grand piano, Marshall amp, 5-watt mini amplifier and three aluminum blocks to play elements from Glen Gould’s Goldberg Variations. There is also a film involving time travel and cryogenics. As with Barrow’s art, Bernatchez’s involves fragments, cues, elements that never quite hold together integrally. This, and the play on and with the time element, just as John Cage once did, and may be central to Bernatchez’s art. Heaven and hell all wrapped up in one artist’s imagination.

The Atlantic duo of Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby collaborate on video productions and the making of sculpture objects. Though difficult to follow, these installations quote aspects of the natural world. The video presentation is museological and correct and comic book-like, even fashionable. The presentations are independent modules, set ups, with lenses and tiny boned creature assemblages, synthetic landscapes in miniature, a bat’s corpse encased therein and so on…

The selected Sobey Arts Award finalists works feel like art for art, but the pay off is not as good in a museum like the MACM. The display and presentation of the art seems to deactivate it from its original source and create a chasm between the artist’s original intention and the desired effect when on exhibition. The installation as art here looks too austere, too clean and contrived in its orchestrated and intentional messiness. Art is not really about museums, it’s about people, what we care about, how contexts and experiences clash, collide, coalesce into something we can share—the artist’s vision. The medium is the message and the message is non-existent. Food for thought, n’est-ce pas?<-
