

Period rooms. Exploring Montréal's Exhibited Interiors

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**PERIOD ROOMS.
8 ART EXPERIMENTATIONS,
24 HISTORIC INTERIORS
VARIOUS LOCATIONS
JUNE 12 –
OCTOBER 20, 2019**

Frédéric Gravel, performance at Château Dufresne, 2019. Photo: VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine.





Claire Savoie, *Sans titre*, 2019. Exhibition view at Château Dufresne. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.

The city of Montréal has a dense web of museums, monuments, and historic sites that form a multifaceted 'topography of memory.' Exhibited interiors play a central role in this topography, and can be found in châteaux, historic residence museums and even in the religious environment of St. Joseph's Oratory. Usually fully equipped with furniture and decorative elements, these places appear to be inhabited (or at least habitable) still today. At the same time, as being part of historic sites, they are apparently attributed an historic, representative value. But to what extent can a once private, intimate living room be part of a culture of remembrance? What meanings are attributed to interiors and what makes them worth preserving as a spatial entity? In order to examine these issues, Marie J. Jean, director of VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine, invited Montréal-based artists to explore 24 interiors on display at highly diverse historic sites in the city. For the exhibition "Period rooms," which was held from June to October 2019, artists created site-specific artworks at the various venues. Along with the mainly sound-based works discussed in this text, the exhibition also featured the sculptural and acoustic installations of Thomas Bégin at Guido Molinari Foundation and Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn at Château Ramezay. A series of Pierre Dorion's watercolours was presented at Château Dufresne, which was also the venue for Frédérick Gravel's dance performance. And Klaus Scherübel's installation at VOX completed the artistic interventions at these historic sites.



Jocelyn Robert, *...CAN...D...Y...SAM...*, 2019.
Exhibition view at Sir George-Étienne Cartier National Historic Site.
Photo: Michel Brunelle.

Claire Savoie's work in the stately rooms of Château Dufresne is particularly remarkable, as it provides a subversive and at the same time entertaining commentary on the display. Exploring the chateau, visitors retrace the footsteps of Montréal's elite in the early 20th century, namely those of the Dufresne brothers, who accumulated wealth as industrial magnates. An app takes visitors on a tour of the splendidly furnished interiors. The integrated audio guide provides information on the provenance and art historical categorization of the main objects and architectural elements. It describes the styles of past epochs and their influence on the decor of the rooms, and tells visitors about the life and work of the former inhabitants. With her extensive sound installation *Untitled*,¹ which spans several rooms and corridors, Savoie creates an evocative soundscape—and a counterpart to the official audio tour. Multiple loudspeakers play a variety of sounds reminiscent of everyday activities and events, such as rustling, knocking, leafing pages through books. The noises arise occasionally: sometimes appearing quiet and far away, sometimes startling one with the sound of shattering glass. The interiors, which remain in untouched rigidity, are acoustically 'enlivened.' This has an impressive effect: the longer one stays in the château, the more one is drawn into a 'ghostly theatre play.' While the official audio guide provides information about the Louis XV style, noises emerge from one of the bedrooms: furniture is supposedly being moved, something rustles, maybe a blanket, and then there are footsteps. The visitors

thus are encouraged to create their own narrative with the acoustic happenings in the interiors, because Savoie's installation neither gives directions nor tells a coherent story. Thus, an infinite number of subjective stories can be created at the château.

Savoie points out that there are a lot of stories to be discovered in the interiors. About the Dufresne family, for instance: while the presentation at the historic site draws a picturesque image of an upper-class family, Savoie's installation makes it clear that this is just one of many possible narratives. Which parts of the family's everyday life are suppressed? Other official narratives conveyed by the interiors and the app deal with art historical aspects and the specific tastes for decorating rooms in the 1920s and 1930s. If the interiors provide the basis for different kinds of narratives, hence Savoie's initial question, then why not for entirely fictional stories as well? The subversive aspect of her work is that she turns the historical interiors into evocative backdrops that can be used to stage a play.

Pierre Dorion, *Period Rooms*, 2019.
Exhibition view at Château Dufresne.
Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.





Steve Bates, *The Voice Moves the Air*, 2019.
Exhibition view at Saint Joseph's Oratory.
Photo: Michel Brunelle.

Less evocative but just as critical is Jocelyn Robert's sound-based work *_CAN_D____Y__SAM__* in the former residence where Sir Georges-Étienne Cartier, the renowned politician, lived in the 19th century. Even the "setup" of Robert's installation is confrontational: cables wind over the floral patterned carpet of the Grand Salon where several electronic devices are prominently staged, including loudspeakers and a beamer on a pedestal, which, as a white cubic box, provides a sharp contrast to the handmade Victorian furniture. Robert created a sound installation based on the patriotic song *Canada! : mon pays! mes amours!* that Cartier wrote as a young student. The piano in the Grand Salon is the one Robert used to record his interpretation of the song. The outcome is disruptive: the tones transmitted through the loudspeakers are dissonant fragments of the song, together they do not create a melody at all. In addition, extensive intervals of silence accompany them. In fact, Robert's soundscape offers more voids than sounds. As isolated fragments, the tones fade away into meaninglessness. A video projected onto patterned wallpaper is also part of the installation. A written inscription can be seen on a light background, but the words cannot be read, because the image is slightly blurred and the handwriting is illegible. A hand holds a pencil, ready to write, but remains still and does not continue the obscured text. Stories remain unarticulated. A reading of Robert's installation is that tradition is aborted and interspersed with missing links. The historical context in which Cartier's song was written cannot be revived, only fragmentarily reconstructed at best. Loss of meaning is inevitable. The interiors at the historic site, on the other hand, provide a completely different impression: it seems as if 1860 was only yesterday, furniture and tableware are polished to a high gloss and fresh bouquets of flowers are displayed to create a homey atmosphere. It is as if Cartier had only recently left the rooms. Curators at the historic site obscure the missing links and voids of tradition—the result of many years passing between then and now—with theatrical means such as flickering electric candles and plastic cakes opulently covering the dining-room table.

The interiors communicate that Cartier enjoyed playing the piano and drinking Bordeaux. This information could be identified as the tones in Robert's installation—the historical fragments. The artist's sound-based work now disrupts the illusion that these fragments could form an extensive melody, or, that the information given at the historic site, for example, would provide access to Cartier's



Klaus Scherübel, *Sans titre*, (Exposition Mousseau-Riopelle chez Muriel Guilbault, 1947), 2019. Exhibition view at VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine. Photo: Michel Brunelle. Courtesy of Line-Sylvie Perron and Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

political stances, his thoughts and ideals during the complex historic period of Canadian Confederation. Art historian Peter Geimer has put into words what Robert made audible in his disruptive work on site. According to Geimer, historic sites are usually staged as places where important pictures were painted, texts were written or thoughts were born. The incantation of those interiors is: important things have happened *here* and one can trace them.² The idea that something of the works, actions and thoughts—respectively the “genius”—of the former inhabitants is sedimented in the rooms and the furniture, is exclusively a matter of the imagination. The entire scenography of these sites is based on the idea of being close to historical personalities and to be able to “activate” something long gone. Curatorial practices related to this scenography—as mentioned above—often reach theatrical dimensions: Geimer writes that the “emptiness” at these sites is obscured with “garlands of flowers and pictures, fireplaces, display boards and quotations of quotations.”³ In this reading, Cartier’s house today is to be viewed as a richly decorated fragment.

The two artworks mentioned above emphasize two characteristics of the exhibited interior, which, to varying degrees, are inherent to every example of this exhibition device: its fragmentary nature that can be—and usually is—“completed” by curatorial means (Robert) and its function as a theatrical backdrop (Savoie). With his sound-based installation *The Voice Moves the Air* at Saint Joseph’s Oratory, Steve Bates investigates a third, all too often neglected quality of this display format. He examines the historic interior as an admired and adored place, one for “contemplative devotion.”

We are in a dark hall in the basement of the oratory.⁴ Two architectural elements characterize the place: the shrine where the heart of Brother André Bessette, who is very much revered in Montréal’s Catholic community, is kept and displayed as a relic; and directly opposite the shrine, there are three exhibition rooms, showing interiors equipped with a mix of original and reproduced furniture. All of them refer to important stations in Brother André’s life: his office, his doorkeeper’s room at Notre-Dame College, and his death room at a hospital. In each interior, except for the hospital room, Brother André is represented as a wax figure. Presenting a reproduced ‘environment’ behind glass, this display is reminiscent of dioramas.

Brother André is commemorated in this hall in two different ways. How does one behave in this place? For the relic in the shrine, the behaviour is clearly defined: a sign asks visitors for an intercession, and the text of a short prayer is provided. But what about the interiors (or dioramas) on display? It is doubtful whether they are supposed to present some kind of art historical information, since the furniture is clearly not representative of a specific epoch. It is quite remarkable in this case that a sign inside Brother André's death room refers to the interior as a "shrine."⁵ It is not clear whether the "authentic linen" on his deathbed is a relic or an artifact. With these displayed interiors, the lines between historical representation and public devotion are blurred.

Bates' sound installation is so modest that one hardly notices it at first. In the room, Bates plays a quiet, echoing, minimalist melody. The transitions between the individual, sustained tones run smoothly, with no pauses or interruptions. The sounds resemble a deep, pleasant hum. This creates a meditative atmosphere that can be felt immediately: the sounds have a relaxing effect. Bates draws on the notion that these sounds can elicit "auditory hallucinations" that are similar to—or even overlap with—certain religious experiences. This also has an impact on the objects exhibited in the interiors, because it enhances the visitor's admiration for the relics. In this way, Bates' installation offers the key to Brother André's displayed interiors: they should be seen as devotional objects that can be revered rather than as monuments to be understood.

Bates shows that both the shrine with the heart relic and the interiors on display are places that can offer hallucinatory experiences.⁷ Contemplative devotion may seem strange in the context of exhibited interiors, especially when considered a museum display strategy. However, none of the sites dealt with in the "Period rooms" exhibition is a museum, but rather an historic site. The difference is crucial. For this reason, the title of the exhibition is misleading. The term "period room" usually denotes interiors that have been taken out of their original architectural context and translocated into a museum for the purpose of visualizing a certain style.⁸ It is primarily this focus on stylistic aspects that classifies the period room as a museum display strategy. Interiors at historic sites, on the other hand, have different origins and implications. Historic sites are, to a certain extent, places of remembrance, which are—to refer once again to Robert's installation—closely linked historically to aspects of devotion.⁹ Obviously, a different set of "rules" applies to the interior at a historic site. Geimer describes them as "places of magic," referring to the fact that these rules are by no means defined. Historic sites that house interiors are therefore reliant on artistic interventions, additions and critical comments. The *Period rooms* exhibition is a shining example in this regard, as it did not concentrate only on a particular form of interior, but covered the widest possible range to explore the varying epistemological potential. The complex artworks mentioned in this text all emphasized the vital qualities and implications of the display format.

1.

The artwork also included a video that was shown in a separate room of Château Dufresne.

2.

Peter Geimer, *Derrida ist nicht zu Hause. Begegnungen mit Abwesenden* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2013), 11.

3.

Ibid., 27. Original quote: "Das Genie ist fort, und genau diese Leere umspielt die Stätte der Erinnerung mit Blumengirlanden und Bildern, mit Kaminfeuer, Schautafeln und Zitaten von Zitaten."

4.

The artwork also included a performance by Steve Bates and Sophie Trudeau inside the oratory.

5.

The text on the sign says: "The partitions, furniture and linen are authentic, and were given to the shrine by the sisters of N.-D. de l'espérance."

6.

Ibid.

7.

This also applies to the small chapel near the oratory that is, as a second venue of his installation, also filled with Bates' soundscape. Here, too, Bates' emphasizes the overlapping of hallucinatory effects caused by the sound installation and certain religious experiences in regard to prayer and meditation. The upper floor of the chapel houses another historic interior displayed to the public, equipped with Brother André's original furniture. Separated from the prayer room in the chapel but accessible by a stairway on the outside, it was not part of Bates' sound installation.

8.

Regarding the history of the exhibited interiors in museums in the USA, see Kathleen Curran, *The Invention of the American Art Museum: From Craft to Kulturgeschichte, 1870–1930* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2016). Regarding the current definition of the term 'period room', see p. 112.

9.

Aleida Assmann writes: "Cultural memory has its anthropological core in the commemoration of the deceased." Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2018), 33. Original quote: "Das kulturelle Gedächtnis hat seinen anthropologischen Kern im Totengedächtnis."

10.

Peter Geimer, *Derrida ist nicht zu Hause. Begegnungen mit Abwesenden* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2013), 11. Original quote: "Ort[e] der Magie".

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