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De la colonne...

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André Fournelle, *Passage 2^e version*, 1983. Mixed-média, 16 x 32 in. Photo : Michel Dubreuil

Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

De la colonne... dans l'art contemporain (Centre d'exposition du Vieux Palais, Saint-Jérôme, May 8 - June 19) combined the visual dynamics of a group exhibition with the discordant theoretical complexities inherent therein. Curator, Andrée Matte, presented a current trope of tendencies in which sculpture, painting, architecture, literature, science, and humanistic thoughts made new alliances thematically centred around the column. Seven Quebec artists were invited to participate based upon the curatorial notion that vestiges, ruins, and fragments of archaeological sites have served as fundamental sources of inspiration for image, object, and environmental modalities in our post-modern era. Without exception, all of the artists employed columnar reference in an ahistorical manner, that is in negation of original symbolic intent or cultural traditions. Their collective predilection to treat the column as an artefact-nourishing a nostalgic reflection of time past as opposed to a symbol of aspiration and structural support-expressed a sense of urgency that partook less of hope than of fear. History became an engorged abstraction grounded in some apprehension both personnel and universal.

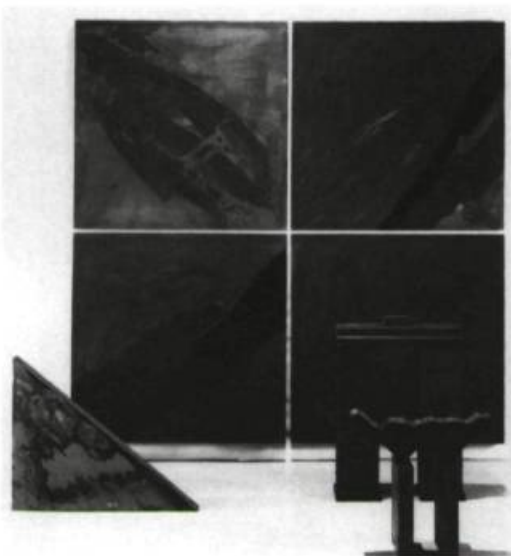
Catalogue essays did not deal directly with exhibited compositions but were intended to stimulate viewer/reader appreciation of varied interpretive approaches to subject. Texts focused on the art historical (Normand Biron) and structural (Paul Faucher) evolution of the column; its paraliterary aspects (Serge Mercier); and its psychoanalytical dimension (Pierre

Verrier). Assays functioned as points of relation for the artists' varied, though largely antithetical, concerns.

In an accompanying artist statement, Laurent Bouchard identified the column as a pretext to the organization of his two unstretched and collaged canvases, and his single picto-sculpture, all dating from 1984-85. Architectural members bore little relation to stylistic orders and were intended to be considered as visual motifs, not vehicles of narration. Though the use of architectonic forms, the artist created a spatial illusion of tipped and intersecting perspectival planes which played upon the concepts of construction and deconstruction.

With the exception of a small wall-piece, Denise Giguère failed to cite the column but by family resemblance. Upon entering the gallery space, the visitor was confronted by two of the artist's ambitious installation/environments, *Liu* and *Tori*, both dated 1986. In the latter, an eight part sequence of vaulted trestles (which "served as a metaphor for a daily alienating routine" [Giguère]) was surmounted by a steel support structure holding an elevated story-line plateau (base-shaft-capital). Here a lamp beamed light through the portal of a 'Mycenaean' lions gate to a rock-rubble filled landscape beyond, inhabited by a solitary feline creature. A gabled end-unit structurally echoed the profile of the lions gate and mirrored the emission of light back into its line of passage. Narrative direction was intentionally ambiguous, open-ended, and disjunctive.

With an analogous measure of indeterminacy, Michel Labbé juxtaposed wall-mounted 'tableau' and architectural floor pieces. Sculptural elements served as "iconographic markers, fragments of memory, stationary witness-accomplices to the (mysterious) object/image association... and initiated a process of introspection and interpretation — a possible shift in meaning." (Labbé) In each of three variations of the



Michel Labbé, *Tableaux/objets II*, 1986. Acrylic, synthetic ciment, paper, wood; 245 x 270 x 155 cm. Photo : Patrick Altman

artist's *Tableaux/Objets* series, 1985-86, the arrangement/installation of painted, square and triangular wall-panels suggested the metope and raking cornices of classical entablatures (ie. those architectural elements supported by the column). In the fluidity, overlaying, and colouration of pigment there was often an affinity to the subtlety and magnificence of Monet's *Waterlilies*. In other instances, muted, earthen hues and landscape forms appeared as though in aerial topography. One sculptural accompaniment precariously poised a temple remnant (column still intact) midway between the mountains and the sea — a revival of the myth of Atlantis? — a symbol of nature's power over man.

Pierre Ayot's *Tra Alassio e Ventimiglia*, 1984, and Linda Covit's *Un ailleurs lointain*, 1988, further involved an interaction between the artificial and the natural. Their approaches to the subject of ruin may be perceived as the classical versus the romantic respectively.

In Ayot's work the original structural integrity of the 'whole' (temple) was lost and its disintegration brought with it a severance in functioning and meaning of the original. The observer was confronted by the efficacy of the passage of time and the discontinuous use of four toppled columns in the creation of an object of aesthetic interest. The artist's ruins "transformed the viewer into actor" (Madeleine Forcier) calling for a contemplation of past aesthetic unity and the imaginative activity of reconstruction of site. The interplay between light and shadow, real and false projection, continued as an integral aspect of the artist's creative concerns.

The "contemplative quietude and tranquility" of Covit's three miniature cast-metal temple fragments reflected in a pool of water had a "dreamlike" quality (Covit) that transported the spectator to a moment in the irretrievable past while simultaneously evoking an awareness of the power of time to negate the present. The sculpture also accommodated the importance of the visible incurrence of nature on the ruin — the green patinaed and rounded edges of the bronze components alluding to weathered and lichen-encrusted stone.



Denise Giguère, *Tori*, 1986. Wood, metal, ciment, plaster, stone, mylar, lighting system, miniature rails, paint, etc.; 365 x 150 x 22 cm. Photo : Jean Longpré

In a decidedly more formalistic mode, the two untitled, gun-blued steel, tubular, 1988 sculptures of Murray MacDonald extolled a latent modernist preoccupation with phenomenology. An interpretative statement stressed the artist's career-long desire to communicate "the living experience of spatiality... (the) invocation of human space within the architectural and physical space — the living space of the corporal viewer". (James Campbell) A theoretical embrace of a Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological archeology¹⁰⁷ was assumed, especially as stepped and ramped slits in the uppermost sections of the columns were highly suggestive of ascents in ancient ritualistic architecture (eg. pyramids, ziggurats,...). 'Expressive' and 'symbolic' meanings co-existed.

Finally, André Fournelle provided work the most spatially demanding (a 1983 installation entitled *Passage*) and the conceptually most complex (a series of architectural drawings entitled *L'inconfortable utopie*, 1987). The former existed as a room-sized temple-environment with neon tubing displacing the pediment; gravel substituting for the euthyteria; and broken, 'textualized' or 'mutant' columns making up the colonnade. The drawings also demonstrated stylistic deviations on classical orders (eg. substituted modern steel 'I'-beams for stone shafts), incorporated poetic verse (Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien*), cut planar section through plan; and superimposed transparent overlays thematically dealing with the flight of hybrid bird/planes. "Columns suggested an enthralling referential adventure to the cult of memory, as mythology rather than as material object." (Fournelle)

Viewed in its totality, *De la colonne...* encompassed numerous paratactical and paradoxical qualities examined in recent French philosophy — the so-called 'philosophies blanches'. The artists offered aspects of the metaphysics of absence (Foucault), theologies of the supplement (Derrida), and mystics of the trace (Lyotard) both soliciting and frustrating our desire that signification be transparent.

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