Denis Demers: A Retrospective

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This exhibition of Denis Demers' multi-media pieces consists of 24 works from eight series dated 1979 to 1986. They were all produced after Demers' self-described "second birth" in Marrakesh at the age of 26. From that time onward the cultural life of Morocco, and the expanse and silence of the north African desert, became the touchstones of his art. These phenomena injected both a sense of personal presence and a readiness to communicate with the viewer into an œuvre that had previously been characterised by a rather hermetic formalism. The selection of works in this exhibition is sensitive, and is sufficiently restricted in number, to encourage the viewer to piece together the events and concerns of Demers' maturation as an artist. This is an exhibition that has important points to make, but that refrains from hectoring the visitor. Intimacy cannot be forced.

Demers' work from the 1980's incorporates three points of concern: formal complexity, trans-individual/transcultural themes, and the subjectivity and individuality of creation, perception and response. The exhibition includes much work that held the promise of future development along any of these lines. It now stands as a memorial to a fast-developing confidence cut short just when the strands that made up the art were coalescing into a convincing unity.

To begin with formal elements: by the late 1970's Demers' earlier faith in the Modernist ideal of the work of art as an isolated and self-critical entity was maturing into a questioning of the defences at the bordelines of formalist etiquette. Among the most visually seductive of his several series in this regard is Lieux et couleurs (1981). Each work in this series consists of three heavily-worked layers: a partly translucent, partly opaque surface placed over a sheet of handmade paper, all superimposed on a support that extends beyond the edges of the completely opaque middle layer. The non-transparency of the top layer is contradicted by the spectator's desire to get beyond and beneath it, thus setting up a neat series of oscillations between two-dimensional surface and (semi-obscured) depth. Similarly, in the De courts moments series (1983) plaster-coated cardboard arches are set in delicate groupings against flat backgrounds to create another variation of the flatness/projection, surface/depth dialogue. The pieces require the viewer to deal with them, at least initially, in terms of their objective physical presence. (The very fact that the De courts moments pieces are sealed in plexiglass boxes seems to...
emphasise their discrete objecthood.) Yet there is a
degree of witty sophistication that is absent in more
strictly "pure" Modernist art, and that hints at Demers'
evolving concerns without flatly rejecting Modernist
discipline.

These concerns with objecthood were develop-
ments of what had already been the principle focus of
interest in Demers' art prior to his first visit to north
Africa. In this exhibition, however, art as object soon
yields ground to something new: an interest in themes of
transindividual experience. Demers' abandonment of
Modernist self-referentiality, first as the sole and
later as the basic criterion in the creation and evaluation
of a work of art, happened during a decade in which
many artists turned to the search for, and the commu-
nication of, essential beliefs, sensations, fears, myths.
For example, the two earliest works in this exhibition,
both from the Fiancée(s)/Moussem series of 1979-80,
have significant comments to make about gender expec-
tations in north African society (and, by implication and
comparison, in other societies as well). This series
evokes the Moroccan festival/ceremony at which
marriage partners were selected. The "male" fiancés
are colour collages — striking constructions that assert
their own materiality and three-dimensionality. Lim-
ited only by their rectangular frames (a reference to
restrictive religious law), they contrast sharply with the
comparative uniformity and the lack of independence
of the black, grey and white "female" figures — assem-
blages of photomechanically — produced copies of the
male figures. Beneath the anthropological documenta-
tion of the Moussem, Demers found the same sort of
controlling structures that Lévi-Strauss had found in
Tahitian society.

In the De courts moments (1983) and the Corpus
Naïs (1984) series, Demers went beyond his exam-
ination of the male-female dichotomy in search of
murkier transcultural values. (In any case, that dicho-
tomy lacks universality insofar as most North Ameri-
can and European viewers might not be expected to
eredit it with still having an inviolable universal valid-
ity.) He incorporated rough three-dimensional repre-
sentations of architectural elements: fragments of
arches and doorways remembered from time spent in
north Africa. These models are not archaeologically
accurate or art historically precise. They can thus
appear on a generalised level to a wide range of culture
groups. Their message tends to be "home" or "shelter"
(or — given the mistering and blurring of the images
— "memory" or "history") rather than anything more
architecturally or historically specific. They are symbols
rather than things — signposts on the obscure line
between rational conscious analysis and non-critical
subconscious presences.

A third crucial evolving concern in Demers' art
during the 1980's was the question of individualism
and subjectivity. In the Fiancée(s)/Moussem pieces
this is seen at its most basic, with the artist contrasting
the fully individualised male figures with their me-
chanically replicated female counterparts. Immedi-
ately thereafter he extended this interest outward from
the figures in the works to encompass the viewers'
subjective responses to visual stimulation. In De courts
moments, for example, the juxtapositioning of three-
dimensional architectural fragments against flat or
slightly-layered grounds not only poses formal ques-
tions and evokes undefined sensations of home and
history, but also disrupts the smoothness of the spec-
tator's gaze (as we attempt to reconcile relief sculpture
with painted ground) and forces us to come to terms
with the foregrounding of our physical and psychologi-
cal relations with the artworks. Other series stress not
so much the subjectivity of the viewer and the act of
viewing as the quirky privacy of the artist as an individ-
ual and the identity of his art as the residue of his inner
life. In Lieux et couleurs, for example, each piece is a
multi-layered record of the Demers' physical, object-
making activity, complete with all the mystery, possi-
ibilities of discovery, and psychological ambiguities
inherent in the very idea of a palimpsest. The flat
backgrounds of certain De courts moments pieces not
in this exhibition* consist partly of cut-up, rearranged
and heavily-reworked photographs of 1979-80 works
from the Fiancée(s)/Moussem series. Because De-
mers' art was rooted in personal experience, the several
series that comprise his œuvre remain introverted,
imitative, and in constant dialogue with one another.

The chronologically and visually ultimate con-
centration on individuality comes in Dos au volcan
(1986). In this, the final work of his career, Demers
included what seems to have been his own silhouette,
lying down and melding with the representations of
arches. "He lay down", speculates Guest Curator Jean-
François L'Homme, "to let his spirit flow inside one of
the numerous passageways he created. [...] Did he [in
Dos au volcan] tell us everything, give us everything
we needed to remember him?" It is in the very late
works that Demers most convincingly brought to-
together his concerns with formal innovation and extra-
individual references, the latter powered and given a
centre and source by the courage of one man coming to
terms with his own mortality. As Marcel Proust (to
whom Demers has occasionally been compared)
 knew, the discovery of the universal through the pri-
vacy of perception and memory, and the expression of
both in terms of dedicated craftsmanship, are worthy
goals for any artist.

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NOTE
1. The works of Denis Demers were also exhibited at galerie Aubes
3935 from June 11th to July 29th, 1989