

ETC



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Montreal

“WHITE RABBIT, BLACK HOLE”

David Altmejd, Patrice Duhamel, Michael A. Robinson and Ève K. Tremblay,
L'écho des limbes, Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal;
 curator : Nathalie de Blois. October 14 – November 19, 2005

One pill makes you larger
 And one pill makes you small
 And the ones that Mother gives you
 Don't do anything at all
 Go ask Alice
 When she's ten feet tall

And if you go chasing rabbits
 And you know you're going to fall
 Tell'em a hookah-smoking caterpillar
 Has given you the call
 Call Alice
 When she was just small

When men on the chessboard
 Get up and tell you where to go
 And you've just had some kind of mushroom
 And your mind is moving low
 Go ask Alice
 I think she'll know

When logic and proportion
 Have fallen softly dead
And the White Knight is talking backwards
And the Red Queen's off with her head
Remember what the doormouse said:
"Feed your Head
Feed your Head !"

Jefferson Airplane, "White Rabbit"

When logic and all proportions have fallen softly dead, as they have so serendipitously in this exhibition, their death does not, however, fall on deaf ears. What to do? Probably best to take Jefferson Airplane's advice: prepare to feed one's head as one rushes headlong into the maze. The death knell in question is a happy, if altogether disorienting, one for the works in this exhibition lure the viewer into a fey Wonderland of the mind that has multiple delightful surprises, tasty aesthetic treats and some nasty twists and turns in store.

In this exhibition, which takes place on the other side of the looking glass as it were, an aura of surpassing strangeness envelops the viewer from the get-go. We are transformed into a proverbial Alice and, as we make our long and perilous descent downward into the rabbit hole, we inevitably ask our-

selves, along with the hyperreflective Alice of Lewis Carroll's timeless tale, "How queer everything is today! And yesterday things went just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is "Who in the world am I?"

An answer awaits at the heart of the maze, and we meet on the journey not only the Mad Hatter on video and the White Rabbit caught between a rock and a hard place and a livid Alice herself, pissed off at the person who shoved her in, but also the nightmarish Minotaur that haunts each and every human mind.

The exhibition subversively assembles the work of four important Montreal artists, who have already made their mark elsewhere, and invites the viewer to descend into the topography of their wholesale *otherness* – and, like Alice pursuing the White Rabbit, we enter a quixotic domain with no seeming *raison d'être*. *L'écho des limbes* examines interiority and its discontents with rare insight and interrogatory luminance that puts paid to any enervating complacency on our part. Inspired by the works of Victorian author Lewis Carroll, the exhibition births all manner of possible thought-worlds. Nathalie de Blois has brilliantly curated the work of some of our most promising and productive artists, weaving their artworks into a coherent and even exalting Wonderland tapestry that sheds welcomed light on issues of interiority, exteriority, alterity and transcendence.

Through video, sculpture and photography, David Altmejd, Patrice Duhamel, Michael A. Robinson and Ève K. Tremblay reach into strange temporal and spatial hideaways to tell these beguiling Wonderland narratives, and they carry the viewer willy-nilly with them. Like an unwary Alice under the tutelage of the Red Queen or the Caterpillar, we enter a labyrinth at the very heart of the fabulous.

The rabbit hole we fall into is akin to a Black hole; here is a region of psychological space that has so much mass concentrated in it that there is no way for a nearby thought to escape its gravitational pull. So magnetic and hypnotic are the voices and visions of these artists that they are strange attractors for our most outré musings and speculations.

Let us start with Alice herself. The works of Ève K. Tremblay in the exhibition once again demonstrate that she is an artist of truly exceptional gifts in a continuing phase of rewarding creative fermentation. Her photowork *Alice tombée furieuse*, from the

L'éducation sentimentale series (2000), is either a brilliant prelude or fitting coda to the exhibition as a whole, with Tremblay playing the part of a younger schoolgirl Alice who looks back at us with dagger eyes as though it was *we* who pushed her down the rabbit hole. Situated by itself on the end wall of a long, white room with no windows, it is the lovely transit hub, transgressive punctuation or point of denouement for an exhibition that questions the artistic status quo and the ambivalent status of our own subjectivities in search of meaning in what is called the “lived world.”

Tremblay’s work is all about the process of individuation, and she pursues this theme relentlessly – and with incandescent insight – in her wider body of work, which is already one of the most considered and considerable bodies of work by any artist of her generation extant in Canada. The series *Disparaître en bleu – Ein Spiel de Biosemiotik* (2003) is haunting, convincing, and her palette is at its most refined and seductive. It is also a cool purview on a near-future world resonant with what director Michael Winterbottom envisioned in his wonderful recent film *Code 46*. Tremblay’s chameleonlike identity stratagems inside these works test the existing limits of what constitutes true subjectivity. Never one to turn away from the harsh truth of her own ongoing self-interrogation (or self-analysis, for she arguably carries that out in her own work), she seeks self-knowledge, transformation – and hopes for transcendence.

In a blue dress and otherwise attired, she assumes several guises and takes on many tasks in this series, as though taunting Modernist taxonomists and sterile schemas of classification, all the while eluding the deadening regimes of categorization that subsume the one under the rubric of the many in late Modernity. Here the self is the permeable membrane, amorphous and polymorphous, between the interior life and the external universe – and, as such, it cannily triumphs over all the advanced weaponry of codification. An artist this sensitive to her own internal contradictions, and those of her audience, means that seer and seen are wed here in the same *tableau vivant* like Siamese twins. Identity is here in unending flux and entirely mutable. “Oh, I’ve had such a curious dream!” said Alice – and we share that dream as viewers of this exhibition and this work in particular. Novalis said, “Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one.” The sentiment seems pertinent here.

Tremblay’s work is just drop-dead gorgeous, aesthetically speaking, and hauntingly seductive, but also severe and unremitting in its self-questioning regimen. Perhaps the best single word to describe her project as she pursues her own White Rabbit through the most treacherous terrain and the most harrowing of transformations is ‘bravery.’ She is simply one of the conspicuously brave and least conventional artists around.



Michael A. Robinson’s albino organ looks like it fell down the rabbit hole before us and got lodged in a curious diagonal fulcrum at the bottom. Painted in Robinson’s trademark white, the instrument – and its architectural scaffolding – titled *Pastiche* (2005), gives rise to the specter of its own instrumental mimicry. The accompanying video, *No Life at All in the House of Dolls* (2005), with the artist himself all-too-ambulatory in white lab coat, carrying out strange pseudoscientific routines, including some nonsensical ones seated at the organ, suggests something like institutionalized insanity. The video and installation both suggest a mental whiteout, a sort of mental blizzard in which thinking itself loses any tidy and well-ordered or trackable linear coordinates. Even the traces of our own footprints are lost, as it were, in the snow this work brings down on our heads.

Robinson moves here beyond his characteristic “empathy boxes” into a postmodernist vignette redolent of an episode of the *Outer Limits* TV show, which leaves empathy far behind and invokes its opposite with surreal glamour and *Lost Highway*-like mischief (care of a Satanic Robert Blake in whiteface, perhaps). A brilliant metaphor for the artistic process in which the artist, moving ahead at haltering pace in a real cloud of unknowing, gets caught between all the hits and misses of his own process and transmits



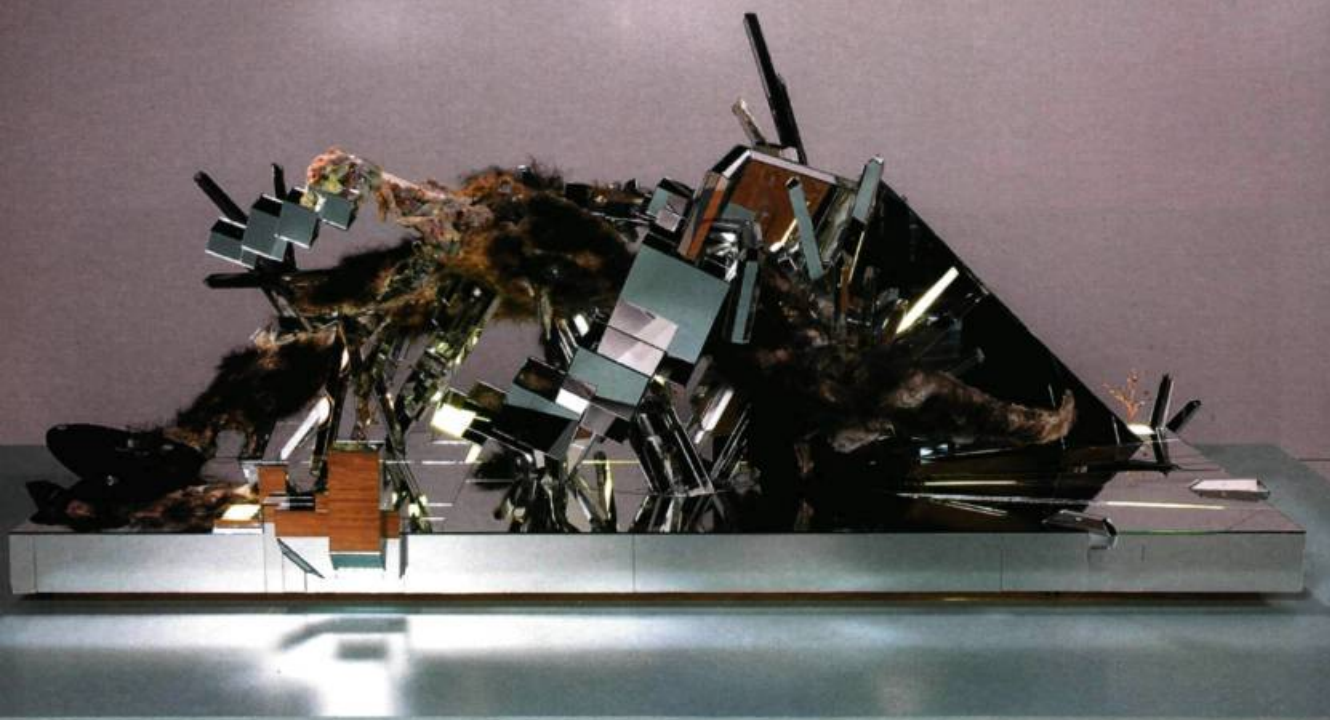
the attendant frustration to his viewers like the Mad Hatter at his tea party.

Robinson's work in recent exhibitions at Pierre François Ouellette art contemporain and the Musée du Québec demonstrates that he is at the top of his form, and the new work in this exhibition eloquently confirms this. As the Mad Hatter in a lab coat, Robinson is peerless. Better yet, call him a mime artist on point in the whole wounded madhouse of our time, and he is hot in pursuit of "growing" his repertoire, for Robinson pushes the envelope way beyond the fail-safe point. Once again, he supplies an epiphany – with his own trademark, well-sharpened, knife-edge incision.

In David Altmejd's remarkable sculpture *The Settler* (2005) it is as though the white rabbit went down the hole, but it was the wrong hole – not a rabbit hole but a wormhole and rematerialized somewhere far off the beaten path of the central galactic clusters. On a platform in the middle of the exhibition space, a human-scale, shoe-wearing creature lies bloodied amidst mirrored spires in a futuristic city orbiting the dark side of a dying sun. The rabbit is pierced and amputated by a multiplicity of dizzying spires, the sharp planes of which have lopped off feet eviscerated and skewered the body that would molecularly unite with this jagged architecture.

Is it the werewolf so often referenced in this work? Perhaps. But it can also be read quite straightforwardly as a rather unkempt, soiled and lifelike rabbit, which it also resembles. The white rabbit got caught in the transporter/gene-splicer par excellence while en route to Wonderland and, as a result, directly accesses the repressed dark side of our embodied imagination. In this work, Altmejd's methodical dismantling of the White Rabbit paradoxically supplies the crazy glue for the exhibition's thematics, and it is this vision of the rabbit impaled upon the razor points of the crystalline mirror-city, and so beautiful in its decay, that suggests wrong place, wrong time, disease processes and unease in the still-lengthening shadow of HIV and other viral invasions which turn the body against itself.

In Patrice Duhamel's loopy revolving door situation *Passages secrets* (2005), Self and its everlasting Other are separated by a pane of glass in a revolving door, in silent pantomime and loopy synchronicity. The revolving door, means of passage, is here a mode of confinement and references the "repetition-compulsion" in psychoanalytic thought. This work adds to the surreality of the proceedings and provides appropriate punctuation for the show. The work stutters in real time and, as a mock whirligig, it is hypnotic and in perennial flux. Each is on the other side of



David Altmejd, *The Settler*, 2005. Mixed medium. Photo: Denys Farley, Galerie Leonard & Bina Ellen, Montréal.

the looking glass, reminding us of Sisyphus's endless climb uphill in vain hope of reward or Beckett's famous words from *The Unnameable* (1953): "I can't go on. I'll go on," with no hope in sight of easy passage, or point of arrival, or happy ending. The protagonists are like perpetual amputees, shorn of all logic and certainty, and thus only repetitive and mawkish motifs ensue. Trapped in the whirligig of old ways of thinking and emoting, they mirror one another throughout infinity with no exit visa in sight.

Down, down, down. The artworks exert a strange form of gravity as we are drawn down into the deep well – but more along the well-bevelled downward curvature of our own psychologies than that of Einsteinian space-time. (Still, the space proximate to a black hole is very distorted and lends it some very unusual properties – like the artworks in this exhibition. Specifically, the distortion in the immediate vicinity of a black hole is extreme. The black hole possesses what is known as its 'event horizon,' a spherical surface that marks its boundary. Once one passes through the horizon, one can't get back out and must move in measure like a dancer towards the 'singularity' at the center. A fitting metaphor, I think, for the artistic 'singularities' in the present exhibition.) Robinson's work, for instance, has some very strange geometrical properties, and yet they are characteristically his. "Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice, which is exactly what we mutter to ourselves here. As we are caught in the event horizon we find, as Alice did, that: "*Either the well was very deep, or she fell*

very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything; then she looked at the sides of the well, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book-shelves; here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs..."

How like the works by Ève K. Tremblay that hang salonlike on the first wall as we enter the exhibition space and are catapulted down the rabbit hole alongside them.

Under the surface of this exhibition is a shared recognition by the participants that differentiation of self and achieving individuation are what is most important. These artists value difference above all. In fact, this exhibition teaches that divinity really does live on in the difference and the radiance that resides in the details of the respective works of Altmejd, Duhamel, Tremblay and Robinson stems from this teaching that is also an ethic. They all offered us nourishing food for thought in what is certainly one of the dreamiest group shows in our town in many, years.

JAMES D. CAMPBELL