

Nothing Is Lost, Nothing Is Created, Everything Is Transformed

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MONTREAL

Nothing Is Lost, Nothing Is Created, Everything Is Transformed

John K. Grande

FOR THE FIRST EVER, THE QUÉBEC TRIENNIAL HELD AT MONTREAL'S MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN, PRESENTS A WIDE RANGE OF EMERGING ARTISTS SHOWING ALL THAT ART IS THESE DAYS — WELL HONED, INFORMED, TRENDY AND TRAINED — A CROP OF ART FOR THE EVERYDAY AND A DISPLAY OF DIVERSITY IF EVER THERE WAS ONE.



Michael Merrill
Paintings about Art (one of a series)
Vinyl gouache (Flashe) on plywood
Courtesy MAC

Among the 135 works of art on view in this show curated by the MACM's Paulette Gagnon, Mark Lanctôt, Josée Bélisle and Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec's Pierre Landry, there is the feeling of a change in contemporary art. These are definitely trained, educated, well schooled artists with a sense of the mediated role art can play in society. They know their materials. They understand what art should look like. They produce art. In fact, some of them humanize an altogether post-human situation. Such is the case with Doyon-Rivest's *Lopopagus* (2008), a Siamese twin-like business consultant or some such creature. He's fuzzy, friendly, harmless, and a mascot of and for every occasion. As they say, "Lopopagus"

is a friend to children, animals, lost causes, defenders of the environment, and so on. Julie Doucet's art looks like art, and cut and pastes its way through the imagery and text with persona. One text piece reads: "Pourquoi devons-nous nous reproduire dans la communauté humaine des lors sans avenir?" Sometimes these works are sentimental, tinged with insights into the mediated dilemmas of living in a post-production, consumer society. She is so Montreal!

David Altmejd, perhaps the best known in this show, has two colossus-type figures. They are devolutionary structures, monumental and awkward, fragile. Altmejd's Bosch-like figuration, so well known to many, captures beauty for a minute, only to turn it ugly. Its a

duality that the propagandists of our era would prefer we believe, for it enables further manipulation of form, image, human. *The Dentist*, Altmejd's other giant is made of mirrors. One cannot help but think that Altmejd sourcing is Biblical, but a sort of Twisted Sister Biblical immersed in a decorum of nature and artifice. There are quail's eggs set into the sides while the smashed mirror faceting carries potential echoes of a presumed (media or artist?) violence. Animal teeth project out in places from the mirrors, and we have regressed back to social Darwinism, or is it the Nature vs. Nurture conundrum? Altmejd has something topical to say, without a doubt. After all, we ourselves are nature, aren't we?

Anthony Burnham's sculptures are all about art and objecthood and revel in the everyday, touching these elements up, painting them, always with a sense of the presence of these forms in space. In his sense his works surprise us with their historical consciousness, sense of art's past lineage, but he does it all his own way. At the video room near the entrance to the show, one can see an array of artists' productions including Patrick Bernatchez's surprising set-ups. One of these, *I Feel Cold Today*, involves a ride up an escalator to an office that fills up with snow. While the atmosphere and music that accompanies the pieces recalls the 1960s, the sense again is of an artist recapturing sentiments and feelings from other places, other times. This is interesting when we compare it with West Coast video, for nostalgia permeates this show, even if you can't put your finger on it sometimes. *Chrysalide: Empereur*, another of Bernatchez's videos, captures a man smoking behind the driving wheel of a car that is slowly filling up with water. He is wearing a Ronald McDonald outfit. Its a clever topical tragi-comic quip and brainless too! And as we all know brainless is in, particularly in an era of global corporate conquest.

Etienne Zack is a very clever, informed painter whose *Cut and Paste* literally paints his figure together out of image fragments and puts him in a neo-Baroque environs that is distilled and denaturalized. We can read this

as painting in an era of screen-bred image construction but Zack knows this and brings great skill to his painting, challenging the dogmas of digital with a basic love of, and understanding of, the painterly process. Michael Merrill is like a painterly anthropologist capturing sites and situations in art galleries and museums like the DIA Foundation in New York.

No Brainer, an image from British-born Adrian Norvid's *Organ Bore* is but part of a sincerely expressive young artists amazing comic graphic imagery. Hermit Hamlet Hotel, is a hippy getaway in a post-modern era. This enormous graphic caricature has a Robert Crumb feel but has free form fun with gratuitous referencing of everything, even if the subject is nothing and goes slowly and predictably nowhere. I even like the organ sculpture. This guy reminds me of George Grosz for his insidious prevaricating wit lost in a sea of boredom. I thought I saw a product package under or near the pedals beneath the organ. Was it all just a dream? Yannick Pouliot's videos follow the strange configurations of orate classic furniture in narrow spaces he created, some of which were seen at MACM recently.

Valérie Blass, to my mind, is one of Quebec's strongest emerging artists and with her own point of view. Any of her sculptures reveal this to be true. A lightning stroke sculpture projects out from a wall but it is covered in hair or is it fur? A neo-mythological nature morph has hooved legs and a lion-like head. The totemic vertical forms in *Distortion et alignement animalier* (2007) have a synthetic electrical cabling material whose outer surface has colour lines. Blass leaves us guessing what objects she has vacuum-sealed beneath the surface coating. *Etant donnees, le Loris perche sur son socle neo-classique* (2008), presents hybrid standing figures. One is a hooved animal with a lion-like face. Blass comments: "My inspiration comes from a 17th century caricature that made fun of those wigs that look like a lion's mane. The structure is treated like a bronze, with the emphasis on the posture and physical bearing of the figure,



David Altmejd
Le Berger (2008)
Wood, mirror, crystal, horsehair, paint
365.7 x 152.4 x 121.9 cm
Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, NY

and the endless waves that form the muscles and the sculpted hair. There is practically no face. The second figure seems almost alive. Two adjoining modes of representation. A real, little animal is perched on an antique sculpture."

Tightly orchestrated, well presented, *Nothing Is Lost, Nothing Is Created, Everything Is Transformed* is unquestionably one of Canada's best visual art shows seen in quite a while. While the art is somewhat too trained, and has none of the social depth one hopes for, maybe these artists are working in reverse from earlier generations. Let's see what happens with their art in the future! □

EXPOSITION

NOTHING IS LOST, NOTHING IS CREATED, EVERYTHING IS TRANSFORMED

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