

John Heward: *Un parcours / une collection*

Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, www.mnba.qc.ca,
March 13 - August 24, 2008, Galerie de l'Université du Québec à
Montréal, October 24 - November 24, 2008

John K. Grande

Volume 52, numéro 212, supplément, automne–octobre 2008

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/62101ac>

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Éditeur(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

ISSN

0042-5435 (imprimé)

1923-3183 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Grande, J. K. (2008). Compte rendu de [John Heward: *Un parcours / une collection* / Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, www.mnba.qc.ca, March 13 - August 24, 2008, Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal, October 24 - November 24, 2008]. *Vie des Arts*, 52(212), 19–20.



Vimy-Ridge, 1993
National Gallery of Canada Ottawa
Purchased 1995
© Geoffrey James

the guise of art, is nevertheless, a human construct, no matter how lofty. It intervenes in the landscape, altering it, whether subtly or contentiously, but always irrevocably.

His lens moves imperceptibly from the sensuous curves of *Pont-Neuf, Paris* to the littered, dilapidated grounds of a rundown neighbourhood of that same metropolis in *Impasse Satan*.

The message is clear but not aggressive, we are shown, not told, we are asked to draw our own conclusions, not pointed at the problem.

Defly altering the direction, the exhibition continues with a series of trees photographed in orchards and parks of North America. James tends to focus on one tree, excising it from its surroundings as it were, thrusting upon it the role of a model, an unwitting sitter, suddenly vulnerable in the eye of the camera.

Whether it's a giant *Linden Tree, New York State*, or an anthropomorphic looking *Willow, Ward's Island, Toronto*, each stands for nature as it does for the talent of the photographer, and each is a messenger, if we care to listen.

For once we move to the series titled *Asbestos*, the whispered

message of the limbed flora becomes a scream of a disappearing landscape. There are not trees in these images. There is dugout earth and metal structures, barren hills with ridges that look like veins, and the sky is but a flat backdrop.

Running Fence is James's foray into a more political arena, although his images are staunchly focused on the landscape, which he allows to invoke its own tale.

In one of his statements, the artist offers a hint as to what inspires him: "I am really interested in the poetics of space. I like to work in places that are very complex and that have many entrances and exits, because the visual game is more fun as it gets more complicated."

And it is that complex simplicity that makes James's photographs such enduring works of art; for even while in the process of documenting, the artist-photographer is always in the throes of creation. □

QUÉBEC

JOHN HEWARD UN PARCOURS / UNE COLLECTION

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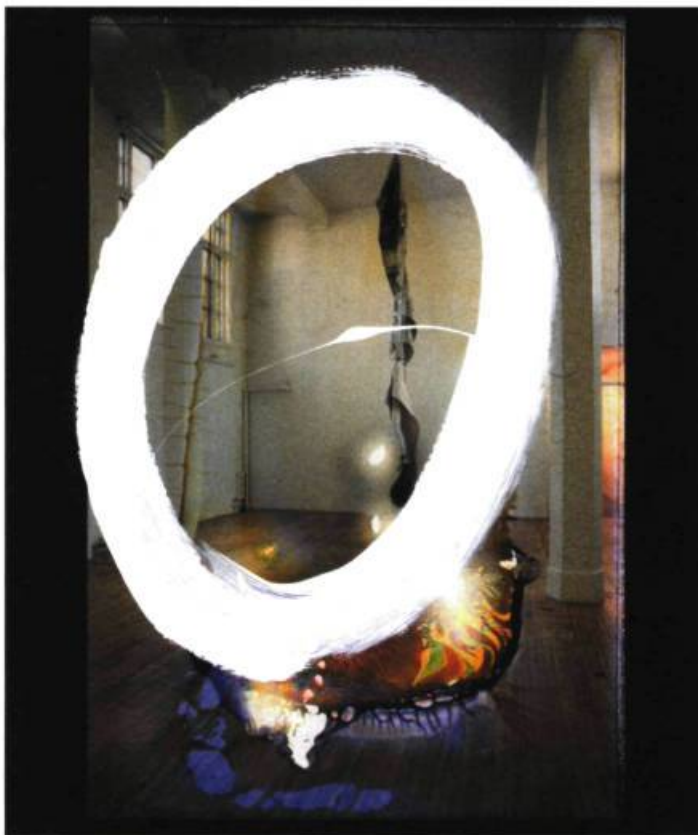
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Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal
1400, rue Berri
October 24 - November 24, 2008



John Heward dans son atelier

This mini-retrospective of Montreal multiform artist John Heward resonates with an open tone of experimentation. Almost nothing is titled. With a certain primitivist directness worthy of Alechinsky and the Cobra group, Heward the artist cannot ultimately be nailed down. His multiform artworks are a phenomenon, capturing a spirit on solipsistic kinship with the ancient and the modern, and do so without pretense and certainly with a sense of abandon.



Untitled (CIAC installation)
1999-2000
Épreuves à développement chromogène
et acrylique
61 x 51 cm (4 fois)
MNBAQ

Heward's spirit of openness is understandable for he does not confine himself to art and is a jazz musician among other activities. His earliest work *Untitled Mask of Mingus* (1966) speaks of this realization of complementary interests early on. You can hear some samples of Heward's drumming in a CD set into the back of the Musée de Beaux-Arts du Québec's very decent catalogue. The CD music selection brings out the relationship between the painter Heward and the musician and includes collaboration with Steve Lacy, and one of Lacy's last recordings.

That 1980s feeling surfaces in this show. The gallery exhibition was a site to be invaded, intruded upon, found, or simply moved through, for which we owe artists like Robert Morris a great debt. Freedom of expression – not the word – but the gesture, is embodied by the circular drum-shaped etching plate Heward played as an instrument. It was later recycled to become an odd-shaped plate for an etching. Heward had played drum stick sounds repetitively on that piece of metal, and the music that evolved from the plate, like the star chart-like print that later came into being, propose an endless collaboration between sound and the visual – just as Armand Vaillancourt once did with the *Plaques Tectoniques*,

that likewise, were both art/sculpture and an instrument to be played.

A very large recent painting titled *From the Cave* (2007) hangs on a multi-level tower-like opening at the Musée, alongside one of Heward's fluid-attached canvas hanging paintings. These multiple combination works recycle the art from flat, wall-based art, taking them a step towards becoming sculptural, ephemeral and impermanent. Like Serge Lemoyne's exquisite wrapped triangular painting once seen at CIAC, Heward's painting reformulates the expression, reinvents its meanings and reference points. The message here is that art can layer upon itself, in this way, become an autobiography of potential meaning(s). The exhibition becomes a venue for rephrasing the gestural, reinventing the incantation yet again. Other canvases hang like moths on a wall, investing this museum with their draping like post-structural ghosts from another realm, and we always feel these actions and gestures make the artist's (now partially hidden), gestural paintings mimetic mementos of an inner silence, though they exist as wall-placed cloth.

In the art there is an endless rephrasing of potential visual reading(s) of a painting as in *Untitled Mask #4*. Everything is tentative and could change yet again. One canvas is covered by another, so the first we look at it is obscured by the second. We read the canvas that covers another underlying canvas. These are sequences in progressive time. This is art that evolves, does not devolve. The devolution is the evolution and vice versa.

The art thus itself becomes a shamanic mask, and it reveals itself as a cover, rather than a surface one reads into. *Untitled #3 Mask* (1976) with its limited palette of black on brown likewise involves layers. A video by Sylvia Safdie at the entrance to the show captures Heward's art in a frame, but the images of Heward's paintings are not on a wall, but underwater interacting with nature. The message we get is that Heward is, more than anything, a process artist, whose material and sound arrangements are a pretext for communicating ephemeral, universal values.

More fun are the photo-works with painted minimal clichés that can echo the forms or structures of these successive stairwell images in *Untitled (Paris Installation)* (2002). As with Heward's artist's books which are displayed with clamps to hold them, the photo ad paint experimentation is less serious and plodding. These are playful structural evaluative meta-materialist games that play on and with visual and material metaphors. Their economy of gesture and compositional means remind one of Antony Caro's table pieces, but Heward's are freeform and playful, anecdotes at their best.

John Heward is not afraid to tear apart his gestures. They open up and evolve to become performative euphemisms of meta-material, gestural collaborations that go with the moment.

A great show. □