

Is Montreal the real art capital of Canada?

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MONTREAL — Is Montreal the new Vancouver? I've heard the question floated the last few days following the opening of the Québec Triennial at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal last weekend. It's a major exhibition – 38 artists showing 135 works of art – and it presents a new generation of Quebec artists, emerging into view after a long period of relative seclusion and quiet growth. There are many, many discoveries to be made, particularly for gallerygoers who live outside of Quebec.

The curators took risks. (The show was organized by MACM curators Paulette Gagnon, Mark Lanctôt, Josée Bélisle and Pierre Landry, now at the Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec.) They set out with no declared curatorial theme, which so often serves as a diversion from the brutal sheep-and-goats sorting that such a show should be all about. The exhibition's title, *Nothing Is Lost, Nothing Is Created, Everything Is Transformed*, was arrived at after the fact, borrowed from the writings of a Greek scientist and philosopher named Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (500-428 BC).

It's a title that would suit many of the big roundup shows this year (for example, *Unmonumental* at The New Museum in New York, and the Whitney Biennial), having about it both the celebratory and the apocalyptic flavour of the moment. These days, the artist often seems to perform a kind of sampling role, picking through the churning deluge of information and imagery that makes up the contemporary visual environment. But where some of these larger international shows seem chaotic in sympathy with their subject (the current Whitney being the odious example), the Québec Triennial is tightly considered and expertly installed.



A focus on the news

Among the big names are Michel de Broin, who won last year's Sobey Art Award and is a significant force on the Quebec scene. (*Ellen Page Wilson*)

There were obvious big names missing from the lineup – such as Montrealers Pascal Grandmaison and Geneviève Cadieux or the Quebec City artist collective BGL, which has been showing up a lot in Toronto – and the curators may take heat for that on the home front. But instead of received ideas they have delivered us news.

One of the most startling discoveries is the video work of 36-year-old Patrick Bernatchez. Here, he is showing two mesmerizing projection pieces, both set in the Fashion Plaza in the Mile End former garment district of Montreal, a part of the city currently being re-gentrified by the arts community. In *I Feel Cold Today*, we enter a 1960s-style office tower and ascend the elevators to the sound of a lush soundtrack (the artist's remix of fragments of classical music and film scores), arriving at a suite of empty offices that gradually fill with billowing snow. It's a mystical transformation. The cinematic precedent is the famous snow scene from *Dr. Zhivago*, where the accumulation of snow in the abandoned country house bespeaks the loss of a way of life, and the passage of time. Here, it is modernism that is mourned and, more particularly, the go-go optimism of Quebec in its Expo 67 moment.

Bernatchez's other work, *Chrysalide: Empereur*, is without such obvious precedent, drifting in a realm of its own. All the camera shows us is a car parked in a grimy garage. In it sits a man in a Ronald McDonald clown costume, smoking a cigarette behind the wheel as water gradually fills the interior of his car. The sun roof is open (we see his party balloons escaping), so this man is not trapped, yet he makes no effort to escape as the water rises.

This seems to be a suicide, yet he does not die. Breathing in water, is he returning to life in the womb, a place of deep privacy and seclusion? I found myself reminded of Bruce Nauman's famous videos of clowns in extremis (his dark and distinctive blend of comedy and cruelty), and the sense of violent threat in Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle*. If these have inspired Bernatchez, he has wrung from these precedents a new comic/tragic resonance.

One of the few big names in the show is David Altmejd, who also hangs out on the borderline between beauty and horror. His two giant standing figurative sculptures in this show continue his investigations of decay and regeneration. One, titled *The Dentist*, is a stylistic departure for the artist : a mammoth monolith in the shape of a standing man that is made entirely from faceted mirrors. This colossus houses a number of quail eggs in its sides, and its surface is shattered here and there with what look like bullet holes, some of which sprout animal teeth. Despite the evidently fragile material from which it is made, the sculpture embodies a kind of brutal force. This is the sort of material conundrum that Altmejd loves to explore.

An inspired juxtaposition

In one of the most effective installation decisions in the show, Altmejd's mirrored sculpture stands within hearing range of Gwenaël Bélanger's video projection featuring the sound of a shattering mirror. The camera spins in the artist's studio, the rotation recorded in myriad stills spliced together to create a stuttering visual effect. Every five minutes, a pane of mirrored glass shatters as it is dropped on the floor with a sound like church bells, the phenomenon captured in hundreds of frozen micro-moments cut together. Like the works of Alexandre Castonguay (not in the show) or the earlier, more overt digital composites of Nicholas Baier, Bélanger takes an artisan's approach to digital technology, showing off his handiwork in obvious ways, a different approach than the sleight of hand of Vancouver artists such as Jeff Wall or the younger Scott McFarland.

Mirrors figure, as well, in the new work of Baier, another of the show's better-known figures. For this show he has installed a magisterial suite of his most recent scanned antique mirrors, surfaces that offer scars and imperfections from deep within their inky depths. But, unlike Baier, most of the artists here are little known. There's Valérie Blass, whose sculptures range from a fur-clad zigzag form that springs from the wall (she titled the piece *Lightning Shaped Elongation of a Redhead*) to a two-legged standing figure that looks like the Cowardly Lion in a pair of high-heeled hooves. (A sloth clings to its breast, regarding us with wide eyes, curiouser and curiouser.) This woman has developed her own completely distinct vision, each work embodying a precise material language.

Likewise, the British-born artist Adrian Norvid, who is showing a giant cartoon drawing of the *Hermit Hamlet Hotel*, an alternative getaway for deadbeat longhairs with hillbilly affectations. (One slogan reads "Recluse. Footloose. Screw Loose. No Use.") Norvid takes the eccentric posture of the outsider/slacker, throwing rocks into the mainstream from his lazy place on the riverbank.

Painting comes on strong. Etienne Zack appears to tip his hat to Velazquez and other classical masters in *Cut and Paste*, a painting of a courtier slumped in a chair. In this Cubist-seeming likeness, he breaks the figure up into planes of form hinged together with masking tape (painted, not real). Zack takes as his subject the literal building up of form through paint. This is painting about painting.

Michael Merrill engages in another form of homage with his *Paintings about Art*, depictions of his fellow artists' work in museums and galleries in Canada and abroad. (One downward-looking view of the stairwell at the DIA Foundation in New York is a compositional gem, executed in dazzling emerald greens.) These pictures document the watering holes and pilgrimage sites of the little tribe of peripatetic Canadian artists, curators, dealers and collectors. Like Manet's portraits of his contemporaries, they are images to inform a future history of art.

Certainly there were things here that seemed weak by comparison. The artist collective Women with Kitchen Appliances felt like a seventies throwback. I could live without the karaoke saloon by Karen Tam, or Trish Middleton's detritus-strewn *Factory for a Day*. David Armstrong Six's wonderful little watercolours hold up better than his large installation work here. And Julie Doucet's collage works are always fun to look at, but they wear out fast. As well, I have never taken to the simulated theatrics of Carlos and Jason Sanchez, who are exhibiting a photo portrait of John Mark Karr (who claimed to have killed six-year-old JonBenet Ramsey) and another work showing a pair of soldiers on the battlefield (the maudlin title: *The Misuse of Youth*). And it was disappointing that Michel de Broin, who won last year's Sobey Art Award and is a significant force on the Quebec scene, missed the opportunity to make a new major piece for this show. But every exhibition of this sort has its hits and misses.

Montreal's critical mass

So, why is Montreal art so strong these days? First, you have to credit the strong art schools in Montreal and Quebec City. Looking at the CVs of these artists, one sees most of them are homegrown talents trained at Concordia University or the University of Quebec at Montreal. (Just a handful have gone on to hone their skills at places like Cal Arts or Columbia in the United States or Goldsmiths in London.) These programs, coupled with the viability of Quebec's artist-run-centre scene and the highly charged political push for cultural integrity over the past several decades – plus the critical funding for the museums to support it – have clearly given extra momentum to the province's artistic production.

With all its vitality and freshness, the show leaves one with the unmistakable impression of Montreal's ascendancy. Quebec artists are emerging now knowing who they are, apparently not seeking validation from elsewhere to feel empowered. Let's note: Montreal is home to the only international biennial in Canada (organized by the Centre International d'art contemporain), something English Canada has never pulled off. And nowhere in Canada has a museum committed to a regular showcase of this sort for Canadian contemporary art. (Province of Ontario, you're getting your butt kicked here.) It's telling that the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal is the first to take the lead with its new Triennial. Refusing wannabe status, and with its leading institutions honouring the home culture with discernment and passion, Montreal is suddenly looking like the sexiest thing around.

Nothing Is Lost, Nothing Is Created, Everything Is Transformed continues at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal until Sept. 7 (514-847-6232 or www.macm.org).