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LORNA BAUER: TOOLS FOR IDLERS GALERIE NICOLAS ROBERT, MONTREAL

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Installation view, Lorna Bauer: Tools for Idlers, Galerie Nicolas Robert, Montreal

Lorna Bauer

Tools for Idlers

Galerie Nicolas Robert (<https://www.galerienicolasrobert.com>)

Montreal

October 20 – November 24

By **JAMES D. CAMPBELL** October, 2018



"As I stood there with the dim outline of the forest all around I was spellbound. Then the first petal began to move and then another as the flower burst into life."

-- Margaret Mee, Diaries of an Artist Explorer

Lorna Bauer's new works have size and depth, and generous helpings of gravitas and grace. This exhibition, her third solo at the gallery, is tiered with liminal meanings and collates several different manifestations of her work, meaningfully dovetailing them into a compelling environmental installation.

Her new body of work draws upon discoveries made while on a research residency in Rio de Janeiro where she became immersed in the Sitio, the home and garden of the late Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, as well as the site for his collaborations with acclaimed British botanist and illustrator Margaret Mee. It also includes sundry images taken while exploring the architect Le Corbusier's famous apartment building in Marseille, France.

As is usually the case with Bauer, her deep and abiding devotion to singular research areas shines through here in the finished work, with its implicit homage to Mee, whose work was deemed extraordinary because "it was as if she had entered the plant itself." [1] Similarly, Bauer inhabits Mee's maverick endeavour, notably her botanical illustrations, as if entering the mind of the botanist and in turn making a home for it within her own aesthetic, working its permutations through with both hand and eye, precision and ardour.

Matthew
Marks
Gallery

Anton Kern
Gallery

Gagosian



Lorna Bauer, *Unité d'habitation #2*, 2018. Pigment print, 50" x 40" (127 x 102 cm)

Mee's status as one of the finest botanical artists of the last century grew out of her many expeditions to the Murutucum basin in the depths of the Amazon, that "haven of green peace" as she once called it. She became affiliated with São Paulo's Instituto de Botanica in 1958, documenting and painting specimens she found in the deep rainforest. She was drawn to some of the most exotic plant species then extant in the Amazon basin. In a written account of her sixth expedition of 1970, she spoke of the almost profane joy of discovering the unearthly orchid *Cattleya violacea* with its profusion of long purple dangling blooms. Other plant groups that entranced Mee included the Bromeliads with their daunting array of flower spikes and thorns. Bauer has showcased many of these Mee favourites in her photographs.

Mee's ruling passion for Bromeliads was shared with Burle Marx. For many years, he had collected a wide variety of indigenous tropical plants. Marx expressed his respect for Mee the artist in saying that she is one "who seeks to portray the intricate beauty of the many plants which have so far passed unnoticed in a world where greed and ambition ruthlessly destroy our wonderful heritage". Having endured a succession of perilous travels throughout the Amazon, Mee was killed upon her return to the UK in a car accident near Leicester at age 79. She had just returned from her 15th and last Amazonian expedition where she had lived the triumph of putting to paint the rare flowering of the epiphytic cactus, *Selenicereus wittii* -- the huge white blossoms of which only appear on one night of the year and fade by dawn's early light, earning it the enviable name Moonflower.



Lorna Bauer; *In photographs windows are never covered with curtains*, 2018. Pigment print, 30" x 24" (76 x 61 cm)

If Mee is the heroine here, another spoke in the wheel that fires Bauer's heuristic reasoning and imagination is the aforementioned work of Burle Marx, in hectic dialogue with that icon of Modernist architecture and the built world Le Corbusier. In 1929, the latter was surveying the verdant Amazon from the window of an airplane, seeing only an explosion of putrid mould-like growth below. [2] It's worth noting that almost 10 years earlier, Le Corbusier in his Purism essay said "Let us leave to the clothes-dryers the sensory jubilation of the paint tube". [3] He was enamoured of mathematical objects but the full chromatic array of the rainforest? No. This sort of overbearing colonial-minded negativity finds its polar opposite in Burle Marx's humane landscape designs born of love and humility. In 1938, Burle Marx was commissioned to design the gardens for the new Ministry of Education building in Rio de Janeiro. The building had been designed by a group of Brazilian architects with Le Corbusier acting in the role of advisor and consultant. Various commentators have suggested that Le Corbusier's negative attitude to the natural landscape of the Amazon rainforest was subsequently countered by Burle Marx when the latter integrated the same landscape tropes that Le Corbusier so despised into his gardens for Brazil's first modernist skyscraper. [4]



Lorna Bauer, *Sitio Roberto Burle Marx #3*, 2018. Pigment print, 50" x 40" (127 x 102 cm)

As far as Le Corbusier goes, drawing was the sounding board for his making sense of the external world, locating him in space, time and circumstance. He contrasted it with photography, which he saw as the lesser medium. He once famously said that by working with the hands we “enter the house of a stranger”, whereas working with the camera was merely “a tool for idlers, who use a machine to do their seeing for them.” [5]

Bauer’s title for this show is, of course, chosen with tongue planted firmly in-cheek. For she is no “idler” and her instrument no mere “tool”. It is much closer to what Le Corbusier had in mind when he eulogized the act and art of drawing. The spirit of criticality that infuses her work can be felt in the image that also supplies the title of the exhibition: *The Camera is a tool for idlers* (2018), a beautifully Bauhausian shot from the roof of a sort of sidewalk sale below, with offerings like athletic shoes and so forth, a response to what Le Corbusier

registered about the tropical terrain of the Amazon from his vantage point way up high. It is perhaps the closest that Bauer has come to a political statement by turning Le Corbusier's sentiment on its head and with a certain subtle, obliterative sarcastic finesse.



Lorna Bauer, *The camera is a tool for Idlers*, 2018. Pigment print, 48" x 60" (122 x 152 cm)

However, it is interesting to note that, and as a tribute to Bauer's remarkable achievement as a photographic artist, she is coming as close to a touchstone of lived embodiment as Le Corbusier held that only drawing can. [6] She understands the camera so well that she can reach out and palpate the subtle essence of things seen and somehow implant that essence in the images we see here, as if by a subtle magic that escapes our understanding, even as it moves us and captures our imagination.

This is as true for works that capture places and structures in Le Corbusier territory in France as it is with Margaret Mee's botanical specimens. Consider Le Corbusier's *Unité d'habitation* flat roof apartment terrace, part of the aforementioned building also known as *Cité radieuse* (Radiant City) in Marseille, where Bauer spent time. The flat roof is designed as a communal terrace and has magnificent views of the Mediterranean and Marseille. Bauer photographed from unusual vantage points as we see here in *The Camera is a tool for idlers* (2018) and *Unité d'habitation #1* (2018) and *Unité d'habitation #2* (2018), the latter with two children bringing a remarkably redemptive human presence into the scene. These images are exhibited across from others in counterpoint and complementarity with an equally luminous green palette like *Margaret Mee Shade House* (2018) and *In photographs windows are never covered with curtains* (2018), the latter with its marvellous Mee botanical specimen.



Lorna Bauer, *Margaret Mee Shade House*, 2018. Pigment print, 40" x 50" (102 x 127 cm)

And, as noted, Bauer is a tireless and gifted researcher. Her earlier series *Blue Fountain* was based on her extensive researches and photo work around the home of the late Modernist architect Arthur Erickson. Bauer's work is often grounded in place, and her interest in architecture is a recurrent and longstanding one, as we see here with Burle Marx and Le Corbusier.

While best known for her photo-based work, Bauer has recently moved strongly and with a certain evolutive logic and poetic integrity into object-based installation and sculpture that complement her photographic images. Several beguiling sculptural installations are included in the current show, including ones that include haunting blown glass sculptures. One of these, and certainly the most expansive and intensively worked, is *The Hand of Mee and the Moonflower no.2* (2018), a sort of work table or ground or shrine on the surface of which three gloves of perforated steel wed to cast glass forms seem to move restlessly as though reading braille latitudes and longitudes in search of crystal spheres that are overwhelmingly elegant surrogates for Mee's elusive Moonflower. **WM**

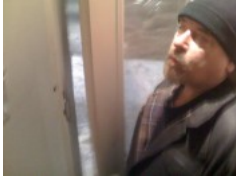
Endnotes

1. See Rebecca Lemire, "Lorna Bauer", gallery exhibition text, Galerie Nicolas Robert, 2018
2. Ibid.
3. Le Purisme appeared in the fourth issue of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, 1920, 369–86. Translated into English and appearing as "Purism" in Robert L. Herbert, ed., *Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1969) 58–73.

4. Rebecca Lemire, op. cit.

5. See Lemire.

6. See Lemire.



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