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The Quebec Triennial: Eyes Front

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL OCT 7 2011 TO JAN 3 2012

by DANIEL BAIRD



Numa Amun *Citadelle des sens (Vert)* 2007–9 Courtesy Illingworth Kerr Gallery

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Standing on the Place des Festivals outside the [Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal](#) during the opening of the 2011 Quebec Triennial, which the curators have titled “Le travail qui nous attend/The Work Ahead of Us,” intense searchlights suddenly burst into the perfectly clear October night sky, gaily dancing and criss-crossing, as though happily anticipating an air strike. Each beam had a remarkably physical, tactile concreteness, its whiteness a kind of ghostly marble, so that Montreal-based Mexican artist [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#)'s spectacular *Intersection articulée. Architecture relationelle 18* creates a dynamic and improvisatory architecture in the city's air and sky. While in these late days in the war on terror, Lozano-Hemmer's work inevitably evokes military surveillance systems and remote-controlled drone attacks, *Intersection articulée. Architecture relationelle 18*, activated and controlled by visitors to the site, is strangely liberating—a monumental art that can intervene in the overdetermined urban landscape's final great, undefined space.

If Lozano-Hemmer's piece is in the mode of the technological sublime, [Dean Baldwin](#)'s wonderfully messy, and rickety, portable bar *Ship in the Bottle*, set at the base of the museum's main stairs on opening night, is a participatory installation on an intimate, sticky, slightly inebriated scale. By the time I rolled into the opening from contemplating Lozano-Hemmer's gyrating sky, Baldwin's makeshift bar set for his own idiosyncratic concoctions resembled something one might find on a beachfront at a tropical resort after a long night—tables piled with oyster shells and squeezed lemons and empty bottles of hot sauce, the booze running low as the party roared upstairs. Baldwin is a kind of Paul McCarthy without the atavistic self-loathing, and his work set the tone for an exhibition mercifully free of moralizing: art should be approached from the position of the shipwrecked and slightly depraved.



Grier Edmundson *The Work Ahead of Us* 2008 Installation view Courtesy the artist

Astutely curated by Marie Fraser, Lesley Johnstone, Mark Lanctôt, François LeTourneux and Louise Simard, and accompanied by an encyclopedic 500-page bilingual catalogue with essays by the curators and by art historians Johanne Sloan, Patrice Loubier, Eduardo Ralickas and Bernard Schütze, the exhibition's evocative title, "The Work Ahead of Us," is taken from a 1920 essay by Russian constructivist visionary Vladimir Tatlin, or more precisely from Montreal-based artist [Grier Edmundson's](#) 2008 installation of the same name, which included a version of Tatlin's famous and unrealized [Monument to the Third International](#).

While Edmundson's borrowing from Tatlin may be tinged both with irony and nostalgia, looking back as it does on a kind of utopianism in art and politics that has been relentlessly discredited over the past century, the title is an apt one for a survey of art by largely young and mid-career artists that falls in the midst of an ever-expanding global crisis whose implications for the future no one is in a position to understand: we may not be heirs to a revolution, but we are heirs to a future whose levels of indeterminacy are greater than any in generations.

The great visionaries of the Russian avant-garde, from Vladimir Tatlin to El Lissitzky to Dziga Vertov, believed in the radical reinvention of pictorial language, and that the work ahead of them was, well, everything. "We are witnessing a reinvestment of the space of the exhibition, envisaged here not as neutral, nor as ideologically loaded, but rather as a site where anything can happen," Lesley Johnstone writes in her introductory essay, and perhaps the work ahead of us, in this distinctively un-utopian age, is to maintain a sense of art as a place where anything can happen.



Mathieu Beauséjour *Icarus (La Récolte)* 2010 Installation view Courtesy Éponyme Galerie Bordeaux / photo David Barbour

In spite of the curatorial nod to the Russian avant-garde, some of the strongest art in “The Work Ahead of Us” involves a virtuoso display of drawing and painting on a kind of manic overdrive.

In the wall emblem in [Mathieu Beauséjour](#)'s installation *Icarus (La Récolte)*, a shirtless, sandal-wearing peasant wields a scythe, and his head is an empty circle from which a dense, ecstatic sunburst of lines radiate. The Icarus legend has always been an ambivalent one, a tale of human overreaching and of human subjection and defeat in the face of higher, more brilliant powers; Beauséjour's image suggests class consciousness suddenly gone explosively psychedelic.

[Jim Holyoak](#) and [Matt Shane](#)'s immersive and subtle wall-sized drawing *Quagmire* manages to be psychedelic purely on the grey scale, with beasts and sprites and forests and disintegrating cities and ghostly otherworlds roiling and swarming across the wall. One is pulled into *Quagmire* as though by unstoppable floodwaters, but one can also pause and marvel at the artists' workmanship.

[Numa Amun](#)'s *Citadelle des sens* series of drawings in ink on paper combines delicacy, analytic precision and obsessive perversity. Hand-drawn with brush and colored ink, the drawings resemble medical textbook prints—if the textbook were for a surrealist medical school with an appreciation for subtle lighting effects. In *Citadelle des sens (Vert)*, for instance, a man's face (Amun's) is cross-sectioned in green and pitched forward, each section displaying a rudimentary and ghoulish visage. In *Citadelle des sens (Jaune)*, a penis in a miasma of yellow is peeled back to its veins and sheath of muscle as though in the midst of a sex reassignment surgery, all that tissue and skin slowly unfolding into a vagina.



Jacynthe Carrier *Rites* 2010–1 Video still Courtesy Collection Loto-Québec

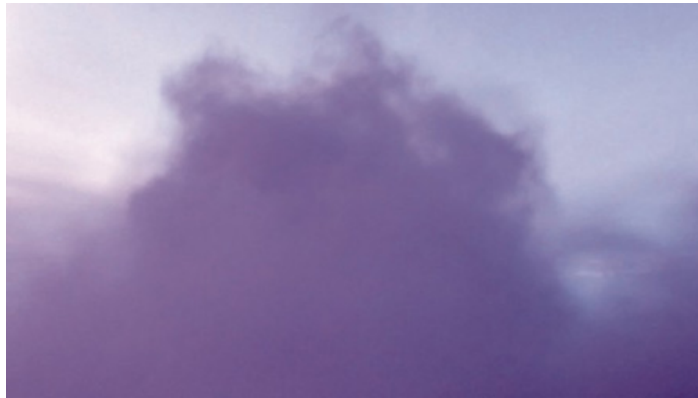
In the work of Beauséjour, Amun and Holyoak and Shane, the process of making is internal to the work, allegorized by it, even—it is impossible to look at Amun's drawings without imagining the almost monastic act of getting each line perfectly even—and the same can be said of the photo-based work included in the show.

In a still from wildly talented 29-year-old [Jacynthe Carrier](#)'s three-screen video installation *Rites*, two young men in white shirts and ties stand blindfolded on a tarp in a field at dusk surrounded by lit living room lamps; they seem to be involved in a form of blind man's bluff, seeking the source of some very interior form of light. In another still, a couple is in a barren field, clouds gathered behind, disentangling a

beautiful snarl of coloured crepe paper ribbons and string. Set outdoors in a sombre, melancholy landscape, the people in *Rites* seem to be trying to find their way through a poetic labyrinth of their own creation.

In [Lorna Bauer's](#) eerie *Éminence grise (Documentary Photographer)*, the image is almost entirely black except for a vertical shard of illumination in which one can decipher the photographer standing behind her tripod, eyes lowered and hands upon the camera: both Bauer and her equipment seem to be receding back into the dark abstraction of the image.

[Charles Stankievecch's](#) video *LOVELAND* involves the intervention of the history of abstract painting into an otherwise hauntingly minimal landscape. Inspired by Jules Olitski's purple spray-painted canvases of the late 1960s, Stankievecch shot *LOVELAND* in the twilit frozen wastes near Dawson City and released a cloud of purple smoke that gradually drifts into the frame. All purple smoke and snowy arctic light, the image becomes a kind of homage to Olitski.



Charles Stankievecch *LOVELAND* 2009–11 Video still

Contemporary art in recent years has seen a near-complete dissolution of the boundaries between painting, sculpture, performance, photography, video, music and more or less anything else artists might think of doing, and that is true of many of the artists included in "The Work Ahead of Us."

While perhaps best known as a photographer, [Ève K. Tremblay's](#) ongoing project surrounding Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* ranges across still photography, video and performance. In *Becoming Fahrenheit 451, Chap 1 & 2 – A Book Becoming a Base*, for instance, one finds Tremblay lying on the floor, eyes closed and book pressed to her chest, trying to remember the text she has just read, as though Bradbury's dark but still pertinent fable might otherwise soon be lost. And in the lovely *Dancing Books (Triumph Over The Fear Of Collapse-Spine #5)*, a column of books wobbles and bends against a blot of dark, encroaching shadow.

In Montreal-based Italian-born artist [Massimo Guerrera's](#) ongoing *La Réunion des pratiques*, he literally transports the clutter of the studio into the gallery: sculptural heads, drawn portraits, tables and vases, ink-blot abstractions and much else are arranged on the floor in a kind of ad hoc temple. *La Réunion des pratiques* is less a single work of art as an assemblage of possibilities, the presentation of a vocabulary, and it is impossible to walk into without imagining rearranging things or adding to them or simply sitting down to meditate: it's a work for which there is no such thing as completion.

Yannick Desranleau and Chloe Lum, who work under the name [Séripop](#) and are also the principals in the noise band [AIDS Wolf](#), invade the gallery with an impertinent carnival of form and colour. For *Dis donc à la*

grosse de se tasser, they've filled the space with a tower of interlocking tubes of pink and orange silk-screened paper, the walls garishly painted as though for the set of a raucous children's play. *Dis donc à la grosse de se tasser* is a kind of indeterminate and self-referential version of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International for an era that doesn't really believe in definitive monuments and that resists settling into definitive forms. The shrill, driving anarchy of AIDS Wolf (its name, Desranleau and Lum say, comes from an urban legend that HIV came from wolves), with Desranleau on drums and Lum screaming, filled the museum on the night following opening day as part of the museum's happenings series, Nocturnes.



Ève K. Tremblay *Becoming Fahrenheit 451* 2007 Performance still Courtesy the artist

An undertaking on the impressive scale of the Quebec Triennial 2011—more than 50 artists, a technically demanding off-site commission, weekly performance events through November and a 500-page catalogue—almost inevitably involves a certain amount of hubris, and “The Work Ahead of Us” is no different in that regard. The curators promise that their staggering amount of research has provided a “comprehensive sense of Québec artistic practice in these early years of the twenty-first century,” and the catalogue essays and the curious glossary of terms included at the end of the catalogue (“Extradisciplinarity,” “Heterogeneity,” “Modernity (return or persistence of),” “Political/Micropolitical Art,” “Québec Art,” etc.) attempt to place the exhibit in the context of the past 60 plus years of art in the province, when in fact what one has here is a group of fiercely talented artists from Quebec, Ontario, British Columbia, Manitoba, the Yukon, Italy, Mexico and the United States, all of whom spend at least part of the year in Montréal for reasons of their own; what fuels their art is pretty much what fuels the art of artists everywhere.

At the press conference for the opening of the exhibit, the artists themselves were present, all of them donning name tags and enduring the speeches as they waited for the cases of chilled champagne to be opened, looking like the members of an Olympic team for some yet to be invented sport. Though champagne in the morning is always a good idea, the art, fortunately, needs no justification, much less a glossary of words that probably shouldn't be used in either French or English. Both the selection and installation of the Quebec Triennial is nearly flawless and does what these kinds of shows rarely manage to do—make art seem an urgent place where anything is possible.

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