

## Article | Québec Gold

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Dominique Gaucher, *Abstractionist's Struggle*, 2006. Photo: Pierre Charrier, © Dominique Gaucher

### **Québec Gold**

**By Peter Dubé**

Much of the discussion around art, if one sets aside work whose principal concerns are formalist in nature, has tended to circulate around concerns that could be characterized as "context." Such notions have been widespread since the triumph of the Duchampian (and let's be frank, it's been a while) and underpin many of the derivative discursive products of contemporary art: "the dematerialization of the art object," "site-specificity" and various forms of "genealogy," to cite just a few of the commonplaces that pop up in art writing time and again. All of these are, to one extent or another, ways of talking about the position of an object in time, or space, or the history of ideas. Given this ubiquity, one feels compelled to underline how much these ideas occupy a peculiarly narrow stretch of intellectual ground. More rare are analyses of political and social context, or economic position, outside the

inevitable, and inward-looking, condemnations (or celebrations, in some quarters) of the “art market.” And, of course, all of this chatter frequently shunts aside a direct consideration of the object itself, the occasion of the writing, this thing before us.

That said, it is such an enlarged notion of “context” that offers us a particularly interesting entry to the recent exhibition Québec Gold, because one of the things that exhibition sets out to do, among, admittedly, many others, is provide some sense of the situation of contemporary art in Quebec right now. The show was a group exhibition held in connection with the 400th anniversary of Quebec City and presented at two venues in Reims, France: the Palais de Tau and the Ancien Collège des Jésuites. Curators André-Louis Paré, Jean-Michel Ross and Élisabeth Pawlowski brought together the work of seventeen artists (or artists’ collectives) (1) for the exhibition.

Given the range and variety of the artists’ practices, the strength of much of the work selected (and, by extension, the rigour of the collective curatorial eye) Québec Gold’s serious ambitions are well served. While corralling so much diversity, the exhibition illustrates a trio of themes that the curators suggest are prominent in contemporary Quebec art: humour, the subversion or détournement of signs and symbols, and ideas of territory—both real and fictional. This thematic strategy, in itself, is a kind of regulatory function, an attempt—I will suggest here—to contextualize. And, as this contention is central to the exhibition’s focus, a discussion of the specific works and their relationship to such a framework is in order.

Humour is certainly present in Québec Gold. Doyon-Rivest’s poster interventions, *Voici Logopagus* and *Gentil Logopagus*, which appeared in a number of locations around Reims, abundantly (if a little glibly) spoofed the conceits of mass-media advertising. The smiling, suited and conjoined twins (they are attached, appropriately enough, at the head) that are the substance of the images are reminiscent of muppets, while—being life-sized—they also manage to echo the padded suits used in combat training. In the images the pair hold kittens and gesture amicably to viewers while selling nothing but their own presence.

The strategy is one that pointedly empties out the communicative function of ads in order to foreground their formal manipulations—their glossiness, their imagery, their insidious “pleasantness.” The posters, emptied of any “pitch” become perfectly articulated nonsense. In a related way, BGL’s floor-piece of an icily white and “melted” Darth Vader, titled *Born Again*, manages to upend the colour-coded conventions of “evil” and the mythologizing pretensions of popular culture with a giggle. The example of *Victoire sur la banane*, Cooke-Sasville’s installation of banana peels in the courtyard of the Palais de Tau, on the other hand, deploys a broader sort of humour, lending what is essentially slapstick an absurdly stately presence. In all of these cases, humour is deployed, curiously enough, in ways that blur the boundary-defining functions of cultural codes, inverting high and low, the serious and the slight, creating a contemporary iteration of one of the very oldest functions of humour.

The work of Yannick Poulliot, displayed in the Jesuit College, is an exemplary case of the curators' second theme, *détournement*. Here, the artist renders furniture in the style of the French eighteenth century, or the English Regency period, unusable. Chairs cannot be sat in because of scale, position, their attachment to another chair; canapés are made equally impossible to access and for identical reasons. The lustrous fabrics and glossy woods are assembled so as to reprise their historical antecedents and highlight their "uselessness," both in the sense of the particular *détournement* to which they have been subjected, and in a self-conscious echo of the relationship of a lack-of-utility to luxury status. Moreover, in their conjoined condition, they simultaneously suggest penetrations both violent and sexual, thereby geometrically expanding the "displacement." For Québec Gold Mathieu Beauséjour (one of just two artists, with Cooke-Sasville, to present new work for the event) extends his investigation into the iconographies of economic and social power by removing the state portraits from coins and isolating them in formless black backgrounds in the series *Kings and Queens of Quebec*. In so doing, the image is stripped of its ordinary "official" status and given an ambiguous new one, equally prominent, but rootless, paradoxically rendered more potent and more vulnerable at once, both disturbing and poetic.

Finally, an array of "territories" is offered in Québec Gold. This theme may be the most pervasive under consideration, and the artists approach it in a fascinatingly eclectic manner. Consider Emmanuelle Léonard's pointed interrogation of the border between territories: those who may enter versus those who may not, the limits of personal space, the many varieties of privacy. Leonard tests all of these with shiver-inducingly direct videotape: *Guardia, resguárdeme*. Using a camera hidden on her person the artist walked the streets of Mexico City, approaching, passing and recording on-duty security guards. The resultant parade of faces and gazes on the screen underlines, beyond the clear boundary-function of security guards as such, the extent to which territory is defined by the presence of other people: how close we stand to them, the extent to which we interact, even soundlessly, and the way in which their sheer physical presence confirms or establishes our own corporeality. Yann Pocreau's photos pick up on something of this thread as well, focusing on the body and its occupation of space in a number of images that are both beautiful and uncomfortable-looking. Even better, they are wonderfully playful in their prodding of the deadpan, mystery-mongering treatment of the figure that seems to have become somewhat conventionalized in recent photo work. Dominique Gaucher's paintings, among them *Because It's There* and *Abstractionist's Struggle* (both 2006) explore territory via a different strategy. The pictures marry hyper-realist treatment to oneiric ambiance, bringing together, for example, the indoors and the outdoors, a room and a vast snow-field, the natural world and the artificial. With a particularly bravura touch, he joins incongruities and blends multiple, conflicting representations in a profound derangement of perceptual assumptions. Gaucher's paintings, in some sense, investigate territory by questioning its

limits, its boundaries, and difficult questions of definition. They dissolve beginnings and endings, our ability to distinguish factuality and fictionality, and the role of the visual in all of that.

Thus, the exhibition does illustrate the themes raised by the curatorial team, and in doing so provides a picture of the art scene in Quebec as it stands now. It is a strong statement, with a deliberate, rigorous focus, and, not surprisingly, therefore, like most such statements it begs a host of questions in response, and pulls at its viewer as an interlocutor.

However effective some of the work assembled is, faced with so determined an exhibition, a viewer must ask him or herself what, for example, is the effect of choosing a thematic grid for an exhibition whose mission is—at least partly—to survey contemporary work as it is made in Quebec? There are other possibilities: surveying by genre, by medium, by region, et cetera. Moreover, given that a thematic grid was chosen, one might ask why—for example—a particular theme, such as humour, is noted as particularly Quebecois when it is equally prominent in English Canada? In Toronto, any walk down Queen Street West will uncover a plethora of witty, ironic and even slapstick works.

One immediately thinks of Allyson Mitchell's *Lady Sasquatch* (both hilarious and macabre, a delightful and psychoanalytically-inflected hybrid), or of how the MOCCA's exhibition of Kent Monkman's work included a presentation of the artist's persona Miss Chief Eagle Testicle. Similar examples can be found in other countries surely. Moreover, the same ubiquity marks *détournement* and notions of territory as strategies and themes: the flow chart narratives and information maps of Mark Lombardi, or the detoured film classics of Klaus von Bruch and Ulrike Rosenbach's *Thousand Kisses*, or—more widely-known—Serrano's use of religious iconographies could be read as such.

Or, on another level of inquiry, why so slender a selection of painting, a mere two artists of the seventeen, when so many Quebec painters are producing startlingly strong work. And what is the viewer to make of the absence of people of colour from the exhibition given the increasingly multi-cultural makeup of Quebec? Or unambiguously "queer" art, regardless of the actual orientations of any of the exhibiting artists? As one approaches the work and wrestles with it, an endless progression of other possibilities arises... one wants to say unbidden, but they are, in fact, very much bidden. They are evoked by the show itself, it's striking work and sheer deliberateness.

So, I do not, let me be clear on this, raise these questions here in any desire to suggest what the show should have been (obviously a show can, and should, be whatever its curators and artists determine) nor to suggest any critical or curatorial failing in the show, quite the contrary. The asking of such questions is the best proof of Québec Gold's profound vitality. (2) (Though one could argue they underline some problems entirely extrinsic to the exhibition, notably the impact the globalization of academic discourses and the art market is having on local specificity, not to say idiosyncrasy.) These questions arise because Québec

Gold succeeds on its own terms. No show could ever be more than “a” (as opposed to “the”) picture of contemporary art in a particular time and place... and one is unlikely to wish that it could be. The offering of any single picture obliges, in the finest dialectical fashion, the viewer to imagine others. A survey exhibition—any survey exhibition—works to precisely the degree it requires such questioning. It is effective to the extent to which it creates a condition of necessary interrogability. And that, one should underline, is a very great virtue. After all, the asking of difficult questions is one of the things good art is supposed to do.

#### NOTES

1. The invited artists were: Jean-Pierre Aubé, Mathieu Beauséjour, BGL, Sylvain Bouthillette, Cooke-Sasseville, Michel de Broin, Doyon-Rivest, Jérôme Fortin, Dominique Gaucher, Pascal Grandmaison, Isabelle Hayeur, Guillaume Lachapelle, Emanuelle Léonard, Yann Pocreau, Yannick Pouliot, Michael A. Robinson and Ève K. Tremblay.

2. For example, one might have asked similar questions of the much-ballyhooed Triennale québécoise at the Musée d’art contemporain, which included a number of artists that overlap with Quebec Gold. However, in the case of the Triennial, the sheer size of the show and the “non-theme” guiding it make the show feel a little too sprawling and unfocussed.