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The Perils and Pleasures of the Contemporary Biennale: Case in Point, Montreal

by Adrian Dannatt



Nicolas Grenier, *Promised Land Template*, 2014, architectural installation: wood, acrylic, construction materials, light, filters, three painting and a cactus, 366 x 366 x 650cm (courtesy of the artist and Galerie Art Mûr in Montréal)

As every city on the globe seemingly has its own biennale these days, necessarily some are less well known than others. I am something of an expert in relative obscurity, having mounted the world's smallest, the *195 Hudson Street, Apartment 2A Biennale*⁶ in my own humble abode. La Biennale de Montréal is also amongst the less celebrated biennials, and in fact it was only by complete chance, spying a poster out of the metro window on my arrival in that city, that I was aware that it was taking place. But what it may lack in celebrity it makes up for in local vim and vigour, and indeed in many ways it also serves as a useful paradigm, a sort of perfect example, of the perils and pleasures of the contemporary biennale.

Just as the Venice Biennale remains notorious for its governmental politics, the Montreal Biennale does not disappoint on the front of bureaucratic intrigue, and has gone through mutations and machinations to arrive at its current incarnation. Launched in 1998 by the Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal, the event has subsequently seemingly been merged with the Triennale de Québec, devoted to largely Francophone practitioners within the state of Québec, to slightly confusing effect. Thus what was originally an ambitiously international event, with two equally pan-international organisers including the celebrated New Zealand curator Gregory Burke, somehow gained two extra curators and a strong Québec quota of artists. As a result the show is now precisely divided between Canadian and international artists, of the 50 participants 16 being from Québec and nine from elsewhere in Canada. To confuse things further, a fifth curator emerged at the last moment, one Sylvie Fortin, the 'Directrice générale et artistique' whose contribution as 'Executive Director' remains entirely mysterious.



Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, *The Prophets*, 2013, mixed media, 125 x 1300 x 81 cm (courtesy of the artists; installation views Henie Onstad Kunstsenter)

The fundamental difference between ‘gallery’ artists and ‘Biennale’ artists was once brilliantly explained to me by Jeffrey Deitch, and the Montreal Biennale certainly makes clear that it wants no truck with what might be considered more representative commercial elements, even symbolically opening right bang between the opening night of FIAC and the Toronto Art Fair. As a statement this makes clear that Montreal does not need either Paris nor Anglophone Toronto and could never be confused with any such art fair. Thus while the staple fare of any fair, its bread and butter, remains painting, this Biennale has boldly blacklisted so old fashioned a medium. Indeed despite listing ‘painting’ in its publicity material as one of its ingredients there are precisely three actual paintings in this entire large exhibition. As it happens these are extremely interesting, held together in an engaging architectural installation, a wooden box with weird traction sandpaper flooring, by local artist Nicolas Grenier, and one of them, *Incoming Flux*, (2014), in oil and acrylic on wood, is amongst the most intriguing and accomplished paintings I’ve seen for a long while. But it is typical that these paintings are seemingly only considered acceptable for the Biennale because they deal with a subject matter, a topic, a social or intellectual issue, rather than just being purely visually or aesthetically rewarding. Grenier’s box construction is next to a long display of wonderful little objects laid out by Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, but these are not allowed merely to be attractive and amusing tiny sculptures. Titled “The Prophets”, they are in fact ‘models’ of various economic models — 3D renderings of statistics. It seems that you are allowed to make art that resembles ‘art’ so long as there is also some weighty discourse or additional theoretical explanation behind it. This is true of several of the stand-out works of the show, whether John Massey’s strikingly dense black and white digital prints – apparently all about ‘language’ – or Suzanne Treister’s wonderful coloured drawings and spectacular wall work, all of which detail alternative histories of the 20th century.

Even the best of the audio-visual works in the exhibition, Oleg Tcherny’s subverted travelogue *La Linea Generale* (2010) almost excuses its visual beauty with the voice of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Amongst the few works to just “be what they are” without extra-mural justification are Thomas Hirschorn’s brutal 4-minute video *Touching Reality* (2012) and the seemingly casually scattered stuffed animals of Abbas Akhavan, one of the real discoveries of this Biennale.

Like any Biennale, Montreal’s supposedly has a theme, “L’avenir – Looking forward“ which is, according to this classic example of a statement written by committee, meant to examine “recent developments in contemporary art in relationship to speculation, futurity and the history of future projection, and the currency of projecting into the future.” And like any biennial, the actual show only has the faintest possible connection to its ostensible theme whose interchangeable generic category headings immediately vanish from the viewer’s memory.

This vision of the future, as far as art itself is concerned, is very heavy on video and film and if I had obeyed my usual strict rule of not devoting longer than five minutes to audio-visual work I could have whisked through the whole show in an hour. The actual total running time for the assembled video runs over ten hours by my calculation. One has to ponder who apart from the curators (if even they) actually sits through all of this stuff to the bitter end. And when you decide, just for once, to see an artist's film all the way through to the last frame, chances are it will consist of live, real-time transmission, without beginning or end.



Dominique Gaucher, foreground Plantation, 2014. Wood, metal and matches, 36 x 120 x 180 inches and hanging, Delta, 2011-2012. Acrylic, oil and paper on canvas, 180-1/4 x 422 inches. Courtesy of Arsenal, Montreal

Essential to a gnawing sense of frustration is that the Biennale must be spread out over a vast array of locations. In this respect at least Montreal is relatively manageable, the majority of the exhibition being held in one central building, the renowned Musée d'art contemporain, although they have provided at least one venue which one cannot visit at all, the 'ville souterraine' being entirely off the map, where 'Adaptive Actions' are apparently collaborating with local workers in a project destined to be always invisible.

Treking to the outlying venues has unexpected rewards in the non-Biennale related art one sees by accident. Thus, for instance, the Arsenal Art Contemporain, a mind-bogglingly gigantic art hangar to make even the largest Gagosian space seem modest, introduces us to the astonishing gigantic 'paintings' of Dominique Gaucher. The Arsenal is hosting a couple of videos for the Biennale, but it is Gaucher who is the revelation. Likewise at the gallery Parisian Laundry to which one repairs to see a new film by Edgar Arceneaux, one can instead discover the accomplished, sophisticated paintings of Paul Hardy.

Even at the Gare Centrale hunting everywhere for some site specific project nobody has heard of or ever seen, one is sent instead to see a wonderful show of shadow sculptures made from cut out boxes, all by some nameless artist.

But then, fundamentally, biennials of this nature are a public relations exercise for the host city, so kudos to them for enabling serendipitous encounters in their lost suburbs.