

Fixating on Futurity: 5 Works at the Montréal Biennial

BY [ASHTON COOPER](#) | OCTOBER 28, 2014



Andrea Bowers's "Courtroom Drawings (Steubenville Rape Case, Text Messages Entered As Evidence)," 2013.
(Courtesy the artist and Susan Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects/ Photo by Robert Wedemeyer)

“The future doesn’t mean so much to us,” says a British retiree in Emmanuelle Léonard’s 2014 video “Postcard from Bexhill-on-Sea.” Situated within this year’s [Montréal Biennial](#), on view at the city’s Musée d’art contemporain and various other venues, the piece fits in perfectly (although somewhat drearily) with the exhibition’s theme, “L’Avenir (Looking Forward).”

In thinking about the future-centric exhibition, it’s hard not to comment on just how many art shows lately are taking on the subject of futurity. Earlier this year, I visited the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts’ [“Dissident Futures,”](#) which looked to artists for ideas about our future in the tech-laden Bay Area milieu. And last week, during the Montréal Biennial’s opening festivities, Okwui Enwezor announced that his Venice Biennale would focus on “All the World’s Futures.”

With the remarkable amount of energy swirling around artists' visions of the future, the Montréal Biennial provided some fantastic entry points into the topic. Not all the works are as explicitly future-focused as Léonard's (many of them are about looking back at moments of looking forward), but a great deal tackle issues of the economy, the environment, and technology. Almost all of the work in the biennial also revealed a very heavy emphasis on research-based projects — a characteristic particular to Montréal, [according to executive and artistic director Sylvie Fortin](#).

With outlooks both bleak and bright, here are five artists from the show, all featured at the Musée d'art contemporain, who stood out.

Emmanuelle Léonard

The aforementioned video work of Montreal-based artist Léonard is juxtaposed in the show with another 2014 video piece about the elderly, called “La Providence.” While “Postcard from Bexhill-on-Sea” focuses on a retirement community in the UK, “La Providence” takes Montréal's aging community of proselytizing Grey Nuns as its subject. While most the seaside residents have a pessimistic outlook on the future (“Not very good, actually”; “I think the future won't be as good as when I was young”; “Grim, very grim”), the nuns have a calm and confident optimism (“Change is a good thing”; “I feel good”; “We still have a lot of work to do”). In both works, the audio is layered with serene shots of the British seaside or the quiet interiors of the nuns' apartments — a visual and aural experience that is quite moving.

Among the significant amount of video work in the show, other particularly good pieces included Li Ran's “Pretty knowledge” (2012), Susan Norrie's “Rules of Play” (2009-13), and Skawennati's “TimeTraveller™” (2008-13).

Read our interview with Léonard [here](#).

Arctic Perspective Initiative (API)

Comprised of artists Matthew Biederman and Marko Peljhan, API has put together an installation of seven works at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal that illustrate the projects they do far outside of a museum context. Working in the Arctic, the duo — which defines API more as a working group than an artist collective — has collaborated with indigenous peoples as well as scientists and other artists to foreground the region. One such project is the “Phoenix Declaration,” a document drafted during an [open-space conference](#) that asserts the importance of both the Arctic region and the cultures that live there. Also on view are a Common Data, Display and Processing Architecture device; a traditional kallitaaq sled dwelling; and an early drone — all field tools hand-built by the pair.

Read our interview with API [here](#).

Suzanne Treister

Treister's “HEXEN 2.0” (2009-11) takes the form of two giant marker-on-wall diagram drawings as well as 78 smaller pieces (drawn from details of the larger diagrams) that form a set of trippy tech-y tarot cards. Treister filters the history of cybernetics into the divinatory template of tarot and in the process constructs a truly revelatory suite of works — the fun is trying to trace a line between Margaret Mead, transcendentalism, drones, telepathy, and Ken Kesey.

Read our interview with Suzanne Treister [here](#).

Andrea Bowers

In her “Courtroom Drawings” (2014), artist, activist, and Native Ohioan Bowers filled three walls with supersized cell phone screen drawings that present texts exchanged between the convicted rapists, Jane Doe, and other figures from the Steubenville Rape Case. Handwritten by Bowers and two others as they were

read aloud in court, the texts are disturbing evidence not just of a violent crime in small town Ohio, but also of the way that rape culture is deeply embedded in our society.

Read more [here](#).

Klara Hobza

For her ongoing project “Diving Through Europe” (2010-present), Hobza scuba dives in the dirty, industrial waters of cities across the region and records her experience via an underwater video feed as well as second hand documentation from above the water. Going below with her into dark, trash-ridden waters of places like the Hook of Holland, for example, is bizarre and at times terrifying. She bumps into rocks, ascends or descends abruptly, and sometimes crawls out of shallow embankments like a Creature From the Industrial Polluted Lagoon. Hobza’s project is not just wacky; it is also quite dangerous at times. Twice she is pulled into the turbulence of a shipping container — encounters that easily could have ended her life. Hobza is working her way from the North Sea to the Black Sea — an expedition she expects to take decades.