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At Quebec City's Manif d'art 7, we shall overcome Artists explore newest forms of social organization

BY JOHN POHL, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE MAY 9, 2014



Instead of menace and aggression, Jean-Robert Drouillard's Manif d'art sculptures project vulnerability.

Photograph by: Renaud Philippe , Manif d'art 7

MONTREAL — Art won't save the world, but it can play a role in resisting the economic and political forces that are degrading our living standards, our democratic institutions and our natural environment.

That is the positive message of Vicky Chainey Gagnon, curator of Manif d'art 7, the Quebec City biennial.

Manif d'art's theme of *Résistance: And Then, We Built New Forms* is a welcome antidote to Jake and Dinos Chapman's nihilistic display of skeletal Nazis and piles of plastic corpses at DHC/ART (dhc-art.org). The Chapmans jar us awake — or numb us — but the question remains: What can we do about it?

Chainey Gagnon said art is a part of the political process.

"We're asking: How can the '99 per cent' organize to combat the neo-liberal agenda? It's urgent to address this question."

The entry to Espace 400e Bell, Manif d'art's main venue on the Quebec City waterfront, states the problem. Jarod Charzewski's life-size Second World War toy soldiers on pedestals remind us of the security state, and Claire Fontaine's fluorescent tubes that spell out *Capitalism Kills Love* is an idea that even Pope Francis might agree with.

A wood sculpture of a young woman stops you with her outstretched arm as you enter the exhibition upstairs. Behind her is an array of teens with gas cans and spray paint, the work of Jean-Robert Drouillard.

But instead of menace and aggression, they project vulnerability.

"I'm inspired by my son and his friends," Drouillard said. "They have a huge understanding of politics and society. The way they speak about these subjects is very intelligent and sensitive."

Oliver Ressler provides a few of the "new forms" of social organization that Chainey Gagnon went looking for.

The Austrian video artist interviews people just after Occupy events as they sit in groups and talk. His three videos, shown side by side, are from three cities — New York, Athens and Madrid — and what the participants have to say is strikingly similar.

Decisions are made by participants, not leaders, Ressler said in an interview. And Occupy is continuing to grow under the media radar.

"My work for about 15 years has been informing people about what is going on elsewhere," he said.

Strike Debt, an offshoot of Occupy, buys bundles of personal debt, including student and health-care debt, on the secondary market, he said. Strike Debt can buy \$100 million in debt for as little as \$2 to \$3 million, and then forgives it, he said.

Manif d'art spreads beyond its main venue to sites across the city and to Lévis and Wendake, where Sonny Assu has a wonderful exhibition of posters, fake cereal boxes and paintings that all speak to the theme of resistance — a common theme in contemporary aboriginal art.

There are outdoor installations as well, including one by Abbas Akhavan, who has placed eight-foot-tall cedars around a footpath, and will move them every five days until the footpath is blocked. It's a twist on the traditional *dérive* in which a person voluntarily decides to move about intuitively instead of following a habitual route.

The Méduse is a row of connected buildings that house a number of participating artist-run centres, and a café that serves delectable sandwiches and lunch plates.

At the Bande Vidéo, Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens show a work in which a performer plays a person who breaks down under the influence of drugs meant to keep her functioning in a world in which workers must always be in touch.

"It's not just the injunction (by employers) to be productive," Ibghy said. "We feel the need to be productive."

(Ibghy and Lemmens are among 50 artists and collectives from 22 countries that will participate in BNLMTL 2014. The theme of Montreal's biennial, which opens Oct. 22, is Looking Forward, in which artists will imagine potential futures.)

In Montreal, the second Contemporary Native Art Biennial has opened at Art Mûr and Stewart Hall. Aboriginal artists demonstrate both resistance and resilience in their work, as well as a generous spirit that offers a way forward for all. Storytelling is both a tradition and a tool for future problem-solving.

Curator Michael Patten mentioned how neuroscience is proving that storytelling is a brain activator. It seems that narratives activate parts of the brain associated with the sensory experiences they describe.

Storytelling is a strong component of Michel Lemieux and Victor Pilon's *Dreamscapes*, an exhibition that opened the International Digital Arts Biennial at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The exhibition consists of a 25-minute montage on 10 screens of works created over a 30-year period that combine poetry, sound and images. There is also a room full of props, drawings and models of sets, including one that shows how a ghost image is inserted into a live scene.

I suggested that they are giving away their secrets.

"I hope some young artists will come here to grab some ideas," Lemieux said.

Manif d'art 7: Résistance — And Then, We Built New Forms continues until June 1 at Espace 400e Bell, 100 Quai St-André, Quebec City, and several other locations, including the Huron-Wendat Museum in Wendake. For more information, visit manifdart.org.

Michel Lemieux and Victor Pilon: Dreamscapes, part of the ***International Digital Arts Biennial***, continues until Aug. 31 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1380 Sherbrooke St. W. For more information, visit mbam.qc.ca and bianmontreal.ca.

Storytelling: The Contemporary Native Art Biennial continues until June 22 at Art Mûr, 5826 St-Hubert St., and Stewart Hall Cultural Centre, 178 Lakeshore Rd., Pointe-Claire. For more information, visit artmur.com.

A 1926 painting by Edwin Holgate was purchased for \$2 at a garage sale in Morin Heights, where Holgate built a house in 1946. The buyer didn't recognize the artist, but was familiar with the subject: Grand Manan Island in New Brunswick.

Now the buyer is selling Grand Manan at Heffel's spring auction. The estimated sale price for the small oil painting is \$20,000 to \$30,000. It can be seen Saturday, along with other paintings of local interest, at Heffel's Montreal preview.

The Montreal preview of Heffel Fine Art's May auction ends Saturday, May 10 at Galerie Heffel Québec, 1840 Sherbrooke St. W. For more information, visit heffel.com.

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