



Montreal Biennial looks forward — and back



JOHN POHL, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE More from John Pohl, Special to Montreal Gazette

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Basim Magdy's *Our Spies Saw an Early Pollination Season on the Horizon*.

Basim Magdy / Marisa Newman Projects, New York/Hunt Kastner/Prague

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Looking Forward, the theme of the Montreal Biennial, also looks back to past periods of optimism and utopian ideas — like Expo 67.

I realized that BNLMTL 2014 is no Expo 67 as soon as I entered the rotunda of the Musée d'art contemporain, the main venue for the event. Overhead, criss-crossing banners evoke what co-curator Mark Lanctôt calls the "dizzying near-sublimity" of the Turcot Interchange's web of elevated roadways.

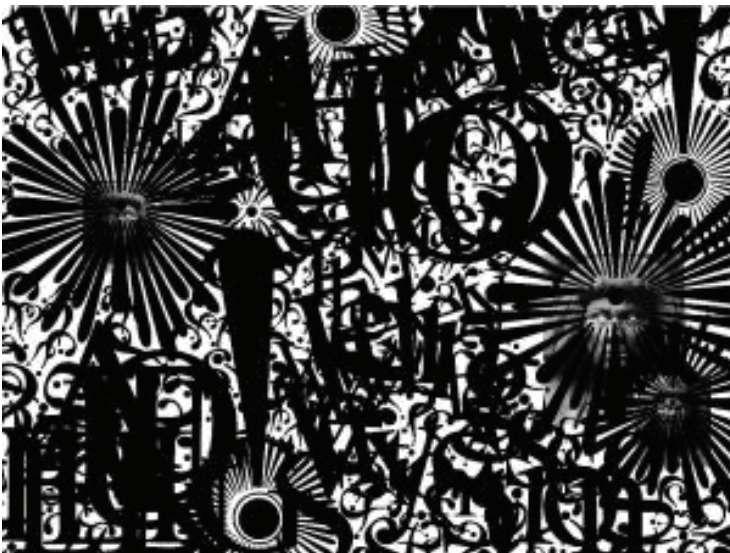
The Turcot was the modernist multi-level miracle highway interchange that opened shortly before Expo 67 but which is crumbling almost 50 years later.

Étienne Tremblay-Tardif strung banners across the open space carrying about 300 printed images — some recalling the evictions that preceded construction — that relate to what the Turcot can teach us about planning its replacement.

But the sobering reality of what actually preoccupies us in the face of multiple crises in Montreal and around the world is in the little display across from the coat check. Jillian Mayer's 400 Nudes consists of images of her own face pasted onto 400 nude selfies posted by women on the Internet. Samples can be taken home.

The biennial's tone is sombre. Examples include Andrea Bowers' replication of text messages between rapists and their drugged victims, and Thomas Hirschhorn's Touching Reality, in which a woman moves her finger across a tablet computer to briefly inspect images, one after another, that show the hideous damage that guns and bombs can inflict on human bodies.

John Massey, in talking about his own work, said that “to function as an artist, you have to have the willingness to look, no matter how hard it is.”



From John Massey's Auto: "To function as an artist, you have to have the willingness to look, no matter how hard it is."

Montreal Biennial

Massey photographs collages of his drawings and gives them one-word titles. His works bristle with contained energy. Auto, he said, has “a sense of a condition and the imperative that drives it,” while

Futurissimus is about “a world reforming around a decision already made, but anticipating a new whole, like another universe.”

Four curtains move randomly around the gallery, alternately hiding and revealing works by Massey and others. The curtains are the work of Ryan Gander, a London-based artist and self-described “fifth curator” to the biennial’s four official curators.

The curtains are black on their exterior, so that when a curtain blocks an entrance, visitors face a black curtain and think they are entering a video-projection room, Gander said.

Gregory Burke, one of the real curators, noted that Looking Forward is as much about the present as the future we imagine. Artists can’t change the world, but may act as catalysts.

Change will come only from “a spirit that impels the individual within the collective,” Burke said in an interview. “People are skeptical of ideological programs.”

Such a spirit may have got loose in the 1960s, but the optimism expressed in Expo 67 was followed by political crises and revelations about the role of organized crime in Quebec’s construction industry.

Massey and the duo of Lisa Steele and Kim Tomczak suggest that a critical mass is needed of people affirming and embracing their fate.

“Life is greatly enhanced by knowing it won’t last,” Lisa Steele said. The prospect of death “helps us to focus on the now.”

The death of aquatic life along our shores and waterways is firmly in the sights of Montreal’s Isabelle Hayeur and Klara Hobza of the Czech Republic.

Hayeur shows images of the Louisiana shoreline that seem to have been made with the camera lens half submerged. The Bayou Terrebonne images show sunny settings above water, but with the murky underwater scene that she has described as an aquatic desert in related images acquired by the National Gallery of Canada.



Klara Hobza's Diving through Europe: Signals: "I had an image of myself as a spy, appearing and disappearing."

Klara Hobza / Soy Capitán, Berlin and Galerie für Landschaftskunst, Hamburg

Hobza has started an underwater journey across the centre of Europe, from the North Sea to the Black Sea via the Rhine and Danube river systems. So far, she has reached Rotterdam.

The initial impetus for the project, which may take decades to complete, came when visiting her grandmother and seeing a tributary of the Danube River as a flowing history of Europe's conflicts and economy,

To avoid being denied access to waterways in industrial areas, she marks her place in the water with a spray-painted plastic bottle meant to resemble floating debris.

"I had an image of myself as a spy, appearing and disappearing," she said in an interview.

She has to come to the surface just to see where she is. The videos that track her progress on YouTube ("TheHobza") show water so dirty her compass is barely visible when held close to the camera on her helmet.