

Montreal Biennial work projects plight of the homeless

BY JOHN POHL, SPECIAL TO THE MONTREAL GAZETTE OCTOBER 17, 2014



Krzysztof Wodiczko's Homeless Projection: Projection of video on facade of Théâtre Maisonneuve at Montreal Biennial.

Photograph by: Kes Tagney/Galerie Lelong New York

Artists who exhibit at international events like the Montreal Biennial can be expected to challenge the visitor with works that have several levels of meaning, some of which are contradictory.

Krzysztof Wodiczko's Homeless Projection, a key event leading up to the opening of the Montreal Biennial on Oct. 22, might be too subtle for its own good.

Wodiczko is projecting video images of the homeless people he interviewed onto the facade of the Maisonneuve theatre, while loudspeakers in front of the Musée d'art contemporain — the main venue for BNLMTL 2014 — let passersby hear their stories.

The breadth of the esplanade on Place des Arts separates the visual and audio components of Wodiczko's projection. It shows homeless individuals sitting behind long desks, as if participating in a panel discussion. From the museum, you can hear their voices, but you can't make out who is talking.

Wodiczko is trying to give voice to the men and women who live in the area being transformed into the Quartier des spectacles. Making it difficult to match a voice with a face just reflects the anonymity that homeless people already endure.

However, it's premature to judge Wodiczko's work. It all depends on how many people stop and listen. And maybe act.

Isabelle Hayeur is more strident in her video projection on a wall facing the St-Laurent métro entrance, which resembles a construction site. The marks on the wall trace the demolished building that previously adjoined it, and are visible during the projection, making it a good setting for a critique of gentrification.

Hayeur seduces with her fast-changing images, but what is the alternative to the process of gentrification, which discards people but recycles the building stock?

More of her works dealing with urbanization and the environment will be shown starting Oct. 22, when the biennial opens at the Musée d'art contemporain. About 50 artists will present works at the museum and at 13 other venues, with events scheduled at 22 locations.

The Darling Foundry, another off-site venue, opened two exhibitions: a video by Li Ran, an artist who lives and works in Beijing, and Lawrence Weiner, an American who lives in New York and Amsterdam.

Before Indulgence, After Freedom, Li Ran's video, shows young men talking about life and art in contemporary China, where money talks, political connections are crucial and "a single slip can cause a lasting sorrow."

The title of Weiner's work, An Abridgement of an Abutment to on near or about the Arctic Circle, is also its total content, written in chalk on the Darling's brick, two-storey gallery walls.

An Abridgement is one of three works by Weiner in the biennial, all of them conceived during a visit to Inuvik in 1969 and referencing the Arctic as a symbol of the precarious state of the environment.

SBC Gallery has the biennial's most engaging work so far. M & A is a creation of Goldin+Senneby (Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby), who hired an actor to rehearse a play written by a hired playwright.

Gerard Harris is expected to follow the script, but the artists aren't present, so he can improvise as he reacts to visitors — who have copies of the script and can intervene, said communications director Megan Bradley.

Harris's job lasts until the production budget — which was invested in a hedge fund — runs out.

The investment strategy, developed by investment banker Paul Leong, is designed to profit from detecting early signs of mergers and acquisitions, which are marked by the buying of stock in the target company in small deals that stay below the market's radar.

The actor's uncertain future invades the script as his rehearsal is interrupted by calls on his cellphone, one offering an investment opportunity, the other offering him a job. He gambles on the investment, but can't accept the job — he doesn't know when his current job ends, and the uncertainty starts to drive him crazy.

During the rehearsal, Harris marks the wall with red paint. Visitors ask him if he is the artist, he said in an interview.

"I'm not the artist, I'm the paintbrush," he responds.

Across the hall from SBC, Galerie Dominique Bouffard is showing paintings by Sébastien Maltais of past Canadiens' heroes in action. The paintings are done in encaustic (pigments in wax) in black and white, and are based on photographs.

Shadows created by photographers' flashes are evident in paintings of the Rocket Richard era, and Maltais is able to reflect the quality of the colour photography of each era in his monochrome paintings. The painting of Larry Robinson and Ken Dryden reflects the grain and high contrast of the relatively slow colour films of the 1970s.

Pigments don't degrade when mixed with wax, as evidenced by Roman paintings that retain their vivid colours after 2,000 years.

Long after images in digital media and on paper — and maybe even "ice hockey" itself — have disappeared, Maltais's legendary heroes will live on.

The Montreal Biennial opens Oct. 22 at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and continues to Jan. 4. Four panel discussions with artists are set for the McCord Museum on Oct. 22. Many other events and guided tours follow. Information: bnlmtl2014.org.

Projections by Isabelle and Krzysztof Wodiczko on until Nov. 22.

Information: bnlmtl2014.org.

Works by Lawrence Weiner and Li Ran continue to Dec. 7 at the Darling Foundry, 745 Ottawa St. Information: fonderiedarling.org and bnlmtl2014.org.

Goldin+Senneby: M & A continues to Nov. 22 at SBC Gallery, 372 Ste-Catherine St. W., Suite 507. Investment banker Paul Leong, actor Gerard Harris and SBC director Pip Day will discuss the project at 2:30 p.m., Oct. 23 at the gallery. Information: sbcgallery.ca.

Sébastien Maltais: Jouer la Game continues to Nov. 1 at Galerie Dominique Bouffard, 373 Ste-Catherine St. W., Suite 508. Information: galeriedominiquebouffard.com.