

CANADIANART

The 2014 Biennale de Montréal: More is More

Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and other venues October 22, 2014, to January 4, 2015

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Simon Denny, *All you need is data: the DLD 2012 Conference REDUX rerun*, 2012. Courtesy Petzel Gallery, New York.

The 2014 Biennale de Montréal, "[L'avenir \(looking forward\)](#)," is a tour de force from curators Gregory Burke, Peggy Gale, Lesley Johnstone and Mark Lanctôt. Running until January 4, this revamped, repositioned edition of what has been former biennale director Claude Gosselin's long-running exhibition of Canadian and international art presents an impressively tight collection of works and installations by 61 artists and artist groups.

The centrepiece is [Simon Denny's](#) *All you need is data: the DLD 2012 Conference REDUX rerun* (2012), an installation that reprises a 2012 digital-culture conference held in Munich. The Berlin-based, New Zealand-born and 2015 Venice Biennale-bound Denny is known for sculptural installations that incorporate his wide-ranging interests in information technology.

In Montreal, Denny mounts information panels summarizing the sessions from the [Digital Life Design conference](#) on a circuitous metal armature that

leads viewers slowly through the gallery via what registers as an orderly crowd-control corridor. This air of mass-audience management meshes somewhat ironically with the self-empowering futurist visions from the conference's high-tech stars that unfold via headlines, pull quotes, graphics and coloured stage-performance images on the individual panels. These people have an exciting story to tell about the ways in which better living is now synonymous with "digital" living. Denny leaves enough friendly rope in his presentation to seem sympathetic with the narrative, yet alert enough with his corralling, conforming, confining sculptural imprint to let us imagine beyond the infective rhetoric of success, ease and egalitarian community.

Denny's installation and its qualified visionary bent play directly to the biennale's theme. [The official curatorial statement](#) describes a show that "examines 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 it delivers on all counts.

One of the most engaging projects in the show is the video series [Time Traveller™](#) (2008–13), installed as a near neighbour to Denny's installation at the [Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal](#). Instead of direct speculation on the near future, this work is a playful, if fierce, engagement with the past as the Montreal-based artist [Skawennati](#) (Tricia Fragnito) shows nine episodes of a web-based sci-fi series that aims at an empowered revisioning of Aboriginal history.

Predicated on the donning of Google-like time-travel glasses, the *Time Traveller™* viewer follows a young, athletic Montreal Mohawk named Hunter through adventures that date from pre-Columbian Mexico in 1490 to a sparkling urban-condo setting in 2121. Equally memorable is Hunter's girlfriend, Karahkwenhawi, who at one point is described as a curator of 21st-century Indigenous art and who likes Sonny Assu, Rebecca Belmore, Hannah Claus and Nadia Myre on her walls. Together, they make a cool, sexy, affectionate pair who bring a savvy contemporary political consciousness to a sad history of victimization, one that seems evermore atrocious in the face of the humane affability of the characters on screen. Of all the futures imagined in the exhibition, Skawennati's is the most welcome. Why the series ([viewable online](#)) is not syndicated for general broadcast in Canada is beyond me; it's a nation-healer.

Painting is not left outside the future either in this biennial. [Nicolas Grenier](#), a former Concordia University and California Institute of the Arts grad who

divides his time between Montreal and Los Angeles, presents a remarkable painting installation called *Promised Land Template* (2014) that creates a funereal desert museum that is a gathering place to consider the complexities of Latin American immigration.

Grenier's subtle, geometrized paintings of hot, far-horizoned vistas contain sparse verbal schematics that invite close scrutiny. One, a table-top ground plane that serves as a landscape, carries the words "end of the line." Below, in darkening bands of colour, is the phrase "indifferent dirt"; overhead other bands are labelled "sunshine," "blue sky" and "approving silence of celestial infinity." The paintings are highly finished and the sandstone-tile floor of the installation lends a grating, tactile aspect that plays into the effortless-seeming transmutation of data and reportage. Where such layered poetics might take him as an artist is anyone's guess. Just about anywhere, likely, but at moments Grenier approaches the eternal metaphysics of early [de Chirico](#)—only it is a century later and this time the artist has a subscription to the *Economist*.

Toronto's [Abbas Akhavan](#) is another subtle show-stopper. He plays a nomadic role in the show with a series of artfully placed taxidermied animals that quietly share space on the periphery of other installed artworks. There's a curled fox near Grenier's wooden museum tomb and songbirds on the floor near [Andrea Bowers](#)'s sky/text drawings. The impact is always startling, always mood-, even boundary-, breaking. The intrusion of these agents of the natural world moves us beyond metaphor or indexical relation to the work at hand to a world outside, where beauty and grace die and disappear as a matter of course.

Equally poised on existential transience are the video works of Montreal's [Emmanuelle Léonard](#). One, *La Providence* (2014), gives us testimonies of several now-retired Grey Nuns remembering their missionary work as they sit in the touchingly sparse accommodations afforded by a now-dwindling religious order. In the other, *Postcard from Bexhill-on-Sea*(2014), sunny English-seaside views of open skies and endless watery horizons are accompanied by the voices of pensioners imagining the future that is left to them.

Those open skies seem to appear again in the vertical panels of Bowers's *Courtroom Drawings (Steubenville Rape Case, Text Messages Entered As Evidence, 2013)* (2014) as light, cirrus-like fragments drifting across empty blue voids. This hand-textured graphic space serves as

background for an astonishing collection of text messages shared between the young men involved in a now-infamous high-school rape case in Ohio. The sheer crassness of the conversations is arresting and the turpitude of the football players charged reads not only as an unfolding confirmation of guilt, but also as a brutal confirmation of a world without a moral compass.

The erasable line between culture and barbarism is also the purview of [Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.*](#) (2014), a video installation that fuses martial arts, Vietnam, Hokusai, capitalism and the 2008 financial meltdown into a down-to-earth essay on the liquidity of all things. Steyerl's HD aesthetics and editing finesse keep the elements fresh and fluid so that the 30-minute video never lapses into being didactic. Watching from the comfort of a curving blue fight mat facing the screen, you feel captive and part of its inventive flow of association.

The same could be said for the biennale. It is an exhibition that brings its viewers closer to the world we live in, closer to the world we *will* live in. In this it lives up to its title and then some, setting quite a standard for two years to come.