

Notes on the 9th Biennial international d'estampe contemporaine.

On a recent trip through Quebec, I wanted to check out the installations by two Toronto artists represented in the print biennial in Trois Rivières. Both Yael Brotman and Libby Hague had shown in exhibitions that I curated in Hamilton in the past.

First impressions of Trois Rivières drew out some similarities with Hamilton: even with remnants of its industrial past clinging to the air (pulp & paper rather than steel), the signs of economic downturn are unmistakable. Aside from the fact that Trois Rivières feels like a quiet French town with medieval rather than industrial gothic architecture, and their printmaking workshop l'Atelier Presse Papier is a bit smaller than Hamilton's Centre3, the support for and interest in contemporary visual art there is overwhelming (unlike Hamilton). Not only does Trois Rivières with a population of approximately 130,000 have 5 major exhibition spaces, they all came together on one project, AND their brochure lists an additional 10 parallel events taking part in the biennial. Imagine, SuperCrawl recognizing that visual art spaces even exist on James Street North!

The intro to the catalogue informs us that the organizers received 385 proposals, from which they selected 57 artists from 26 countries. Despite the fact that the juried show format of the event would put many artists off –I had given the call for submissions a miss because I refuse to pay for the privilege of a rejection¹– the range of works on exhibit offer a thorough view into contemporary printmaking practices.

To start with the people I know, both Yael's and Libby's pieces confirm the contemporaneity of printmaking. I say this in response to a recent comment on

¹ Other signs of the frustratingly archaic juried show format were the awarding of prizes and honorable mentions linked to corporate sponsors, absence of artist fees, a catalogue with numerous forewords and advertisements, but no bios, artist statements or critical texts.

Akimblog, by Sarah Todd, Calgary June 30, 2015, "The hard-core medium specificity doesn't seem very uh, contemporary (whatever that means)."

Printmaking is as hard-core or fluffy as any other mode of visual representation, and it is equally fluid. I admit to a bias in favour of evidence of art as work, as in the labour that went into its creation, including the mental effort of the conceptual process. A number of the artists in the biennial started out with prints, which they then turned into 3D objects and structures, book works and installations and one bulletin board inviting viewer interaction.

Libby Hague had previously used prints in video animation; her woodcut and mixed media *Tower*, *Dog with nifty jacket*, *Gesture* and *Homecoming (Rhizome) with birds* construct an enchanted-forest-like narrative where tiny human figures are engaged in some sort of physical contact sport, while the birds are enjoying magical flowers. The curators grouped the pieces under "Archives: Collectible Object," suggesting that perhaps they would function in curio cabinet dioramas. My first impression of Yael Brotman's etching-clad miniature building materials was that they seemed to be made of marble. The precision with which the pieces are cut and assembled gives them a sense of strength and weight, balance and grounding at the same time as the imagery has the delicate organic feel of woven or knitted fabric. Brotman's titles, *Tatlin's Fence*, *Boardwalk*, *Blackfriars*, *Trestle*, *Pier I* and *Moorings* suggest that the pieces are intended to be built in large size. The curatorial grouping in "Occupying Space" confirms their place in the built environment.

Also working in installation, Belgian artist Frederik Langhendries' *Boxes in Transit* piled up banker-size cardboard boxes bearing silkscreened likenesses of shipping containers. Even in its gallery-size format, the piece has an ominous monumental presence. As an exercise in recurring imagery, he included video documentation of the piece in transit. The effect is humorous as the package is tiny compared to its source visual in the shipyard.

In addition to the transformation of the prints into other dimensions, I was really impressed by what printmakers can do with linoleum. Not only do their prints testify to the intense skill involved in carving, some of the artists produced linocuts that look like lithographs, screenprints or digital output. Look up Marta Lech (Poland), Ariane Fruit (France), Angélique Van Wesemael (Netherlands), Michiel Van Nieuwland (Netherlands) and Ontario artist Florin Hategan. Sandra Baud (Switzerland) throws a formal curve to anyone who thinks that the printmaking matrix has to be limited to a linear frame. Her awesome linocut in the series titled *Radiographie* (no 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12), portray political eco-feminist landscapes. Placing the scenes within human torso shaped cutouts the artist negates the need for a background. Similarly independent of the picture plane, April Ng Kiow Ngor (Singapore) creates playful lotus-like imagery. Unfortunately, the label descriptor “intaglio” did not specify how the prints came to be in multi colour with no plate tone and parts that were embossed only. Using spit bites Alberta’s Jill Ho-You similarly challenges conventions in etching to create floating images for her artist book titled *Paper Bodies*. In contrast, illustrating the merit of using the plate as an integral part of the image, Danielle Grosbusch (Luxemburg) creates etchings with aquatint that resemble notes from 19th century botanists. Good etchings and lithographs in the exhibitions were too many to list. Silkscreens, one copper engraving and some haunting mezzotints by Alberta’s Sean Caulfield, all did justice to the potential of each medium. Only one method, one that I am personally attached to, did not come through. The collagraphs by Cuban Ernesto Miguel Blanco Sanciprián were too simple in their glue dripping and at the same time as they were too cluttered with mixed media. In my opinion, his work exemplified the problem of over-finishing in academic painting and would merit the critique of a confining matrix, a limitation that many of the other artists defied.

However, the worst part of the biennial was not one for which to fault the artists, perhaps not even the curators. The thematic grouping linked formal concerns as well as content into dynamic exhibitions in the different spaces. I will blame the

editor and translator. It was the language of the short curatorial paragraphs that introduced the thematic grouping: in both French and English, the artist was always referred to as “he” even though a clear majority of the artists’ names in the catalogue were feminine. This presented a major obstacle to my reading of the works. I got different explanations for this in the different galleries, but it seemed that nobody had raised it before. Good thing the brochure encourages feedback!