

## CRITICAL SUPERBEAST

### The Woman from Magdala: New Work by Steven Beckly, John Haney, and Paul D. MacIntyre

By Amanda Jernigan

John Haney: *Grapple* Art Gallery of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario.

7 May – 31 July 2016

Paul D. MacIntyre: *A Sense of Order* Art Gallery of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario.

7 May – 31 July 2016

Steven Beckly: *Of you, unfolding* Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto, Ontario

6 May – 2 June 2016



Steven Beckly, *Of you, unfolding*, installation view ([*corner poem*], folded photograph, 8.5" x 20", 2016)

This May my husband, John Haney, graduated from the University of Guelph with his M.F.A. in Studio Art. His graduating work is an exhibition called *Grapple*, currently on display at the Art Gallery of Guelph alongside *A Sense of Order*, by Paul D. MacIntyre. John and Paul (apostles? beatles?), along with Steven Beckly, whose graduating exhibition, *Of you, unfolding*, took place at Daniel Faria Gallery in Toronto last month, are part of a close cohort of seven M.F.A. students, the remaining four of whom will defend their graduating work in August and early September. In a perfect world, I said to John — this after sitting in on the hat trick of spring defenses, his, Paul's, and Steven's — a critic would be here: someone from the art pages of the local daily, for instance, assigned to survey the current crop of talent out of Guelph. Someone should write about this. He looked at me, batting his eyes: how about you?

I make no pretension to art criticism. What follows can only be a love letter. But I do want to write something about the work of these three artists, who — though they are in ways very different — have studied and worked together closely in the past two years, and whose work, to me, exhibits certain similarities.

A word, first, about process, or processes. Haney and Beckly are photographers: that is, at any rate, their home among the media, though in both of their work there is a strong tendency for images to aspire to the condition of objects, photographs to the condition of sculptures. In Beckly's exhibition, photographs — many of them figurative — hug corners and apertures in the gallery space; they emerge from out of the drywall; they peel off of the wall; they curl; they slump to the floor. Beckly describes himself as an explorer of intimacy, and his images partake of many of the qualities of skin (including, he reminds us, photosensitivity: 'light,' he has told me, 'is the ultimate subject').

Beckly's images, made on film, are digital prints, on various substrates: some opaque, some translucent. Haney's images, likewise made on film, are with one exception darkroom prints: some silver-gelatin, some platinum or palladium — long exposures made on watercolour paper to which a light-sensitive compound has been applied by hand. They are developed, fixed, and (for the silver prints) toned in liquid chemistry. While Beckly's images are photographs, the handwork of reflected light, Haney's are photograms, shadow images, whose subjects (arms, a rusted grapple) are revealed through the pattern made by the light these objects or entities block. Conceived of and made in series, Haney's images move along the wall in a kind of ritual motion, regular or irregular. One of them, a diptych array of sloughed rust, is supported by a plinth.

MacIntyre is a painter, draughtsman, and collagist, though like Haney and Beckly he is working, currently, with the given — not a found object (Haney) or moment (Beckly), but found images: small, mass market reproductions of eight prints from Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *Apocalypse*, which MacIntyre has, in his own words, 'dissected,' then painstakingly collaged on drawing paper, reassembling the images in such a way that they are shot through with light — the white of the paper, showing through in gridwork patterns that reveal the architecture of MacIntyre's cuts. (Cutting is like 'drawing before the invention of erasure,' he has said.)

MacIntyre's and Haney's exhibitions take up two adjoining rooms and the hallway between them, on the second floor of the Art Gallery of Guelph. Moving through them is something of a religious experience; at the same time, it is like going back in time, or in psychological history. MacIntyre's gridwork collages, with their explicitly religious subject matter, their evoked contexts of confessional screens, of Alhambra-esque wooden partitions, of leaded glass windows (I think of the Lady Chapel at Ely), are the Church. Enter the hallway between the two rooms and you pass Haney's plinth piece *Diptych*, an altar covered in rust; then the pillars-gone-organic processional of his *Armature*, which leads you to the cave: the black-walled gallery in which his grapple images orchestrate Lascaux-like passage through a womb-like space.

MacIntyre's roots are Catholic, although, he says, 'I have no spiritual agenda of my own.' Beckly, asked about religion in his work (high on the gallery wall, rounding a corner, an outstretched, Christ-like hand), says: 'The outstretched hand is a symbol of almost all religions. But this is a bent hand, a queer hand.' If anything, this is a religion of intimacy that transcends doctrinal divisions, he says: a religion for everyone. Haney, I know because I live with him, is an atheist — though with what he sheepishly acknowledges to be 'mystical tendencies'.

So these are not religious artists, in any traditional sense — and each is in ways deeply critical of religion. But they are all artists who, at the same time, court religion as art's last taboo. Looking for their common ancestor, at least in one mythology, I think of Mary Magdalene, as she appears in an unforgettable walk-on at the end of an essay by the Welsh Catholic poet David Jones:

When Mary Maudlin fractured the alabaster of nard over the feet of the hero of the Christian cult, the Sir Mordred at the dinner-party asked: 'To what purpose is this waste?' But the cult-hero himself said: 'Let her alone. What she does is for a presignification of my death, and wherever my saga is sung in the whole universal world, this sign-making of hers shall be sung also, for a memorial of her'. A totally inutile act, but a two-fold anamnesis (that is, a double and effectual recalling). First of the hero Himself and then of the mistress of all contemplatives and the tutelary figure of all that belongs to poesis. The woman from Magdala in her golden hair, wasting her own time and the party funds: an embarrassment if not a scandal; but an act which is of the very essence of all poetry and, by the same token, of any religion worth considering.

The organic columns of Haney's *Armature* are portraits of his arms, the photographer's arms, as he sees them in the dark room: adjusting the photographic paper on the easel, or setting up for an exposure, or washing, washing, washing the prints, in the alabaster of nard otherwise known as a darkroom tray. I have seen him wash our children with those arms.

It is comical (and I hope not too impertinent) to think of my bearded husband, not to mention his contemporaries — the cleancut, bespectacled Paul; the raven-haired Steven — as the woman from Magdala in her golden hair, wasting her own time and the party funds but, well, there it is. An embarrassment if not a scandal; but an act which is of the very essence of all poetry and, by the same token, of any religion worth considering. And, I felt, contemplating these exhibitions, of any art.

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