La biennale de Montréal 2016

Various venues, Canada

In Jean Genet's 1956 play Le Balcon (The Balcony), the patrons of a brothel hire prostitutes to help them fulfil fantasies in which they occupy traditional positions of power: priest, general, executioner. Though the relationships are not physically consummated, each man takes a role that, in the real world, routinely fucks the disempowered. They perform as though for an invisible audience, transforming the brothel into a burlesque stage; at the same time, a real revolution outside its walls turns its balconies into theatre boxes, from which the patrons observe the unfolding drama. 'It's the most artful, yet the most decent house of illusions,' the madame proclaims of her keep. Genet was always interested in the pageantry of desire; if all sex is about power, and sexuality is also performative, then power, too, is a kind of performance – one that stuns its audience into submission.

'Le Grand Balcon' (The Grand Balcony), the 2016 edition of La biennale de Montréal, is named after the brothel in Genet's play – and, like that work, it contains both performance and spectacle. Curator Philippe Pirotte has organized an exhibition around the balcony as an ambivalent metaphor: voyeuristic and exhibitionist, interior and exterior, it is a space of both public address and private confession. Balconies gird political pronouncements and Shakespearean trysts alike.

During the press conference, Pirotte described the balcony as a defining feature of Montreal's residential architecture. As far as I could tell, it has no particular vernacular significance there, unlike the spiral staircases detached from every facade. A staircase might have been a more apt spatial metaphor for this biennial, which its organizers hope will be a catalyst for a somewhat provincial art scene. With works by 55 artists and collectives from 23 countries, distributed between eight venues around the city, it is the most international iteration of an exhibition that has historically been nationally and regionally focused. In previous years, the biennial has received generous grants from the Canadian Council for the Arts, who assess eligibility according to a recipient institution's support of national content. While the availability of public funding in Canada is truly enviable, such provisions can create a hermetic environment for

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the circulation of stale, like-minded ideas – particularly in one of the least dense countries in the world (by population). It seems clear that Pirotte, a native of Belgium and a resident of Germany, has opted for starry, institutional names in order to thaw this cultural climate and encourage cross-border dialogue. There is much cause to hope that he succeeds.

The biennial's main exhibition, at the Musée d'art contemporain (MAC), opens with one such star: two paintings by Nicole Eisenman (Shooter 1 and 2, both 2016) threaten the viewer with cocked pistols, or duel with a vitrine of Brian Jungen drawings, more quietly installed across the room. Jungen's contribution is one of two in the biennial from an artist of First Nation descent; his caustic pen-and-inks of classic Canadian signifiers (snowsports, Mounties) critique racial fetishism and nationalist sentiment, while unashamedly probing the artist's queer desire. The following gallery reveals the show's most elegant juxtaposition: the last hanging strand of Elaine Cameron-Weir's scintillating, tripartite ceramic tile sculpture (SNAKE, 2016), seems to slither between Njideka Akunyili Crosby's lush paintings (Cassava Garden, 2015) and (Thread, 2012). Across the room, though, Luc Tuymans's mostly monochromatic, milquetoast paintings of Doha museum interiors (Doha I–III, 2016) seem misplaced, like abstract cyanotypes in a jungle diorama.

A number of works grapple with the legacy of modernism and its relationship to contemporary capitalism. In The Five Wives of Lajos Bíró (2016), one of three tapestries by Shannon Bool produced from digital collages, Malagan patterns from Papua New Guinea have been superimposed onto the bodies of mannequins in a photograph of a commercial design pavilion at the 1925 International Exhibition in Paris. Modern art and design were driven forward by cultural appropriation of colonized cultures that Europeans considered retrograde. The expressive patterns' contrast to the smooth and featureless mannequins also nods to the ways the West has used other cultures to assuage its own capitalist anxieties. Another Bool tapestry, Looshaus (2016), depicts a silver-skinned mannequin standing in the doorway of Adolf Loos's famous Vienna building. The shiny, featureless planes of Loos's architecture are doubled by the figure, suggesting a loss of individual identity within the modern sublime. (There are echoes of Loos in one of the biennial's satellite spaces, a Ludwig Mies van der Rohe-designed petrol station, hidden in a leafy suburb.)

Bool's collaged imagery consigns the modernist project to what Thomas Hirschhorn once called the 'capitalist garbage bucket'. In a nearby gallery, Isa Genzken's Schauspieler II (Actors, 2015) mannequins live in that very same rubbish bin, window-dressed in culture's leftover scraps. Genzken's actors perform a sham individuality that falls away to reveal skin-level sameness. An essential element of our postmodern malaise is the fear that originality is no longer possible; Genzken's work is, ironically, an original take on this anxiety. Mere feet away, Cady Noland's Cart Full of Action (1986), a shopping pram stuffed with automotive junk, could be the mannequins' precious haul; although the pairing risks caricaturizing homelessness, it underlines the link between industrial capitalism and our contemporary modes of self-expression.

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Postmodern malaise was unavoidable in Anne Imhof's Angst 3 (2016). The final performance in a trilogy that began this summer at Kunsthalle Basel opened the biennial in MAC's basement. There, on a raised platform, a row of sleeping bags lay between live, snoozing falcons in leather masks; packs of cigarettes sat by tubs of Vaseline and crates of Diet Pepsi. As the gallery filled with artificial fog and tobacco smoke, the performers wandered listlessly, cracking open cola cans and singing softly to the audience pressed against the walls. As its title makes clear, Angst 3 is aware of its own malaise; the four-hour performance was as dreary and aimless as the prospects for many of today's teenagers, facing a future of debt, fascism and climate change. Still, it seemed inappropriate to subject live animals to the windowless gallery's thick air. (Are disaffected youth really birds of prey, choking on greenhouse gases?) In one scene, the performers lathered their partners and slowly shaved them to the sound of speeding racecars. It was the one anxiety-inducing instance when Angst 3 lived up to its name, although the shaving might have served better as a more focused performance, like the buttermilk transfer in Imhof's DEAL (2015).

The popularity of Angst 3 with attendant Instagrammers testified to the enduring power of spectacle and spectatorship. One of the first works in the show, David Tretiakoff's film A God Passing (2008), documents the transfer of a 12th-century BCE Rameses statue from the Cairo train station to the new Egyptian Museum. The film opens with shots of crowds gathering to watch the pharaoh pass, recording the event on their cell phones, and we first see the statue in grainy news footage, on a television monitor perched in the corner of a cafe. The Rameses spectacle threatens to eclipse the millennia of history to which it belongs; Tretiakoff suggests that the real event is the recorded one, when our memories turn to static and we have nothing left but video footage.

The biennial's star work is another film: Moyra Davey's latest project, Hemlock Forest (2016), is an homage to Chantal Akerman that reproduces a number of shots from the late auteur's films, narrated by one of Davey's hallmark, self-reflective texts and interspersed with banal domestic imagery. Davey copies a shot down a New York subway car from Akerman's News from Home (1977) while voicing the anxiety she felt surreptitiously filming strangers on a train, in a position of intimate distance. Davey draws links between the concerned letters Akerman received from her mother, Kathe Kollwitz's artistic response to the death of her youngest child, and Davey's own relationship with her adolescent son. She pores over her literary sources while her camera gazes at a family of bluebirds, fluttering around a fractured egg.

'Le Grand Balcon' has plenty of good work, but it's nearly impossible to glean a specific curatorial thesis without didactic assistance; Genet is nowhere to be found. Pirotte is a hands-off curator but his open-ended approach can easily become vague. A certain amount of precision is crucial in our dire sociopolitical climate, even if the issues raised prompt more questions than they provide answers. After all, can a strategy of opacity ever effectively respond to clear and present danger? Being opaque is also an exercise of power, allowing curators to retreat behind undefined positions. Although an important gesture for Canada, the biennial's sum is weaker than its parts. Like a balcony, caught between interior and exterior, public and private, it refuses to pick a side.

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Anne Imhof
Angst 3, performance at
the Musée d'art contemporain
de Montreal, 2016

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Nicole Eisenman
installation view at the
Musée d'art contemporain
de Montreal, 2016