



Moyra Davey,
Hemlock Forest,
2016, video, color,
sound, 42 minutes.
From the Biennale
de Montréal.

MONTREAL

Biennale de Montréal

VARIOUS VENUES

The 2016 Biennale de Montréal, titled “*Le Grand Balcon*” (The Grand Balcony) and organized by Belgian curator Philippe Pirotte (with curatorial advisors Corey McCorkle, Aseman Sabet, and Kitty Scott), was refreshingly ambiguous, intentionally confused, decidedly unruly, convincingly contradictory, and consistently chaotic. The curatorial statement mentioned a gloriously diverse range of touchstones, including Jean Genet’s strongly political absurdist play *Le Balcon* (The Balcony), 1956—which examines authenticity, representation, truth, and illusion—as well as the Marquis de Sade and an enigmatic portrait by Lucas Cranach the Elder.

Yet these references were overshadowed by the exhibition itself, which had neither an overall plot nor overarching themes. The list of fifty-five international participants offered a cross section of established luminaries, including Kerry James Marshall, Isa Genzken, Thomas Bayrle, Nicole Eisenman, and Luc Tuymans; rising stars, such as Anne Imhof, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Lena Henke, and Luke Willis Thompson; and a few new names, such as Zac Langdon-Pole, Myriam Jacob-Allard, and Nadia Belerique. Within this mix, Cranach’s *Portrait of a Lady*, ca. 1540, played a central, disruptive role. The painting has been altered and partly overpainted on numerous occasions since its sixteenth-century debut, and its inclusion here pointed toward unstable authenticity and questionable narratives given its tumultuous history and somewhat mysterious origin.

The show’s standout piece was perhaps Moyra Davey’s intimate video *Hemlock Forest*, 2016, which revisits her 2011 video *Les Goddesses*. Including an homage to the early filmic style of Chantal Akerman via a restaging of a scene from the late filmmaker’s 1967 *News from Home*, Davey’s highly autobiographical work—a meditation on the artist’s son’s impending departure for college—speaks to beauty, intimacy, motherhood, and loss in a slowed-down world away from contemporary anxieties.

Highly topical was another filmic work, this one by Eric Baudelaire, *Prelude to AKA Jihadi*, 2016, which traces the actual journey of a

young Frenchman to Syria. Without ever revealing the motivations behind the protagonist’s decision to aid the Syrian rebels (and his likely if unconfirmed involvement with ISIS), the film connects disparate fragments of his mental and physical expedition.

Revelatory was the display of drawings made in the 1990s by Brian Jungen, a Canadian artist of Swiss and First Nations descent. The small, surreal, and often sexual drawings presented relationships between European settlers and Canadian indigenous societies in frequently humorous ways, with many reversing the roles of oppressor and oppressed. Alongside Jungen’s surreal drawings was a series of collages and drawings he produced in collaboration with his longtime friend Geoffrey Farmer. Also made in the 1990s, these works on paper weren’t shown until 2002; they are dense with references to popular culture and offer clues to later developments in both artists’ work, in particular their intense explorations of Canadian identity politics.

A series of eight anthropomorphic sculptures by another Canadian artist, Valérie Blass, effectively embodied the intentionally open premise of the exhibition. Her work embraces oppositions of surface and interior volume, materiality and immateriality, form and shapelessness. Where Blass explored formal ambiguities, the Turkish photographer Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin’s work evidenced the rich possibilities of temporal indeterminacy. His stunning series of photographs *Arkadya’da Melankoli* (Melancholia in Arcadia), 2000, taken in a hospital in Odessa, Ukraine, confronts the viewer with colorful and slightly odd scenes of a non-place lit by a television’s glow and populated by fluttering curtains, tidily made beds, and a bizarre display of garish wedding dresses.

“*Le Grand Balcon*” was by far the most enigmatic large-scale exhibition I have seen in a long time. That it was still being installed during the press preview seemed almost an intentional statement—resistance to the idea of a finished product ready to be consumed before the biennial caravan moves on to its next destination. The show’s endeavor to (uncover the paradoxes) of the bourgeois principle of formal equality by exposing the fact that fantasy categorically resists universalization (as the curator noted) was certainly carried out.

—Jens Hoffmann