

# Raymond Boisjoly and Rebecca Chaperon: Artists draw inspiration from black metal and fairy tales

by ROBIN LAURENCE on SEP 14, 2011 at 10:55 AM

## STORY



Raymond Boisjoly and Rebecca Chaperon at the Helen and Morris Belkin Gallery.

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### Raymond Boisjoly

If your background is in the visual arts and you know next to nothing about black-metal music, you'll be surprised by Raymond Boisjoly's new series, "The Writing Lesson". This work's imagery, using what the Vancouver artist describes as a "rudimentary photographic process" on construction paper, mimics the logos of Scandinavian black-metal bands. What their thorny, scrolling, Nordic-inspired fonts and forced symmetry delineate, however, are indigenous place names from this part of the world, such as Chilliwack, Nanaimo, and Yakima.

Given that Boisjoly comes across as a gentle soul, you might have trouble grasping his allusions to extreme metal. Wasn't there something back there in the '90s about Satanism? Church-burning? Murder? But the strategy of this eloquent and scholarly artist is absolutely logical—and non-satanic. "Much of black-metal culture is about the forceful and violent introduction of Christianity into northern Europe,"

Boisjoly says, "which bears some analogy to the assimilation practices of colonial entities in the Americas." The place names he's chosen to illustrate in black-metal fashion "index a relationship" between aboriginal peoples and empire builders. In many cases, he says, "There's a history to be recuperated."

Speaking with the *Straight* at the Republic Gallery, where "The Writing Lesson" will be on display from Friday (September 16) to October 15, Boisjoly reviews his busy art practice. Since graduating with an MFA from the University of British Columbia in 2008, he has exhibited in solo and group shows locally and in Ottawa, Seattle, San Francisco, and Chongqing, China. He has also won two prestigious residencies at the Banff Centre for the Arts. And although much of his art uses or addresses language, "text-based" does not begin to describe its complexity, nor its aspiration. Boisjoly has created grainy prints whose appearance suggests the connection between TV snow and the cosmic microwave background radiation generated (in theory) by the Big Bang. He has composed sentences for library banners and gallery installations that evoke a condition of being that is at once past, present, and future. And he has strung Christmas lights over plywood to mimic

the features of a souvenir-store miniature totem pole. “I was thinking of the lights as having a distinctive cultural character, so that displacing them into a gallery would reveal something about that,” he says.

Boisjoly talks openly about his family background—he grew up in Chilliwack with a Haida mother and a Québécois father—but says that his art is not specifically about his “ethnic particularity”. Rather, he hopes, his sense of who he is in the world can be directed toward making work that resonates with his audience, generating questions around significant issues. “I’m incredibly interested in origins and thinking of my Haida background, but ultimately...I have to take that and do something with it,” he says. “I have to find some way to realize it in a useful way—to find some kernel of an issue that is important and meaningful, that can somehow be used to open up a discussion.”

Rebecca Chaperon

A particular character recurs throughout Rebecca Chaperon’s small, surreal paintings. With her dark hair, pale skin, and youthful build, this figure reads a lot like a self-portrait, often situated alone in a sombre, leafless landscape. Chaperon insists, however, that while the being’s depiction may recall her own body and proportions, the psychologically charged situations she finds herself in are not necessarily autobiographical. “It’s not like I set out to say, ‘Okay, this is me and this happened to me,’” the artist explains during an interview with the *Straight* at the grunt gallery. “I want the painting to feel a bit more open, so that you can look at it and see yourself in it, especially as a female.”

As Chaperon guides us past her new suite of paintings, “Like a Great Black Fire”, on view at the grunt until October 15, she talks a little about her interest in creating mysterious narratives, often drawn directly from her unconscious mind but replete with metaphors of identity and transformation. She also mentions the inspiration she has found in the work of early surrealists Remedios Varo and Dorothea Tanning, especially in their finely wrought, highly symbolic depictions of the emotional lives of women. Another influence is the 15th-century fantasist Hieronymus Bosch.

Born in England, Chaperon did most of her growing up in St. Catharines, Ontario, before moving to the West Coast in her late teens. She took a year of general studies at Kwantlen College before transferring to Emily Carr Institute. And she credits one of her instructors at Emily Carr, printmaker Martin Borden, with showing her “how to think about” her own work. “He’d see a scribble that I’d done and say, ‘That’s actually really interesting,’” Chaperon recalls. “And it would be something nonintentional, whereas maybe

something I was really focused on would be a bit too contrived. So he allowed me to see that there was room for letting things happen.”

The things Chaperon lets happen in her small paintings fall somewhere between spooky surrealism and enchanted fairy tale. Her female protagonist may be submerged in water and holding aloft an unmarked flag. Or she may be climbing a tree or brandishing two swords or engulfed in flame-like strands of fabric. The landscape she occupies is often executed in brackish browns and greens, under an equally dark sky. “I was interested in a feeling of the unconscious and a night-time state of being where things are not illuminated,” Chaperon says of her sombre palette.

Since graduating from Emily Carr in 2002, she has developed an underground following, exhibiting her work in small galleries and taking part in offbeat group shows. “Like a Great Black Fire” represents a leap forward for her: from a deep, dark, unconscious place, this artist has emerged into the critical light of day.