

## Pascal Grandmaison, Galerie René Blouin, Montreal, November 27, 2010 to January 8, 2011

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# Pascal Grandmaison

Galerie René Blouin, Montreal

November 27, 2010 to January 8, 2011

Blue-tinged icebergs? Handmade plaster sculptures? The sleek, cool signature of Pascal Grandmaison is hard to discern when we first enter his recent exhibition at Galerie René Blouin. His new works hold several surprises: while they continue his investigation of the mediated photographic act, the figure-ground relationship, and the representation of the invisible, the three works included here are rich in metaphor, melancholy, and artistic modesty.

The “icebergs” that occupy the main space are collectively titled *Desperate Island* (2010). Cast in Hydrostone plaster, they are undeniably massive and unmoving, and yet they appear light, as if floating on the gallery floor. Like over-blown crumpled paper balls scattered by some disgruntled writer, or sculptures by John Chamberlain without the chrome and gloss, the nuances of their creases and shadows quietly await exploration. The passage of time is more geological than performative in face of these “islands,” which has the effect of making our own movements seem manic and disconnected. This effect is central to the conceptual integrity of *Desperate Island*: Grandmaison used blue photo-studio background paper to make the moulds, traces of which are embedded in the surface. However, if we extend the logic of the actor’s dissociation with the matrix of action that background paper is designed to facilitate, then not only are these islands awaiting their contemporary castaway as an unexplored ground (rhetorically represented by the paper), but they themselves also embody the figure of the castaway, lost in the ground of a context-free white cube.

Unlike islands “desperate” for human action, the islands featured in Grandmaison’s latest video, *Soleil Différé* (2010), were literally built as a stage: Montreal’s Île Sainte-Hélène and Île Notre-Dame – the latter the site fabricated for Expo ‘67. Shooting in documentary style with a (seemingly) dispassionate eye, Grandmaison offers a non-narrative sequence of stunning video extracts: a leaf caught in mid-air by a spider’s thread; birds chirping on their woodland perches; waves coursing around a boulder in opposing directions; the Buckminster Fuller dome shrouded in fog; crumbled concrete caught in a tangle of cobwebs; leaves lapping against stone; water running over walls; and a black-clad surfer riding the

giant waves that crest in the canal due to the artificial islands. Over all, the video points to the forces of nature at their most elemental – the collision of water, rock, and air, and the potential of the plant and animal kingdoms to thrive despite human intrusion.

In light of this modern ruin, the site’s name, *Terre des hommes*, seems ironic: rather than serving as showcase of human action and potential, it is seeing the forces of nature eroding its shores and overgrowing its edifices. But it is an irony that is more melancholic than humorous, as it points to a failure to follow a straight arrow of time into an era of technological ease and leisure. Grandmaison taps into the Romantic preoccupation with ruins – in this case, the loss of the promised future – but he does so without crossing the line into didacticism or kitsch. As such, *Soleil Différé* manages to leave a place for the derangement that the beauty of “natural” imagery can instigate in stale aesthetic codes.

It is this point – that the particular power of beauty or, generally speaking, the aesthetic lies in the fact that it is available only to intuition and remains forever outside the faculties of comprehension and the frames of representation – that the final work in the show, *Void View* (2010), addresses, albeit (over-)aggressively. Composed of twenty-eight photographs of ashes – the powdery residue of images taken by the NASA Hubble space telescope that Grandmaison destroyed by fire – *Void View* attempts to reclaim the unimaginable – the infinity of the universe – by way of a rhetorical non-image. Speaking



*Desperate Island 1*, 2010, sculpture with hydrostone plaster, fiberglass, studio photo background paper, 139,7 x 102,9 x 58,4 cm, photo : Richard-Max Tremblay

of his work, Grandmaison asks, “Doesn’t claiming to reveal the truth in fact upend it, subjecting it to opinion? [An image reveals only] one half of the truth – the other half lost in illustrating it – a little like infinity.”<sup>1</sup> *Void View*’s iconoclastic gesture seems to be asking, How can an image-maker in today’s hyper-mediated cultural milieu succeed in

isolating a subject worthy of critical attention and mobilize the out-of-frame in a way that harnesses (and liberates) its potential to disrupt our understanding of the very subject in question?

In this small sampling of work, Grandmaison demonstrates once again that, at its best, his work is both formally exquisite and theoretically rigorous. These three new works cohere in the subtext of their own limits of representation, thus suggesting the necessity of a sustained artistic engagement with the nourishing but frightening uncodifiable real.

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<sup>1</sup> Grandmaison in conversation with Béatrice Josse, “Before Beginning and Beyond the End,” in *Pascal Grandmaison: Half of the Darkness*, exhibition catalogue, exhibition curated by Kevin Muhlen (Casino Luxembourg, 2011).

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*Soleil différé*, 2010, video HD, 18 min 51 sec, photo : Richard-Max Tremblay

## Shadow Catchers Camera-less Photography

Victoria & Albert Museum,  
London, England

October 13, 2010 to February 20, 2011

“Shadow Catchers” takes off from the tradition of camera-less photography initiated by William Henry Fox-Talbot, whose photogenic drawings, first displayed to the public in 1839, preceded photography with a camera – a “little bit of magic realized,” as he put it. And we sense his influence on photographers who followed, such as Christian Schad, Lucia Moholy, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and Man Ray, whose photogenic drawings, schadographs, photograms,

and rayograms played with forms, springs, mechanical objects, garbage, tickets, rags, and other objects on photographic paper. In “Shadow Catchers,” an ingenious array of contemporary responses to this environmentally sensitive medium, we learn about photographers who are extending the range of possibilities and subjects available to camera-less photography.

Floris Neusüss is a romantic of sorts, who studied mural painting before turning

to camera-less photography in 1954. Best known for his *Korperfotogramms* (full-body photograms on silver-bromide and auto-reversal paper) of the 1960s and 1970s, which are on view in “Shadow Catchers,” Neusüss has extended his practice to include shadowy metaphorical images of couples on photographic paper. Ephemeral, evanescent bodies become a dialogue on life and death. In the image of a woman in fetal position in *Untitled* (*Korperfotogramm*,