

Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky: *Veneers*

Gil McElroy

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dévoués à de nombreuses expéditions botaniques pour l'avancée des connaissances. Dans *Le paysage miraculeux*, l'herbier symbolise leurs conquêtes périlleuses d'autant plus que son contexte de diffusion en centre d'artistes nous le fait percevoir comme une forme d'objet conceptuel, ce que l'artiste nomme un *ready-made* puisé dans la nature.

Cette tentative de repousser les frontières entre les formes et leurs références se réalise également dans l'ensemble de trois boîtes lumineuses empilées à l'entrée de la galerie. Misant sur la lumière pour intensifier l'espace blanc des caissons, chaque boîte lumineuse nous donne à voir, en lettres majuscules, un mot qui compose le titre de l'exposition. Or, dans la tradition historique de la représentation du paysage, ces objets agissaient comme écran de projection fantasmatique, dispositif lumineux de détournement de la vue. Difficile donc, de leur attribuer un genre, de les définir, tant leur statut dans l'exposition est ambigu : signalétique lumineuse, dispositif sculptural, paysage imaginaire. Ainsi, *Le paysage miraculeux* révèle les strates iconographiques qui dormaient jusqu'alors dans la mémoire des expéditions de Fortin. On comprendra, en ce sens, que son processus de création s'apparente à une forme d'« écosophie⁴ » telle qu'énoncée par Félix Guattari : une sensibilité écologique dont l'ambition ne se limite pas qu'à la sauvegarde des environnements naturels, mais aussi à la préservation d'écologies dites mentale et sociale. L'essor touristique des expéditions de masse a changé à jamais nos rapports à l'environnement. Avec le formalisme minimaliste revisité de ses objets sculpturaux, de même que les notions de collecte et d'endurance réactivées dans *Le paysage miraculeux*, Amélie Laurence Fortin dégage un fondement de nature éthique, social, idéologique et culturel de la pratique actuelle de l'expédition en nous rappelant que l'humain n'est pas toujours le centre du paysage qu'il traverse.

1. Gilles Deleuze, « Index des principaux concepts de l'Éthique, article : Puissance ». In *Spinoza : Philosophie pratique*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, Coll. Repères, 2003, p. 135-143.
2. L'expression remonte au V^e siècle av. J.-C. et évoque une situation particulièrement risquée reposant sur la tête d'une personne.
3. Emmanuel Kant, « Livre II : Analytique du Sublime, B.: Du Sublime dynamique de la nature » in *Critique de la Faculté de juger* : Traduit et introduit par Alexis Philonenko, Paris, Éditions Vrin, Coll. Bibliothèque des textes philosophiques, 1993, p. 141-165.
4. Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que l'écosophie ?*, Saint-Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe, Éditions Lignes/IMEC, Coll. Archives de la pensée critique, 2013.

Cynthia Fecteau détient une maîtrise en arts visuels de l'Université Laval. Elle s'intéresse aux formes de connaissances sensibles en arts actuels, notamment l'écosophie. Outre ses textes publiés dans *Espace art actuel* et *Le Sabord*, elle finalise un essai théorique intitulé « Sur la mouvance écosophique de la pratique » initié en 2014 au cœur d'une résidence de recherches à LA CHAMBRE BLANCHE. En 2015, elle poursuivra ses recherches en écriture lors d'une résidence, en France, auprès de la communauté de Saint-Mathieu-de-Trévières.

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To say we live in a society utterly devoted to the superficial, to the surfaces of things, certainly isn't the most profound thing one might utter about us. It's pretty self-evident, all in all. But "self-evident" doesn't necessarily mean uninteresting. The superficial, the surfaces of things, is, after all, what we encounter when we set forth to explore our world, and often we simply opt not to look any further, settling for whatever meaning we might extract or conjure forth that is utterly contingent upon the immediacy of surface appeal.

In a sense that's what Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky have done in *Veneers*. They have assembled together a number of sculptural works in an exhibition that is, in many ways, about the contingency of the world, about how our understanding of our place within it is absolutely shaped by the kinds of surfaces we encounter. And what we seem to encounter, here, is a rickety, rather dishevelled version of the world, a world but one tiny step away from entirely collapsing in upon itself – and in some instances, already has.

What hasn't quite succumbed to disintegration is *Bad Neighbour* (all works are 2014). It's a fence – sort of. Three upright posts supporting a backyard barrier made of alternating board construction. Pretty run-of-the-mill stuff, except that Wepler and Mahovsky have introduced real absences and their mending. One side of *Bad Neighbour* reveals the removal of structurally critical railings to support the vertical elements, and between two posts the entire lower half of the fence is missing, patched over on the opposing side. And on the far side of the central post, there's a large enclosed void that projects beyond the fence line into the territory of the other. Walking around the far side, that void becomes the positive shape, of all things, of an old chest of drawers that's been nailed in place. And the missing lower section of fence is, here, a patchwork of makeshift repairs, including the use of what appear to be two window shutters, and a hollow-core door, with pre-drilled hole for doorknobs, that seems to have suffered damage.

And all of it – *all* of it – is insubstantial, false, misleading. Wepler and Mahovsky have meticulously constructed this scenario, this sculptural narrative, of thin, delicate wooden veneers, painstakingly making individual boards of it.

What Leaf? What Mushroom? makes for a kind of sculptural diptych comprising a bird cage (in gold) and a shopping cart (in silver) resting side by side, unplinthed, on the gallery floor. The bird cage registers right away; it's a recognizable, if a bit dinged up, three-dimensional form. But the shopping cart is another matter. It's pretty much flattened, the legs and wheels collapsed onto the basket. There's

something touchingly human in this thing splayed out on the floor, its legs bent as if at the knees, the wheels doubling for feet... I know it can't be aesthetically intentional, but it's jarring, registering that way. And the whole of it is tinged with sadness and a certain pathetic quality. Next to the dead shopping cart, the empty bird cage seems itself to be teetering on the point of total collapse. Perhaps just one slight nudge, and it would be done for. In *What Leaf? What Mushroom?*, the "marrow" of objecthood has clearly been sucked right out of these things, leaving desiccated husks behind.

Or try on a different metaphor for size: this bird cage and this shopping cart are like the husks or shells left behind by moulting insects.

Or maybe they're rinds (albeit rinds of soldered brass and aluminum foil).

See, there're varied ways of looking at what Weppler and Mahovsky have aesthetically wrought, but they all clearly tend toward the "departed" stage of things, as if something elemental in these objects, these things, has been evacuated or displaced. The pith is gone. What we are left with is the residue of matter: The shell of appearances.

Rotting Squashes (Living Inside This Shell) is another unplinthed work, a small, semi-orderly ring on the floor of titular sculptural squashes and their vines, stakes, and what appears to be string linking together some of the stakes. It's an arrangement straight out of the garden plot, save for the clearly artefactual nature of these things, made of copper foil. As with all their other work, the essence of the things is long gone, leaving not even the shell of these things but in fact the shell of the shells, copper foil that had been wrapped about the original vegetative things and taken on their shape – another displacement from the things themselves.

Rotting Squashes (Living Inside This Shell) looks darn close to the real thing (as does all of Weppler and Mahovsky's work), but is of course a simulacrum. It differs from, say *Bad Neighbour* or the seemingly related piece *From Whichever Side One Approaches Things*, which essentially comprises a wooden board (again made of veneers) leaning against one wall, in that it's an "impressioned" piece, made by actual physical contact with the things – squashes, vines, strings, stakes – it simulates. These things in many ways stand in place of our sense of touch; they're like skins that have grown out of tactile engagement with the real things in someone's garden plot. They're the markers of someone's physical involvement with matter. But not ours.

And in the end it's all so tentative, so tenuous. Beyond the surfaces of these pieces there is nothingness. They're hollow, almost tissue-thin, their reality that of something like Hollywood props, the illusion of substantiality there to enable the visual moment, but proffer absolutely nothing beyond that except the void. To touch one of Weppler and Mahovsky's pieces would likely be to watch it fall to pieces, to succumb to an irreversible rupture in the fabric of this aesthetically microcosmic universe they have shaped here in the gallery. The world would collapse in upon itself. So what we are given to see, here in the gallery setting, is a world that is barely there, a world a mere whisper away from annihilation.

It's the knowing of that which is central to Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky's work in *Veneers*. This is absolutely stunning work. No question about it. They've deftly woven complexities onto complexities to lend an aesthetically formal shape to absence, charging their rickety, makeshift world with the aesthetic landmines of contingencies.

And it absolutely works.

Gil McElroy is a poet, critic, and independent curator living in Colborne, Ontario.

Rhonda Weppler & Trevor Mahovsky. *Veneers*, 2014 (partial view of the exhibition). Photo : André BenetEAU.

