

# TYRANNY

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monotonous appearances, Stonhouse's sculptural renditions radiate bright colours. The functional elements are now geometrical shapes organized within a defined picture frame. The formal arrangement recalls the modernist tradition similar to works of Canadian sculptors like Eli Bornstein and Elizabeth Willmott who are known for their structural approach to abstract reliefs and sculptures.

Another artist reference that comes to mind when viewing Stonhouse's sculptures is Quebecois artist Serge Tousignant whose 2012 print series *Totem bleu*, *Totem jaune* and *Totem vert* also demands consideration of colour, sculpture, and space. This reference to the senior artist was substantiated in Stonhouse's series of small sculptural photographs. Occupying the only non-mural wall in the gallery, the artist installed a row of small-format square photographs of utility exteriors of buildings. The collection is a result of Stonhouse's bike rides around industrial areas, looking for views that would remind him of paintings. He places the photographs inside custom-made frames, which share elements with the environment depicted in the images. These can be viewed as extensions of the environment from the original site. In this manner, Stonhouse shares Tousignant's interdisciplinary curiosity about how sculpture and photographs can work together to influence a viewer's perception of space.

By layering the exhibition with a diverse range of techniques, formal and conceptual references, Stonhouse effectively turned the room inside out. He brought the outside into the previously pristine interior of the gallery. Stonhouse also brought art to the outdoors. During the run of the exhibition, the artist installed sculptures and photo panels on buildings and businesses across downtown Yorkton. Visitors could find his works adorning the exterior of a popular ice-cream shop, the

brick wall outside the gallery and a window hoarding in the alley of a music store. In a similar approach to the one used inside the gallery, Stonhouse responded formally to the environment, taking visual cues from the texture and colours of the site to which it was attached. Just like the inside of the gallery, the aesthetic additions not only drew attention to themselves but also encouraged reflection about the actual utility of infrastructure hidden in plain sight.

*POWERBOXES* was a daringly fun exhibition. Stonhouse's bold colours and rich textures created a formal and conceptual experience that was different from typical immersive exhibitions, which often focus solely on transporting audiences to another place or reality. By creating an environment and an experience that was simultaneously inside and outdoors, Stonhouse brought attention to simple, ordinary power boxes to highlight their significance and contribution to supporting our daily infrastructures.

Tak Pham is a Vietnamese art curator and critic. He is a graduate of Carleton University and OCAD University. His critical writings and reviews have appeared in *ESPACE art actuel*, *esse arts + opinions*, *Canadian Art*, and *Hyperallergic* among others. Pham currently works as Associate Curator at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, Treaty 4 territory, the original lands of the Cree, Ojibwe, Saulteaux, Dakota, Nakota, Lakota, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation.

## TYRANNY

Ray Cronin

**ART GALLERY OF NOVA SCOTIA**  
**HALIFAX**  
**JULY 21 –**  
**ONGOING**

Tyranny's antithesis is often thought to be freedom, but in a new exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia a different solution to the problem of authoritarianism is proposed: sympathy. It's a timely discussion. Too often, "freedom" is the cloak would-be autocrats hide behind, and the rallying cry of oppression. Our neighbours to the south provide many examples, but in case we get too smug, current events in this country provide numerous ones as well. The ongoing debate about Covid-19 vaccination mandates is just the most egregious. Sympathy, the ability to project oneself into another's situation and feel accordingly, is a richer and more subversive antidote to tyranny, because, unlike our Western idea of freedom, it is outward facing. Sympathy murmurs "you," while too often freedom shouts "I."

There are sixteen artists in *TYRANNY*, all Canadian, all represented by works drawn from the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The exhibition, curated by David Diviney, starts with two powerful and unsettling works by Brian Jungen and Jane Ash Poiras. Jungen's *Beer Cooler* (2002)—a commercial plastic cooler incised with images based on homemade tattoos—evokes traditional Northwest Coast bentwood boxes that, elaborately painted and carved, were given away and even destroyed in potlatch ceremonies—a traditional Indigenous gift-giving ceremony banned in Canada from 1885 until 1961. *Beer Cooler* is filled with cans of Budweiser beers, their red, black and white colour scheme echoing the palette of much Northwest Coast visual art. Jungen is inverting the generosity of the potlatch here, offering alcohol to settlers, returning the poison pill that colonization inflicted on First Nations. Jungen stipulates that viewers of European descent are invited to help themselves to the beer; the exhibiting gallery is responsible for keeping the cooler stocked. Jane Ash Poiras's *Pink Shamans* (1996) combines collage, drawing, painting and text into a dense meditation on aspects of the colonizers' attempts to suppress First Nations culture. Such attempts, of course, have been all too successful, yet she still sounds a note of optimism, writing in the work, "the balance of nature tips but doesn't crumble. With determination harmony will prevail on Mother Earth."



Mario Doucette, Brendan Fernandes and Evan Lee, *TYRANNY*, 2021.  
Partial view of the exhibition. Photo: Steve Farmer.

Mario Doucette's four drawings revisit the expulsion of the Acadians in 1755 from what was to become Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In Doucette's versions, comic book heroes join the British in attacking the Acadian farmers of Grand Pré, while British soldiers curl on frozen lakes and Acadian ghosts flit amidst bare trees. *La Dispersion des Acadiens (d'après Henri Beau)* (2006) depicts a group of Acadians, just before they are put on a boat to be deported, stripped of their clothing to symbolize the actual stripping of their land, possessions and heritage.

A more contemporary deportation is the subject of Evan Lee's excerpts from his *Migrant Ship Re-creation Project*. The 2009 deportation of 76 asylum-seeking Tamil migrants who arrived in Vancouver on the *MV Ocean Lady* inspired the work. Comprised of a sculpture of the ship and a collection of research notes, drawings, found images and other ephemera, Lee's project highlights the hypocrisy of a colonial culture deeming migrants as unwanted.

Tyranny has many guises: colonialism, racism, sexism, classism and more. Its strategies are equally varied: suppression of language, detention, forced labour, starvation, sexual assault, denial of education. Sadly, the list is endless. Brendan Fernandes, in *Devil's Noise* (2011), takes as his starting point student protests in South Africa against the imposition of Afrikaans as the language of education. In two powerful installations,

Chantal Gibson and Camille Turner each address historical attempts to erase the histories of Blackness and evade the collective responsibility for the fruits of slavery and systemic racism. Lucie Chan's evocative drawings of Black figures also resist the erasure of Black lives and insist on the dignity of their presence. John Scott's frenetic series of drawings from 2000, imagining various apocalypses, remains relevant today, strident appeals for change to stave off these horrific visions.

Sympathy is concisely expressed in Emily Falencki's artist statement: "No one person's suffering is more important, or more painful than another's." In her painting *Mira River* (2012), images drawn from media accounts of a murdered woman in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and bombing victims in Syria are combined, powerfully evoking how victimhood knows no borders. Marion Wagschal's monumental *Elegy After Manet* (2002) presents a generalized figure of victimhood, a corpse laid nude in an ambiguous setting, stressing that, in death, we are always alone.

Colleen Wolstenholme's large cement sculpture *Daisy* (2002), Luanne Martineau's felted *Form Fantasy* (2002), and Gillian Collyer's sculpture *hand-held* (2000), all address the various tyrannies surrounding society's expectations and prohibitions of women in the domestic and public spheres, and feminist strategies for countering them. Wolstenholme's

mammoth pills in the form of a flower subversively suggest the overreliance of the medical industry on medicating women, while Martineau and Collyer's use of textiles reflects a rejection of any limitations on the types of materials and processes (specifically traditional ones—so-called “women's work”) available for use in the fine arts.

Robert Wiens, in *Bed of Nails: Photograph Smuggled out of Prison* (1983) blows up a photograph to near life-size that Amnesty International released of a political prisoner being tortured in Uruguay. Paired with a steel bed of nails, the work is a powerful indictment of the abuses of power. Torture is also the theme of Garry Neill Kennedy's magisterial installation *The Colours of Citizen Arar* (2007). It was created in consultation with Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen who the United States detained on suspicion of terrorism links and deported to Syria, where he was tortured for a year. Eventually, both the Canadian and Syrian governments acknowledged Arar's complete innocence of the charges; the United States has never admitted wrongdoing. Arar's testimony to a commission of enquiry provided the source for Kennedy's wall work: each of the colours of the text (“the colours of Citizen Arar”) is mentioned in his testimony: the blue of a bucket that was his only toilet, the orange of the jumpsuit the Americans made him wear, the red of his blood, and more. Created for a larger gallery, this rendition of Kennedy's work is in a square room with much less wall space. The work's resulting compression makes the text appear like bars and the bright clashing colours seem to strobe as one looks around the room. It is a difficult space to inhabit, disorientating and oppressive, even threatening. Kennedy was consulted on this reinterpretation before his death this year, and this version must surely stand as one of the iconic artist's most powerful and searing statements.

TYRANNY is a very well-curated exhibition, with work that is consistently challenging and engaging. Where the exhibition falters, however, is in the design. While the show is well-lit and the sombre colours of the walls work well with the theme and the works, it relies too heavily on large, abstract wall treatments that often compete with the artworks. Good design should enhance our experience of an exhibition, but unfortunately, in TYRANNY, the design gets in the way. However, it is an unequal contest, with the art overcoming the visual clutter, much as sympathy can overcome tyranny, and harmony can yet prevail.

Ray Cronin is a Nova Scotia-based writer and curator. A former Director and CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, he is the founding curator of the Sobey Art Award. A frequent contributor to Canadian and American art magazines, he is the author of nine books of non-fiction, including *John Greer: Hard Thought* and *Alex Colville: Life & Work*. His newest book, *Colleen Wolstenholme: Complications*, will be published by Gaspereau Press in the Autumn of 2021.

## Maison molle

Gabrielle Sarthou

**LE LIVART  
MONTRÉAL  
2 SEPTEMBRE –  
10 OCTOBRE 2021**

Accueillante et chaleureuse, l'exposition collective *Maison molle*, commissariée par Alice Ricciardi, a abrité mon esprit pour ensuite l'habiter. Mise sur pied dans l'espace du Livart – ce bâtiment patrimonial situé sur le Plateau Mont-Royal et anciennement Presbytère Saint-Jude –, elle héberge les œuvres d'art textiles de dix artistes<sup>1</sup>, qui viennent s'y déployer dans toutes leurs formes, couleurs et textures. Cette exposition, imprégnée de la notion du « fait main », allie le côté traditionnel des techniques artisanales et de la matérialité des œuvres avec l'hybridité des pratiques contemporaines et de l'expérimentation. Dans cet espace, les artistes ont minutieusement déployé différentes techniques, promouvant un héritage, fruit d'une transmission du savoir-faire qui résonne ici en échos uniques. Résultats d'un long processus de conception, les œuvres exposées révèlent la complexité et la lenteur du travail textile fait à la main et la solitude qui accompagne souvent la création en métier d'art. Résonnant avec le contexte de la crise sanitaire actuelle, de l'isolement et de la négociation entre vie privée et vie publique, *Maison molle* devient un lieu d'intimités partagées.

Les œuvres de Damien Ajavon, artiste textile queer né-e en France et d'origine sénégalaise et togolaise nous accueillent : ce sont des sortes de tapis troués aux longues franges. Ils sont composés de nœuds et de serpentins orange et violets qui découlent d'une technique de tissage nommée « dentelle espagnole ». Les entrelacements des fils sont présentés à grande échelle – on a l'impression de regarder un tissu de très près – et notre regard tente de retracer le chemin de chaque fil. Les œuvres d'Ajavon sont le résultat d'une écoute et d'une compréhension des enseignements de sa famille sur les cultures africaines et évoquent ainsi son héritage et l'apprentissage intergénérationnel.

Nous tombons ensuite nez à nez avec un « vêtement sonore » : l'œuvre *The Leftovers of the Sword* de Patil Tchilinguirian, une artiste plasticienne et multidisciplinaire d'origine libanaise et arménienne basée à Tiohtià:ke/ Montréal. Cette œuvre est inspirée du Kepenek : un manteau traditionnel sans manches porté par les berger-ère-s turc-que-s et couvrant le corps de la tête aux pieds. Les revers du vêtement sont ici ornés d'interrupteurs souples qui permettent à la personne portant le manteau d'activer des haut-parleurs cachés dans le tissu. Lorsqu'on active le son, on peut entendre des paroles et des bruits qui, selon la description de l'œuvre, « articulent des vérités difficiles concernant le contexte et l'histoire des génocides arméniens ». Cette expérience tactile et sonore intime nous immerge dans l'espace et nous transporte dans un endroit qui dépasse les frontières physiques de la salle, nous sensibilisant à des traumatismes culturels et des fardeaux lourds à porter pour celles et ceux ayant vécu ces génocides. Le tissu devient ici polyphonique et multifonctionnel, il est une maison portable qui protège des intempéries tout en devenant un espace de dialogue culturel.