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Denis Demers: A Retrospective

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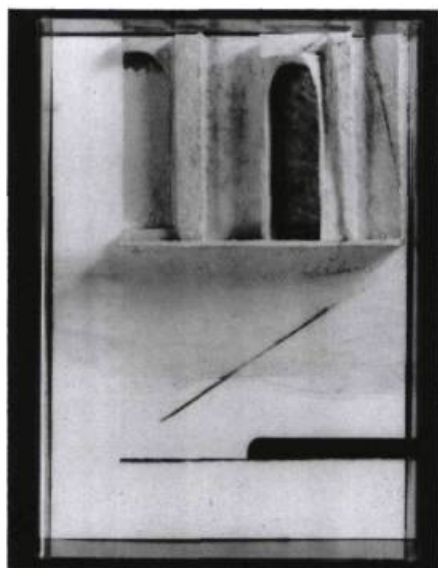
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Denis Demers : A Retrospective



Denis Demers, *De courts moments*, 1983.
Mixed media; 51 x 36 cm. Courtesy Concordia Art Gallery

**Denis Demers 1948-1987,
Concordia Art Gallery, Montréal,
May 25 to July 1, 1989 —**

This exhibition of Denis Demers' multi-media pieces consists of 24 works from eight series dated 1979 to 1986. They were all produced after Demers' self-described "second birth" in Marrakesh at the age of 26. From that time onward the cultural life of Morocco, and the expanse and silence of the north African desert, became the touchstones of his art. These phenomena injected both a sense of personal presence and a readiness to communicate with the viewer into an *œuvre* that had previously been characterised by a rather hermetic formalism. The selection of works in this exhibition is sensitive, and is sufficiently restricted in number, to encourage the viewer to piece together the events and concerns of Demers' maturation as an artist. This is an exhibition that has important points to make, but that refrains from hectoring the visitor. Intimacy cannot be forced.

Demers' work from the 1980's incorporates three points of concern : formal complexity, trans-individual/transcultural themes, and the subjectivity and individuality of creation, perception and response. The exhibition includes much work that held the promise of future development along any of these lines. It now stands as a memorial to a fast-developing confi-

dence cut short just when the strands that made up the art were coalescing into a convincing unity.

To begin with formal elements : by the late 1970's Demers' earlier faith in the Modernist ideal of the work of art as an isolated and self-critical entity was maturing into a questioning of the defences at the bordelines of formalist etiquette. Among the most visually seductive of his several series in this regard is *Lieux et couleurs* (1981). Each work in this series consists of three heavily-worked layers : a partly translucent, partly opaque surface placed over a sheet of handmade paper, all superimposed on a support that extends beyond the edges of the completely opaque middle layer. The non-transparency of the top layer is contradicted by the spectator's desire to get beyond and beneath it, thus setting up a neat series of oscillations between two-dimensional surface and (semi-obsured) depth. Similarly, in the *De courts moments* series (1983) plaster-coated cardboard arches are set in delicate groupings against flat backgrounds to create another variation of the flatness/projection, surface/depth dialogue. The pieces require the viewer to deal with them, at least initially, in terms of their objective physical presence. (The very fact that the *De courts moments* pieces are sealed in plexiglass boxes seems to

emphasise their discrete objecthood.) Yet there is a degree of witty sophistication that is absent in more strictly "pure" Modernist art, and that hints at Demers' evolving concerns without flatly rejecting Modernist doctrine.

These concerns with objecthood were developments of what had already been the principle focus of interest in Demers' art prior to his first visit to north Africa. In this exhibition, however, art as object soon yields ground to something new: an interest in themes of transindividual experience. Demers' abandonment of Modernist self-referentiality, first as the sole and later as the basic criterion in the creation and evaluation of a work of art, happened during a decade in which many artists turned to the search for, and the communication of, essential beliefs, sensations, fears, myths. For example the two earliest works in this exhibition, both from the *Fiancé(e)s/Moussem* series of 1979-80, have significant comments to make about gender expectations in north African society (and, by implication and comparison, in other societies as well). This series evokes the Moroccan festival/ceremony at which marriage partners were selected. The "male" fiancés are colour collages — striking constructions that assert their own materiality and three-dimensionality. Limited only by their rectangular frames (a reference to restrictive religious law), they contrast sharply with the comparative uniformity and the lack of independence of the black, grey and white "female" figures — assemblages of photomechanically — produced copies of the male figures. Beneath the anthropological documentation of the Moussem, Demers found the same sort of controlling structures that Lévi-Strauss had found in Tahitian society.

In the *De courts moments* (1983) and the *Corpus Naos* (1984) series, Demers went beyond his examination of the male-female dichotomy in search of murkier transcultural values. (In any case, that dichotomy lacks universality insofar as most North American and European viewers might not be expected to credit it with still having an inviolable universal validity.) He incorporated rough three-dimensional representations of architectural elements: fragments of arches and doorways remembered from time spent in north Africa. These models are not archaeologically accurate or art historically precise. They can thus appeal on a generalised level to a wide range of culture groups. Their message tends to be "home" or "shelter" (or — given the misting and blurring of the images — "memory" or "history") rather than anything more architecturally or historically specific. They are symbols rather than things — signposts on the obscure line between rational conscious analysis and non-critical subconscious presences.

A third crucial evolving concern in Demers' art during the 1980's was the question of individualism and subjectivity. In the *Fiancé(e)s/Moussem* pieces

this is seen at its most basic, with the artist contrasting the fully individualised male figures with their mechanically replicated female counterparts. Immediately thereafter he extended this interest outward from the figures in the works to encompass the viewers' subjective responses to visual stimulation. In *De courts moments*, for example, the juxtapositioning of three-dimensional architectural fragments against flat or slightly-layered grounds not only poses formal questions and evokes undefined sensations of home and history, but also disrupts the smoothness of the spectator's gaze (as we attempt to reconcile relief sculpture with painted ground) and forces us to come to terms with the foregrounding of our physical and psychological relations with the artworks. Other series stress not so much the subjectivity of the viewer and the act of viewing as the quirky privacy of the artist as an individual and the identity of his art as the residue of his inner life. In *Lieux et couleurs*, for example, each piece is a multi-layered record of the Demers' physical, object-making activity, complete with all the mystery, possibilities of discovery, and psychological ambiguities inherent in the very idea of a palimpsest. The flat backgrounds of certain *De courts moments* pieces not in this exhibition¹ consist partly of cut-up, rearranged and heavily-reworked photographs of 1979-80 works from the *Fiancé(e)s/Moussem* series. Because Demers' art was rooted in personal experience, the several series that comprise his *œuvre* remain introverted, intimate, and in constant dialogue with one another.

The chronologically and visually ultimate concentration on individuality comes in *Dos au volcan* (1986). In this, the final work of his career, Demers included what seems to have been his own silhouette, lying down and melding with the representations of arches. "He lay down", speculates Guest Curator Jean-François L'Homme, "to let his spirit flow inside one of the numerous passageways he created. [...] Did he [in *Dos au volcan*] tell us everything, give us everything we needed to remember him?" It is in the very late works that Demers most convincingly brought together his concerns with formal innovation and extra-individual references, the latter powered and given a centre and source by the courage of one man coming to terms with his own mortality. As Marcel Proust (to whom Demers has occasionally been compared) knew, the discovery of the universal through the privacy of perception and memory, and the expression of both in terms of dedicated craftsmanship, are worthy goals for any artist.

Brian Foss

NOTE

1. The works of Denis Demers were also exhibited at galerie Aubes 3935 from June 11th to July 29th, 1989