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Seripop

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Folk

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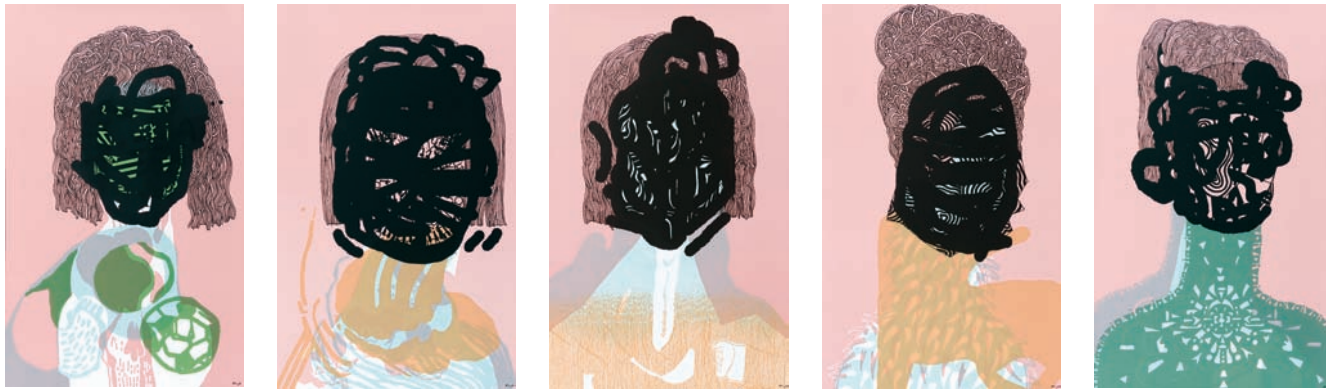
Introduction:
A Long Overdue Artworld "Hat Trick"

Yannick Desranleau and Chloe Lum had a whirlwind summer, criss-crossing the Atlantic for installation and poster art exhibits in Brooklyn (the Secret Project Robot), Paris and Vienna (Kunsthalle Wien) as Seripop, and rehearsing in Montreal with their experimental noise-rock band AIDS Wolf for a fall tour through the U.S. All talked-out and full-up on homemade vegan pizza, I'm about to head home and they offer a ride in the tour van. I'll be sharing the back with four plastic toddlers' cars—*objets trouvés* sought over a full day at several garage sales across Montreal. The cars are destined for Seripop's upcoming installation at the 28th Symposium International d'art contemporain de Baie-Saint-Paul (July 30 – Aug. 29, 2010). The invitation from guest curator Stefan St-Laurent to participate in the prestigious Quebec Symposium at Baie-Saint-Paul, entitled (aptly with Seripop on the roster) *Union Makes Us Strong*, is part of a long overdue 2010 'hat-trick' for Yannick and Chloe in the Canadian artworld. Add to the Baie-Saint-Paul invitation their present coverage in *ETC* (a first feature article for the duo in the Canadian art press), and a CALQ (Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec) project grant for their sculpture installation at Baie-Saint-Paul and Seripop's 2010 coup is plain to see. It's been a good year.

Postering: The Cambrian Explosion in Print

Poster art commentator Uwe Loesch says "a good poster attacks you, a bad poster loves you and there are 'art-for-art's-sake' posters that love themselves."[1] When asked where Seripop's posters fit into this scheme, Chloe offers the following: "we definitely see a little of column three in what we do… we try for a singular voice. If we do an album cover we want it to appeal to people even if they've never heard of the band… and it's the same with our posters, we want them to have a certain degree of attack!"[2]

Immersed in an international community of poster artists and critics on forums such as Gigposters.com, the pair was voracious in their search for inspiration and critical commentary on their work. Pioneers of the poster art form such as Vittorio Fioruccii and Art Chantry exerted a major influence on Seripop. The pair traded in their art school affiliation for an informal apprenticeship with Art Chantry, which was carried on initially through the Gigposters.com

discussion boards and eventually by mail. After a brief courting period on the site, Chloe and Yannick began sending editions of their posters in tubes to Chantry in exchange for his detailed critical feedback, and even grades! Chantry's wisdom is recalled in mantras by Yannick: "He (Chantry) pushed us to think of the poster as a whole composition, and to approach it experimentally. He also insisted on our being able to talk about our work—to explain it. 'Everybody has thousands of mediocre ideas' he used to say, 'and they need to be gotten out of one's system before good work can be done.'"[3]

Chantry's wisdom took well. Seripop have paid their dues. The "good work" has been flying out of their "100 Sided Die"—the co-operative studio in Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood (est. 2004) for quite some time now. In a seven-colour, collaborative screen-print that Seripop produced in Chicago with Nick Butcher and Nadine Nakanishi (a.k.a. Sonnenzimmer), the technique of layering serves to generate a visual cyclone—the mostly abstract forms of the print appear to radiate from a busy and dense compositional centre. Communication is described as an unruly force of nature. A black speech bubble with dashes, impatiently sketched lines and dots—a corrupted rewriting of Morse code—rises above the central motif to reinforce the theme and make strange everyday patterns and mediations of speech. The work is graphomaniacal—a little like Cy Twombly's scribbles or Jackson Pollock's Jungian hieroglyphics but less cryptic—more understood. Their prints record measured and successful communicative experiences between attentive interlocutors, rather than involuntary, libidinally charged moments of expression. Their posters are creaturely! In a series of five, four-colour print portraits, Seripop direct their skill in drawing toward near representational ends. The "sitters" in the series of quasi-portraits are suggested with cluttered forms that approximate shoulders and necks, and with tangles of meticulously drawn lines that wittily describe the shapes of various hairdos; bob-cuts, beehives and jerry curls all get their turn. Heads are mounted on part-bodies in the series as separable units of an anthropomorphic or humanoid architecture. Geometric and organic designs cover the surfaces of neck-like structures that seem more like sculptural plinths than functional anatomical parts. Patterns or decorative motifs in this series hover somewhere between the crystallographic and the biomorphic, and invite the viewer to play a game of identification without verifiable answers. Seripop's figurative prints playfully stage a confusion of natural categories. Are they mineral or animal, or for that matter, viral or bacterial? It's anyone's guess.

People are strange in Seripop's world, but oddly familiar too. Their pantheon of humanoid abominations seems sort of ancient. The dreamed up creatures featured in the prints might be our forgotten ancestors from the Cambrian explosion of 545 million years ago. Or are they our future-primitive heirs? After our first meeting, Chloe recommended *The Book of Dave*, by a London author called Will Self. The story tells of a cab driver, Dave, whose chronicle of shuttling drug dealers, socialites, thieves and immigrants around the city is discovered by a small settler community in London after the apocalypse. The *Book of Dave* becomes a founding text for a motley race of New Londoners. Dave's book is thin on moral insights, but derives its advantage as a religious text from its narrative form. His taxicab travel-log vividly records the lost but not forgotten psychogeography of the New Londoner's former home. Their attraction to the Book is desperately nostalgic. In Dave's Book the eviscerated London is re-born in

fragments that correspond to the settlers' post-traumatic intrusive memories of the city. It was this character of the unearthed and repurposed urban record that appealed to Chloe too. And like Self's world, Seripop's printed colonies seem at once archaic and utterly new—slices of life from a ruined city of the future. Whither the folk?

Seripop's prints are nostalgic, but not for a readily identifiable age. It is the body's memory perhaps of earlier evolutionary stages of development—an ontogenetic flashback—that accounts for the uncanny familiarity of Seripop's drawn beings. Their work is, in this respect, *folkloric*: it welds together a present community by harkening back to a common experience. But their figures and atmospheres are endlessly interpretable too—a different story, with different players will suggest itself to each pair of eyes that scans a Seripop poster. Soured on the art world's wrote theories and monotonous aesthetics of reproduction and appropriation, Seripop insists on the continued importance of earnest experiment and hard earned invention. They make a case for the value and possibility of originality—in their work and in its reception.

Unhinged and Installed: Seripop at Large in Vienna and Baie-Saint-Paul

Their summer 2010 show in Vienna was ambitious. Seripop's work was presented by the Kunsthalle's Catherine Hug in a sweeping curatorial vision as an important contemporary iteration of the tradition of "street art." Hug suggests an art-historical pedigree in the exhibition title: *Street and Studio: From Basquiat to Seripop* (Kunsthalle Wien, 2010). Their engagement with forms and problems of urbanism justifies Seripop's prominent place in Hug's expanded vision of street art to be sure. But their practice has long been informed by the considerably more high-minded enterprise of Modernist aesthetics as well. Seripop's moment of invention in Vienna had to do with bridging these normally separated spheres. In their installation work, Seripop stage a ritual pollution of Modernist ideals with the re-purposed materials of a street-wise poster practice.

The work entitled *Hoarding Skin* includes two large caricature prints of Le Corbusier laid out on the floor to be trampled underfoot by the throng of gallery goers. The history of Modernism figures as a substrate, a frame of reference and a turf in the installation. But it is an unstable ground—not at all the singular and rationalized Purist space of the perfect city Le Corbusier theorized. A first fault in the Modernist illusion of fullness appears in the interval between the two large 'Le Corb' heads rendered in shaky lines on the gallery floor. The iconic architect is turned into a 'poster-boy' for Modernist schizophrenia. The caricature is hilarious: Le Corbusier is recognizable not in the city of the future but in the creases its strained conception left on the man's forehead, and in the imperfectly drafted circles of his readily identifiable thick-framed glasses. The serious-headedness of a march of Modernist history is constructed as an altogether more convivial and unpredictable switch-point in public space. On the back wall of the installation in shaky block letters, Seripop announce their intention: "We're in it for the Shits and Giggles." *Hoarding Skin* is a great rebuff in the Viennese epicentre of European Modernism. Years after the heyday of the *fin-de-siècle*, on the graves of Gustave Klimt and his Vienna Secessionist peers and in the margins of Freud's groundbreaking *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) comes Seripop's good-humoured allegory of Modernist purging. Beneath the wall text, a pile of crumpled papers built up in yellow, orange and fire-red monochrome layers evokes an archetypal writers' waste-paper basket full of abandoned starts. Out of this symbol of the artist's moment of failure, Seripop build an environment in which failures, false starts and laughter all figure as essential parts of any creative process.

The problems of modern urbanism––in art, architecture and design—are for Seripop a strictly transnational business. Seripop's installation for the symposium at Baie-Saint-Paul, cheekily entitled *You Should be Able to Read it From 30 ft. Away in a Car Going at 50 km/hr* (2010), zeroes in on a particularly insidious aspect of the urban experience––car culture. In North American cultural imaginary, the car signifies variously, personal power and freedom of mobility, desire and virility and the urban anomie brought on by devices of automation and insulation. The relationship at issue in the work for Baie-Saint-Paul is that of the isolated driver and the highway-side billboard: a rolling dance of distracted consumer desire. Of course, the title describes an advertising industry standard for effective communication with a mobile target. But the work's immersive

quality does much more than this, locating the imperatives of such profit driven communication in an almost mystical multisensory environment.

The idiom worked out in Seripop's earlier installations is pushed considerably further in this work. It is more abstract and more densely significant than *Hoarding Skin*. Ersatz columns, vividly coloured proxies for posters and/or screens and handily arranged volumes act at once as structural supports in the work, and as metaphorical portholes to the communicative networks of an abstracted city. Plastic cars skewered by tall 6x6 cedar posts condense the wit and humour achieved in past works by textual means. The printed element on the wall behind the arrangement of pillars (in various states of collapse under the weight of the plastic cars) functions as a kind of onomatopoeic text panel in a comic strip. The "pow" of a *Shazam* comic is given a semantic equivalent here in an exploding star form that operates as a graphic sign for the "crash" of a highway pile-up. The auditory valence of this graphic element is reinforced by the columns: their volumetric units are conical rather than cubical as in *Hoarding Skin*. Individually the cones look like megaphones, which combine to make cylindrical 'walls of sound,' recalling the gaudy technical innovation of the stadium rock bands of the 80s. The work is a three-dimensional noise-rock anthem technicolour.

But, like the "soft sculptures" of Claes Oldenburg, the monumentality of Seripop's structures is undercut by their evocation of structural failure. The plastic cars crash into the pillars, compressing the openings of the cones into voids that look like cartoon lips; pursed as if in frustration or curled in irregular waves and bends. The columns are Medusan and psychedelic; they are roughly geometric and cylindrical at a distance, but up close, they fall apart into a mess of mouths alternately agape, puckered or shut violently in mid-articulation.

This hallucinogenic vision of the abstract driver/consumer on a sonic highway system recalls a debate that exploded in the American art-press in the late 1960s. Cooper Union instructor and sculptor Tony Smith, in a short piece published in *Artforum* magazine advanced the motif of the highway as an urban or post-

Seripop, *You Should Be Able to Read It From 30 Feet Away in a Car Going at 50 km/h*, 2010 ; Screenprinted paper, lumber, plastic toys , 304,8 x 487, 6 x 365, 7 cm. Photo: Seripop.

industrial sensorium worthy of serious artistic attention. Smith describes a transformative experience during an otherwise typical drive with three students at night on the New Jersey Turnpike.[4] The sensation of speeding along the unfinished turnpike at night, attuned to the details of an entirely artificial environment was, Smith suddenly realized "a revealing experience… a reality which had not had any expression in art." Smith recalls his rapt attention while moving through the Turnpike's "landscape of flats… punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights:"

"the experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized… it ought to be clear that's the end of art… most painting looks pretty pictorial after that."[5]

"Mapped out but not socially recognized;" the social and built world that was somehow held at bay by the art establishment until Smith's time was suddenly opened up as a vast field of sculptural possibilities and general human interest. Smith's near-religious experience expressed a desire among many artists of the 1960s and 70s to move beyond the narrowly prescribed bounds of Modernist pictorial integrity championed by critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Fried's curmudgeonly opposition to Smith ended up functioning as a swan song for the values of high-Modernism.[6] Perhaps most importantly, where Fried decried the endlessness of temporally organized experiences like that described by Smith on the N.J. Turnpike many advanced artists of the period began exploring the possibilities of a durational art. Fried's fear of temporality exposed

fine art on the one hand and between music, visual and textual art forms on the other. Their work stages a kind of convergence of media in a world built on exchangeable units of information, and issues a plea to build a durable social fabric out of the detritus of such an impersonal media-scape. In Seripop's oeuvre, Fried's aversion to "theatricality" becomes a principle of construction. Their sculpture installation displays all the techniques of anthropomorphism that Fried mentions. They make use of the human scale in their towers and in the found objects of the latest work. And what Fried describes as the "hollowness" of a human encounter (a sense of confrontation—which strikes an almost paranoid note in his text—occasioned by an object's presentation of an inside and an outside) is certainly evoked in Seripop's extensive use of volumes and "skins." To be sure their installations flirt with theatre at every turn, adhering, at almost some points to a stage plan. Crucially, the temporality of Seripop's work (and of Fried's personal hell) is to be found in careful evocations of music and sound and in the immersive experience of their work.

Conclusion

Seripop's formal experiments with an immersive and ephemeral postmodernist sculptural language are not idle. They have been building something feverishly in recent years that has started to register a very real presence—in the institutions and discourses of the art world and on the ground in the DIY arts and music subcultures. Seripop re-imagine and commune with a 21st century hybrid city; equal parts Montreal, Chicago and Vienna. Their growing audience in those cities (and others) responds directly and viscerally to a language cobbled together out of moribund Modernist forms and reanimated with amplifiers and attitude. It is this constructive and profoundly social impetus in Seripop's work that recalls the ethos of folk art. What is clear is that Seripop's audience is multi-, if not para-disciplinary, engaged with media and materials but indifferent to medium-specific aesthetic prescriptions (like Fried's), and hell bent on visual and aural surprises. Seripop's message seems to resonate for more than just a "freak" demographic. They speak to anyone who has marvelled quietly at communications towers or daydreamed about blasting out power-chords at a hazardous volume on the morning commuter train. Seripop and AIDS Wolf have roused a long-dormant moral majority of the odd. Freak folk, perhaps. But the more pertinent message seems to be that we city folks—one and all, like it or not—are incorrigible freaks.

Tammer El-Sheikh

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Notes

1 Uwe Loesche, quoted in John Foster, *New Masters* of *Poster Design* (Gloucester: Rockport Publishing, 2008) p. 4.
2 Yannick Desranleau, Interview with Tammer El-Sheikh for *Street and Studio* (Kunsthalle, Summer 2010). Recorded in Montreal, Thurs. Feb. 18, 2010.
3 Yannick Desranleau, Interview with Tammer El-Sheikh for *Street and Studio* (Kunsthalle, Summer 2010). Recorded in Montreal, Thurs. Feb. 18, 2010.
4 Tony Smith, Interview with Samuel Wagstaff Jr. in *Artforum*, v. 1, n. 4, New York (December, 1966) p. 18-19.
5 Tony Smith, Interview with Samuel Wagstaff Jr. in *Artforum*, v. 1, n. 4, New York (December, 1966) p. 18-19.
6 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" originally in *Artforum* (summer, 1967), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Eds. (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1992) p. 822-830.

the entire Modernist enterprise as a kind of panic formation or defensive reflex in the face of historical currents whose ultimate social and political significance exceeded the language of painting and traditional media.

Forty years on, Fried's swan song has become Seripop's raucous, avant-rock anthem. Seripop's practice builds precisely on the tradition or counter-tradition of multi-media installations and time-based, experiential artworks by which Fried was so mortified. Media are de-differentiated in Seripop's oeuvre; their sculptural forms suggest aural experiences, technologies of broadcast communications and features of the urban environment from "hoardings" to billboards, shop windows and high-rises. And their practice shuttles back and forth across the borders between design—graphic design, poster design and urban design—and