

Jen Aitken & Caroline Monnet, *Architectonic Transmissions*, Arsenal Contemporary Art Toronto

Alex Bowron

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Jen Aitken & Caroline Monnet

Architectonic Transmissions

Aptly titled by Arsenal curators Anaïs Castro and David Liss, *Architectonic Transmissions* brings the sculptural practices of Jen Aitken and Caroline Monnet into dialogue around the formal and communicative aspects of raw materials. The pairing makes beautiful sense. Together, the works speak a language of contemporary abstract modernism, where volume, surface, and geometry combine to produce scaled-down architectures that push shape into space and play with perception. By refining common construction materials into aesthetically confident wall and floor sculptures, both Aitken and Monnet build their practices through a process of unveiling the inherent properties and intimacies of matter.

Continuing her expansive personal history of working with modular geometric concrete sculpture, Aitken's signature style is bolstered in this exhibition by a series of new works titled *Knots*, each with a mass so minimal that their three-dimensionality is mere technicality. Fabricated from thin strips of pine trim, spruce plywood, and framing lumber, and augmented with brass and copper sheeting, these spindly armatures look almost like angular tumbleweed, functioning as sculptural illustrations that delineate space rather than occupy it.

Where Aitken builds her material into space, Monnet cuts hers down. Whether carving into circular-cut laminated insulation board, layering rectangular pieces of housewrap into wooden frames, or embroidering directly onto polyethylene foam, each application of her singularly elegant geometric motifs demonstrates the potential for a surface to transform through minimal intervention. Most of the works selected for this exhibition were created using materials linked to the troubled architectures of government-subsidized housing in remote northern Indigenous communities. Generic, impractical, and out of place, these structures represent a complete failure and lack of vision on the part of the Canadian government

to fulfil their obligation to provide appropriate and dignified housing. By unearthing the visual poetry of mundane materials like DuroSpan, ComfortSeal, and Tyvek, Monnet reminds us of the long-standing integrity and cohesion inherent to the traditional building techniques of her own Algonquin Anishinaabe origins. The works employ insulation as a metaphor for isolation, emphasizing how physical and mental health are deeply tied to dignified housing.

Whether literally or conceptually, Aitken and Monnet both take their visual cues from existing structures in the built environment. Together, their work explores the emotive potential of architecture. Aitken's sculptures draw our attention to the physical makeup of the gallery space, its familiar form and structure, and its thwarted attempt at neutrality. The emotion in her work is located beneath the surface, in her highly personal labouring with the physicality of construction materials. The almost complete lack of overt content in her sculptures necessitates the primacy of an intuitive response. Where Aitken's works ground us in place, Monnet's pull us back out. Her emphasis on the intimate connection between body and building connects to Aitken's, amplifying the potential for materials to act as transmitters of culture, history, and identity. Viewing Monnet's work in such close proximity to Aitken's gives us permission to *feel* before analyzing, so that we may indulge our senses freely in the materiality of these human-scale works that feature geometry as pattern, ornament, volume, and subject at once.

Alex Bowron

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Architectonic Transmissions,
exhibition views, 2021.
Photos : Courtesy of Arsenal
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