

Feature

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Bryne McLaughlin's Top 3: Against the Grain

VARIOUS LOCATIONS JAN TO DEC 2011

by BRYNE MCLAUGHLIN

Olivia Boudreau *L'Étuve* 2011 Video still Courtesy the artistOlivia Boudreau *L'Étuve* 2011 Video still Courtesy the artist

1. The [Quebec Triennial](#) at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

With works by more than 50 artists selected by five curators filling the MACM, and a slate of on- and off-site performances and installations, the [Quebec Triennial](#) is a juggernaut of an exhibition. And, as is to be expected with this kind of ambitious omnibus survey (artists are only allowed to show once in a triennial, no repeats), there are hits and misses aplenty depending on your point of view. For me, the show started strong and ended strong, with a few particular highlights scattered between. The opening galleries of works by Chris Kline (in particular a new cartographic treatment of presence and absence), Steve Bates (a functioning radio antenna fashioned from barbed wire), Nelson Henricks (an installation based on the skull-jarring 2287 Hertz frequency—the same used for police sirens) and Olivia Boudreau (an immersive video installation depicting women slowly appearing then disappearing in a steam bath) all signal a discordant reality/ephemerality. Further on, Jean-Pierre Aubé's *31 soleils (Dawn Chorus)* takes this dissonance to cosmic proportions with a massive video of the transiting sun set to a cacophony of digitally captured radio broadcasts. Charles Stankievech's *LOVELAND* fantastically captures an ominous arctic sci-fi (with a nod to American abstract painter Jules Olitski), and who would have thought that dot-matrix printers could make such maddeningly compelling music as experienced in an audio installation/composition by [The User] (a.k.a. Emmanuel Madan and Thomas McIntosh). Numa Amun's *Citadelle des sens* series of biomorphic drawings embedded into the gallery wall seem to hint at a weirdly beautiful clinical dystopia and made me think again about Stéphane La Rue's gallery of folded and painted minimalist geometries. Finally, a bit of playful humour arrives in sculptural and psychological mazes by Mathieu Latulippe and by the duo Florine Leoni and Sylvain Baumann, along with Alexandre David's latest interactive plywood intervention. Things I didn't get: Massimo Guerrera's relational aesthetics, which always leave me feeling like I missed something; Jacynthe Carrier's "psychologically charged" video triptych *Rites*, which only made me think of an avant-garde European car commercial; Jim Holyoak and Matt Shane's ongoing floor-to-ceiling drawing installation (maybe it'll make sense when it's done?); Sophie Bélair Clément's and Grier Edmundson's installations—enough with the coldly calculated and ironic-kitsch (respectively) conceptualism; and Claudie Gagnon's video/performance series *Tableaux*, which takes an

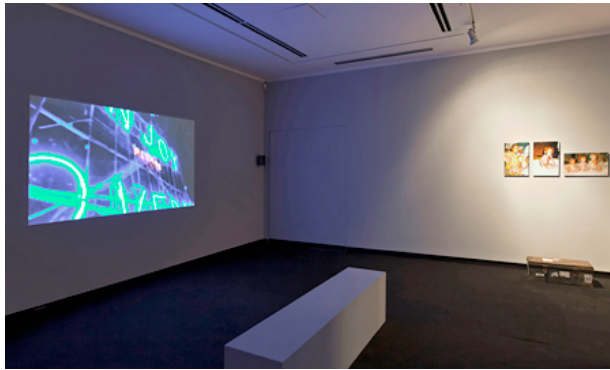
absurdist jab at art historical imagery that seems for the most part to be just silly. It won the triennial's people's choice award, so I guess that shows how much I know.



Raqs Media Collective's "Surjection" installation view with (right) *The Untold Intimacy of Digits* 2011 / photo Cheryl O'Brien

2. [Raqs Media Collective](#) at the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto

Director and curator Philip Monk—who has just won this year's Hnatyshyn Foundation Visual Arts Award for curatorial excellence—and his team at the Art Gallery of York University have a reputation (that they've encouraged through gallery marketing) of being “out there.” On the surface, this is a wry play on the fact that the suburban gallery is off Toronto's downtown art map, and perhaps on Monk's rather contrarian reputation as well, but that distance (and institutional support) has also allowed Monk and company the freedom to mostly ignore the trends that seem to dominate other major gallery spaces and art scenes in the city and to look further a field for new perspectives and programming. An exhibition of works by Panamanian artist Humberto Vélez earlier this spring was one example, as was this fall's solo exhibition by the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective (Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Suddhabrata Sengupta). Taking its title from a mathematical concept that deals with the transfer of the elements of one set into the features of another, “Surjection” presented a range of text, film and sculptural works that dove into the calculated reductions, and in turn the social implications, of modern global politics, culture and language. Raqs, whose art practice is well known on the international art scene and through their work with the Sarai program, have a smart, subtle touch with meaning and metaphor. The seemingly abstract gestures of sign language and the historical resonance of fingerprinting, as the Indian government undertakes the world's largest biometric database, are just two of the elements that underscored the malleability/viability of identity and emotional contact that coursed through the exhibition. There was much to think about in this show and I wonder, amid the distractions of a busy fall art season, how many people made the trek up to the AGYU. I had [a long chat with Sengupta](#) at the gallery, which, if you're interested (and you should be), fills in the details.



Renzo Martens *Episode III – Enjoy Poverty* 2009 Installation view at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery / photo Toni Hafkenscheid

3. Models for Taking Part at [Presentation House Gallery](#), North Vancouver, and the [Justina M. Barnicke Gallery](#), Toronto

I'll admit right off that, even though I've chosen "Models for Taking Part" as one of my top exhibitions this year, I'm still not sure what to make of it. The group exhibition organized by UBC grad and Witte de With curator Juan A. Gaitán for Presentation House Gallery this spring, and recently on view in Toronto at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, takes a hard-hitting look at the chaos and contradiction of the modern "democratic" world. That's a strong premise and, indeed, Gaitán successfully crafted a strong show filled with differing perspectives by six international artists that carried the viewer from the streets of Poland to the depths of Congo. Notions of participation, or the fantasy thereof, played a big part here—in Polish artist Artur Zmijewski's cacophonous installation *Democracies*, footage shot at political protests, street parties/riots and a Second World War re-enactment is purposely overwhelming to the point of confusion; Romanian/Slovakian duo Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkáčová's video *The Descent of Man* follows the inherent breakdown of meaning as a group of giggling blonde girls pass along whispered sentences taken from the writings of Charles Darwin; Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili's video *Straight Stories – Part 2: ANYA* tells the story of a disenfranchised Iraqi refugee's failed attempts to escape immigration limbo in Istanbul. Yet the work that lingers most—and has caused me the greatest uncertainty—is Dutch artist Renzo Martens' video *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty*. I felt drained after I sat through all 90 minutes of Martens' self-guided, Conradian tour through parts of the crisis-ridden, war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo. Corruption reigns on all sides here, always, it seems, at the expense of those whose impoverished lives are being fought over between warring factions, colonial industrialists and international aid groups. That's not a surprise, I suppose, but Martens does well to reveal the intricate layers of deceit, suffering and hopelessness—whether in the work of photojournalists, aid workers or between the Congolese themselves. As I discovered later, Martens has been subject to much critical dressing down over the film, ranging from being called a foppish interloper/narcissist to a morally vacant pornographer. There's a point to be taken here. After all, Martens is an internationally known artist who crafted the film to be shown (and sold?) in the Western art world. But cut away all of that theory laden art-world cynicism for a moment and at its core, I think, this work still seems to be about a visceral human response to what we see and, in turn, feel. Whether we do anything about those feelings is another, more individual, matter, but perhaps the knowledge of what we've seen and the conundrums it reveals should be taken, in the context of this exhibition, as a much needed kick-start toward participation.

Bryne McLaughlin is managing editor of Canadian Art.

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The Quebec Triennial: Eyes Front

Melding a major regional survey of more than 50 artists with an off-site installation, regular performances and a 500-page catalogue, the Quebec Triennial kicked off this week at an impressive scale. Daniel Baird reviews, finding it nearly flawless.

Raqs Media Collective: The Equation Makers

Poetics, politics and paradox multiply in the work of India's Raqs Media Collective, which has gained wide international attention in the past decade. Last week, as its latest exhibition opened in Toronto, Raqs' Shuddhabrata Sengupta sat down to chat with Bryne McLaughlin.

Larry Clark: Tulsa Time

American photographer Larry Clark is widely known for his documentation of youth on the verge. Now, North Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery focuses on the body of work that made his name: *Tulsa*, a rigorous look at 1960s teen experiments in drugs, sex and violence.