

Allison Moore and Arthur Desmarteaux: The Future in Ruins, Today

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**DE L'AUTRE CÔTÉ DU MIROIR
GALERIE D'ART D'OUTREMONT
MONTREAL
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We are beginning to see the forest. As capitalism's problems become increasingly globalized, the impulse to protest everything and the need to critique society as a whole gain traction. This is a risky impulse; in our sound-bitten era, critics of everything quickly can find themselves spun by opponents as critics of nothing—or, worse, critics by nature.

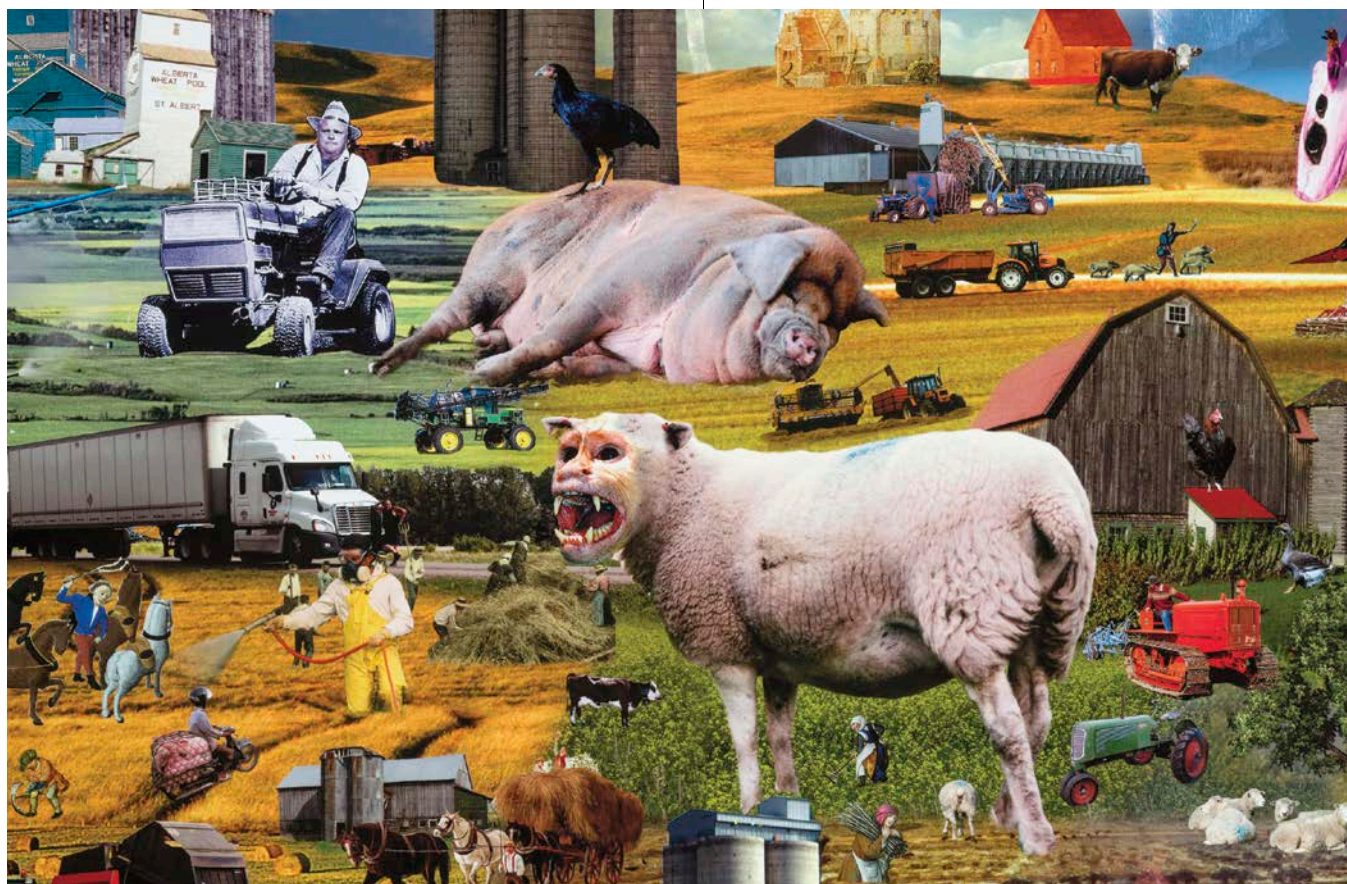
When turning art to the purpose of social critique, it may seem preferable then to moderate or modulate a project's scale. Carefully delineated scenarios are more manageable: a selected environmental disaster, one nation's independence struggle, or a key vignette in the history of colonialism. With their exhibition *De l'autre côté du miroir*, however, Montreal artists Allison Moore and Arthur Desmarceaux throw the aperture wide open, facing the challenges posed by a society-wide critique head-on.

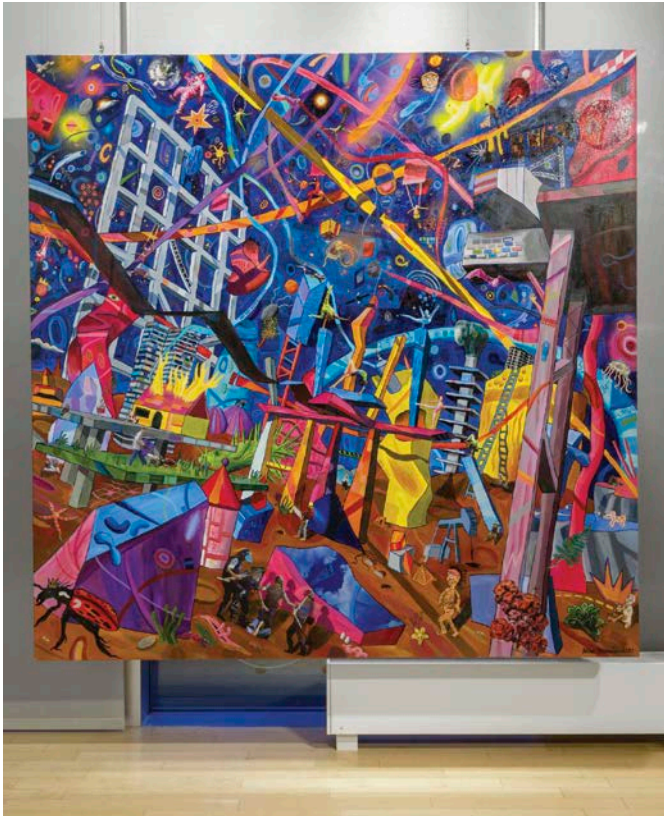
Four large digital collage panels (112 x 224 cm) titled *Visions du future* dominate the show, each tableau depicting an dystopian aspect of Western society: a compromised rural Eden, a suburban commercial

parking lot in chaos, a downtown urban wasteland, a desert warzone. The Eden panel appears sunny, verdant—yet columns of soldiers creep through the growth, a landscape peppered with guns, shells, corpses and mass graves. A sign marks an army outpost (“we fight what you fear”) and giant insects scurry everywhere. In the next panel, a drama of suburban chaos unfolds on a vast box-store parking lot, as corporate mascots, flesh-eating zombies and giant rats feasting on burning garbage compete for our attention. A stop sign and some rent-a-cops on Segways promise to defend the social order—something of a conceit in the wake of this fracas. In the urban wasteland panel, an aggregate Babel of twentieth century skyscrapers looms over the scene—a pastiche Gotham of Art Deco and Beaux-Arts masonry astride a bleak landscape of windowless tenements, burning cars and playing children. Mirroring this blight, the desert warzone shows a bleak landscape of rubble and trashed cars. Fires burn and soldiers point their guns beneath a phalanx of bombed-out high-rises and oil refinery towers. A tiny Captain America seems displaced and impotent.

At a distance, each panel appears lively, carnivalesque, but closer inspection reveals episode after nasty episode of miniature crimes and horrors. Like genre paintings, we must examine these collages scene by little scene, in succession—but the larger image remains apprehensible only as a mirror-world of chaos and complexity. The viewer thinks of Bosch (*The Last Judgment*, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*) and the work of the Pieter Brueghels (father and son).

Those painters would surely confirm that as fodder for the working artist, Inferno beats Paradiso hands down. For depictions of Hell, earthly realities offer rich visual vocabularies—blood, fire, steel—that lose none of their power in painted form. In contrast, earthly tropes of goodness—gatherings of virtuous people, halos and clouds, lions lying (platonically) with lambs—yield a pallid palette.





For the artist, too, dystopia promises more than utopia; for if utopia is an ideological vision of the perfect society, what is dystopia but a satirical critique of ideology? Michael Albert, the anarchist philosopher, once stated that there is no idea so fine it cannot be pushed to its logical extreme where it becomes abominable. Indeed, these collage panels purportedly depict the future, yet the present is discernable throughout.

Two further giant panels explicate this utopia-dystopia pairing. In *Notre pain quotidien*, an extended family of collaged people contemplates endless images of food and food brands. Everyone eats in this *grande bouffe*—a revolting, even fatiguing vision of facial orifices and gluttony. In the foreground, a girl drinks from a gas-bar nozzle. Her gym shorts, together with a stray yoga ball—limp salutes to fitness—are like the Segway rent-a-cops: perfunctory gestures, detours—a consumerist appliqué on a consumerist problem. The second panel, *Paysage bucolique*, explores agricultural production as a compromised landscape. Against abundant farms and fields, farmers, tractors and silos contend with massive, monstrous domestic animals and out-of-control corporate brand mascots. Here, utopian promises of bountiful capitalism—prosperous farms, well-stocked supermarket shelves, full kitchens—dissolve into dystopian venality.

A seventh large panel, *Spaghetti urbain*, redirects the show's global critique toward familiar ground: Montreal's Turcot Interchange. Elevated highways crisscross the panel while crumbling concrete viaducts are held together with duct tape and band-aids. A homeless man pushes an orange shopping cart loaded with bags of aluminum cans and a hitchhiker holds a sign requesting a ride "anywhere but here." Once a proud monument to progress, the Turcot has become

a labyrinth. But this isn't the kind of labyrinth we see on medieval cathedral floors that delineates a spiritual quest from margin to sacred centre; no, this is the "labyrinth with no centre," which so terrified the young Borges. The myth of Theseus with its labyrinth has been read as an early critique of urbanism, then still a novelty; today, similarly, the iconic Turcot alerts us to the industrial city's dystopian trajectory.

While the large panels form the main body of the exhibition, the artists have also included some earlier solo works—a pair of acrylic paintings for Desmarteaux; for Moore, two small collage pieces. Against the giant panels, these solo works appear somewhat isolated, forlorn; yet they also provide a backdrop or provenance to the artists' collaborative practice—the medium of collage, from Moore's solo pieces, and from Desmarteaux's, the carnivalesque, cartoonish genre painting aesthetic.

If the dystopia is also often playful, so is Moore and Desmarteaux's creative process. Each giant collage arose out of a ping-pong collaboration, one artist making some edits in Photoshop, then volleying the file back to the other, and so on, in dozens of iterations. Unlike children who play amidst the rubble and devastation of war, and unlike most Montrealers, who go about their daily business unaware their city is already a ruin of sorts, Moore and Desmarteaux seem self-aware as they play in the rubble of a grand narrative. If the Turcot labyrinth turns out to have a sacred centre after all, the apotheosis enshrined there is probably this: industrial capitalism is already dead. Most of us just don't know it yet.

Born in Winnipeg and based in Montreal, Edwin Janzen is a writer, editor and interdisciplinary artist who creates digital prints, video, artist books and other media. He has exhibited and worked as an artist-in-residence at diverse locations across Canada, and has written for numerous publications, galleries and other projects. Edwin completed his MFA at the University of Ottawa (2010) and holds a BFA from Concordia University (2008) and a BA (Byzantine history) from the University of Manitoba (1993). www.edwinjanzen.com