

Swan Song

Julia Skelly

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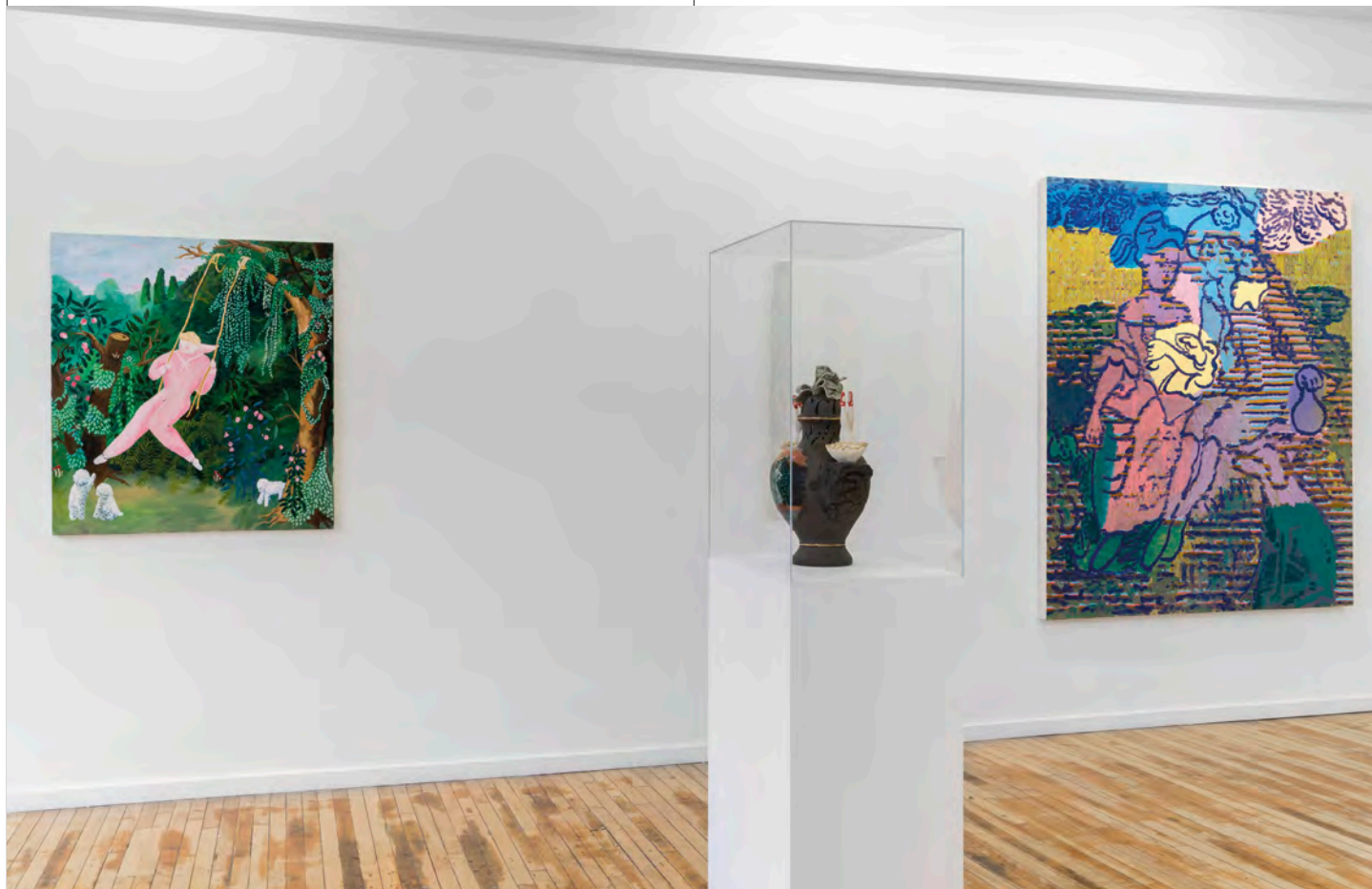
PROJET PANGÉE
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It is always a pleasure to see Shary Boyle's paintings and sculptures in a gallery space, rather than as photographs in a book, because her mythological, excessive artworks—particularly her sculptures—demand time and movement. With the small exhibition *Swan Song*, Projet Pangée has brought together the work of four female artists: Boyle (Toronto), Delphine Hennelly (Brooklyn), Annelie McKenzie (Los Angeles) and Claire Milbrath (Montreal). Encompassing only seventeen artworks in total, *Swan Song* is a carefully curated, implicitly feminist show that is premised on the concept of decadence in relation to both material and behavioural excess, and notions of decay and “inevitable” decline. In the 1890s, decadence was linked to transgressive sexualities, drug and alcohol consumption and to male artists' depictions of threatening women. *Swan Song* is a decadent collection of works that celebrates bright colours, consumption, the androgynous body and the transience of love and lust in the works of four very different female artists.

There are two of Boyle's magnificent recent stoneware and porcelain sculptures in the show. *Sisyphus* (2020) is comprised of a female figure with a pinched face covered from head to toe in the dullest of browns, pulling a brown wheelbarrow full of pink dipped lace that is trimmed with gold lustre. The title leads us to read this work in terms of unending and repetitive tasks; the fact that the subject appears to be a woman invites us to consider the physical and affective consequences of paid and unpaid domestic labour by white women and women of colour.

Red Shoes, Fake News (2020) is an urn topped with a flapping newspaper, with the heavily made-up face of a woman represented on its curved side. The red shoes in the title could be interpreted as alluding to the ruby slippers that Judy Garland wore in her iconic role as Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*. On the sides of the urn, two pairs of legs with red ballet slippers extend, upside down, into the air, but the dancers' torsos and heads are missing, not unlike the Wicked Witch in the *Wizard of Oz* when she is crushed underneath the house. I read Boyle's sculpture as an elegy for both objective journalism and Garland. The work was produced around the time that Renee Zellweger won an Oscar for the 2019 film *Judy*, which Garland's daughter Liza Minelli has famously refused to watch. *Red Shoes, Fake News* can be read, on the one hand, as a general indictment of Trump-era misinformation that has become even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and on the other hand, as specifically critiquing Hollywood's penchant for feeding off of, and benefiting from, the tumultuous lives of women like Garland.

Claire Milbrath, Shary Boyle, Delphine Hennelly, *Swan Song*, 2020. Partial view of the exhibition. Photo: Courtesy of Projet Pangée.



The show also includes two of Boyle's medium-size paintings that are enigmatically titled *Black Gold* (2019) and *Europe is Lost* (2019). The latter image depicts a sculptural figure doing a headstand on a pedestal with a floral sculptural relief. In *Black Gold*, a serpentine blonde woman lies on the ground. Her exaggerated long legs dip in and out of a fountain that spouts, we might assume, black gold. Her left hand has monstrously long fingers, while in her right hand a glass of red wine tilts precariously; wine has spilled onto the floor as a result. This work can be viewed as a surrealist—yet distressingly realistic—depiction of what a really bad hangover feels like.

Across from Boyle's two paintings is Claire Milbrath's simple but joyful work, *Boy with a Dog (Homage to Fragonard)* (2020). The semi-nude boy—a curly haired androgynous figure—plays on his bed with a fluffy white dog. The title indicates that Milbrath is interested in playing with eighteenth-century iconography. This work is a kind of Rococo painting for the twenty-first century, as are her other pieces, including *The Swing* (2020), a re-interpretation of Fragonard's *The Swing* of 1767. Rococo was associated with aristocracy, decorative excess and frivolity. Milbrath appropriates Fragonard's painting, exploring ideas of pleasure, gender, and clothes as signifiers of sex. Instead of a female subject on the swing as in the original work, Milbrath depicts the androgynous figure from *Boy with a Dog*—this time wearing a pink sailor suit—without the explicit sexual intrigue of Fragonard's painting.

Like Milbrath, Delphine Hennelly is concerned with the iconography of historical art, but for Hennelly it is the pastoral tradition that provides the ground for a playful yet bittersweet engagement with the passing of affection. In two of her three paintings, a male figure, holding a money purse, and a shepherdess sit together over wine and food. The titles, such as *Idylls Are Brief and Various* (2019), point to the inevitable end of these dalliances. Formally speaking, the clothed bodies are suggested, using thick, gestural brushstrokes, rather than carefully modeled, and at times horizontal painted lines obscure the faces and objects. The paintings are beautiful to look at, but they frustrate our desire to understand fully what we are looking at.

Annelie McKenzie's project of painting canonical scenes from western art onto vintage purses works better on paper than in practice. There is a very good idea here informed by feminist interventions into art

history—the title of one of her painted purses is *Defensive Nymph Capsule (after Angelica Kauffmann)*—but none of the painted images are actually legible, which could well be deliberate, like with Hennelly's paintings, undermining the scopophilia invited by so many canonical paintings. The value of the work is the concept, and indeed the objects, rather than the paintings themselves.

The works in the show complement each other in the use of vibrant colour palettes and the interest in strange female figures or figures whose gender is ambiguous. The latter is the case for the strongest (and biggest) work in the show, Boyle's life-size *Goethe's Urn* (2019). This enigmatic painting depicts a headless figure wearing a glorious, multi-coloured cloak, with opalescent shoes peeking out from underneath. Whatever Boyle's intentions with this work, there is no clear meaning or narrative, but the pleasure is in running our eyes over the image, trying out different interpretations, while enjoying the explosion of colour on the cloak.

It is perhaps not surprising that Boyle's works overshadow, not to say overwhelm, the other pieces in the show. Nonetheless, all of the artists demonstrate a keen interest in material excess and the various kinds of pleasures that materiality can engender. The artists' feminist approaches to decadence share an interest in ornamentation, consumption and pleasure with that of late nineteenth-century decadence, but it is more critically oriented towards the material reality of women and non-binary individuals. The inclusion of work by black feminist artists would have been most welcome to broaden the scope of the show even more.

* The exhibition closed on March 18 and was then extended until the end of summer 2020.

Dr. Julia Skelly teaches in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University. Her publications include *Wasted Looks: Addiction and British Visual Culture, 1751-1919* (2014), *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft* (2017), and the edited collection *The Uses of Excess in Visual and Material Culture, 1600-2010* (2014). Skelly's next book, *Skin Crafts: Affect, Violence and Materiality in Global Contemporary Art*, is forthcoming from Bloomsbury Academic.

Caroline Cloutier, *Variations*

Emmanuelle Choquette

FONDATION GUIDO MOLINARI
MONTRÉAL
27 FÉVRIER –
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Connue pour ses agiles explorations de la stratégie du trompe-l'œil, Caroline Cloutier dévoile dans l'exposition *Variations*, un corpus où elle s'approprie un langage plus pictural en s'éloignant de la forme installative souvent privilégiée dans son travail. Elle y déploie trois séries photographiques dans lesquelles on remarque l'introduction de la couleur, élément neuf dans sa pratique. L'inclusion d'un ensemble de plages tridimensionnelles s'ajoute également à ce renouveau, un écho indéniable à son intervention architecturale à être inaugurée prochainement au théâtre ESPACE GO. Loin d'évacuer la relation que ses œuvres entretiennent généralement avec l'espace et le contexte, sa proposition permet un dialogue avec le lieu d'accueil : la Fondation Molinari, dont le mandat est de conserver et de montrer les œuvres du peintre renommé, tout en favorisant la diffusion des pratiques contemporaines.