

ETC



Haunted: The Uncanny in the Drawings of Sophie Jodoin

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Number 87, September–October–November 2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/34892ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Campbell, J. D. (2009). Review of [Haunted: The Uncanny in the Drawings of Sophie Jodoin]. *ETC*, (87), 51–53.

Haunted: The Uncanny in the Drawings of Sophie Jodoin

"Headgames: hoods, helmets & gasmasks". Battat Contemporary, Montreal.
March 19 — April 2005, 2009

If drawings can be haunted by old memories, even primordial ones, then Sophie Jodoin's installation made for a replete haunting at the inaugural exhibition of the Battat Contemporary art space. Seventy-five black-framed drawings, mostly of monstrosities expressive, mostly human heads (with some notable exceptions), might have had an impact far greater as an ensemble than separate drawings if the subjects of those drawings were not such powerfully individualistic personae in their own right.



The moment we homed in on any one of them, it swallowed us whole. Swaddled in darkness, half cached, half unveiled, the faces staked a potent claim upon the imagination. Once you seized on pure aura here, you were a goner. They were seldom palatable, palpable icons of tidy beauty. Say rather that they possessed something of the exotic beauty of H.R. Giger's work, something of Odilon Redon's *noirs* and his drawings for Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* in particular, something of Alice Neel at her feisti and least expected.

The technical virtuosity of Jodoin's work has always been laudable and the works in this show were no exception to that rule. Using *conté* on Mylar, she deftly crafts faces and housings for faces that are uncanny in formal mien and in effects. Often the faces have morphed into machine-like carapaces. Part flesh, part steel, they ache with pain, closure and anxiety. The face merged with the gas mask, like the Borg from the popular Star Trek franchise, is unsettling. But you could never dismiss these metamorphs for their integration of what Jodoin has learned from special effects in cinema. 'Hollywood-like' they are most decidedly not. They always have a nascent sense of beingness in

them; even when human features are missing, suggested only by their absence, even when most are post human and inadmissible. Each seems invested with a magnetic halo or aura that, once it latches onto you, is difficult to shrug off.

In fact, the longer time we spent with them, the more moved we were, the more emotionally implicated we became. The desire to turn away, which was felt initially almost as a instinctual self-survival move (as we grew aware of the profound claustrophobia we would feel inside these helmets, these hoods, we thought of the wet towel over the head in the water boarding torture regimen, something Jodoin must have thought of when executing them), and suddenly felt hemmed-in, in jeopardy. But this revulsion was quickly replaced by a strange fascination, as the work spun its webs around us, pulling us into the luminal lair of drawing almost by main force. Fraught with a sorrow conveyed only subliminally, never in baroque terms but with subtle insistence, the works overpowered any resistance on our part.

Jodoin started the series with beautifully rendered studies of medieval helmets. But she wanted to bring the work into the present and future. She began a series of hybrids, integrating facial features with gasmasks and futuristic headgear. Jodoin resisted an early impulse to use mutilated heads. But she arguably goes beyond the mutilated here: the melding of the human and the instrumental transcends mere mutilation. Some of the pieces are unbearably poignant memorials for what happens to humans when they morph, even partially, into machines. What makes them even more harrowing is our inability to decide whose side they are on in the war that human beings make on their brothers and their sisters: are they perps, victims, survivalists or helpless witnesses to their own damnation? One does not know. There is no way to know.

Jodoin often works small-scale and this exhibition proves her casual authority. It is with startling humility that she claims these works are diarist in nature. I know of no diaries extant comprising such an exquisite set of masterworks. To call them diary-like is a reference to scale alone. Further, one's first impression of immense and reflective work on her part is, according to her, simply wrong. Jodoin is that consummate paradox. She is a savant. Works that seem brim-full of stored labor, lingered over for weeks and months, are in fact executed quickly, with her unusually quiet, keen and deft intensity.

Vessels for contemplation on the viewer's part, each drawing contained a full measure of the uncanny. I mean that in at least three registers—before, in and after Freud (Ger. *Das Unheimliche*—literally, 'un-home-ly'), where it means an instance of where something can be surpassingly strange, yet familiar at one and the same time. As we assimilate Jodoin's dark drawings, we have a feeling of them as familiar, identifiable, assimilable, but then being somehow unhinged from familiarity, made suddenly and even disconcertingly strange.

Because the uncanny is at once familiar and strange, it generates a sort of mental buzz, a cognitive dissonance that throws us off balance. The magnetic aura is in a fluctuating state of unending tension with an ongoing feeling of repulsion. The strange beauty of a certain face here leads to an uncomfortable feeling when its metamorphic authenticity settles in and its housing reads as cage. Freud developed the idea in his 1919 essay entitled *The Uncanny*, which comments on the work of the writer of strange stories

E.T.A. Hoffmann (whom Freud calls the unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature). He claims the source of the uncanny in Hoffmann's *The Sandman* is the sandman himself. The sandman is a mythic figure who tears children's eyes out of their heads.

In seizing upon the idea of being robbed of one's eyes, as the most salient and uncanny instance in the story, Freud opened the parentheses on one of his most pungent and still ambulatory concepts.

He tabulates uncanny effects that result from instances of 'repetition of the same thing', being or happening, including sundry incidents where one becomes lost and accidentally retraces one's steps, and doubling, citing Otto Rank's concept of the 'double'. The relevance to Jodoin's work is clear: seventy-five drawings on the same theme of heads and the same size yield a wide array of uncanny effects that can be fruitfully contextualized in terms of the Freudian idea, its antecedents and its sequels.

Freud held that the uncanny "undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror".¹ We are terrified by uncanny phenomena that come at us from the outside while simultaneously welling up from within us. Everything about Jodoin's drawings seems uncanny, and fraught with numinous dread. The uncanny here confronts us with something familiar yet strange, even sinister, and Jodoin can be seen as a fellow traveler with the painter Marc Séguin and the photographic artist Matthieu Brouillard. If the uncanny is something repressed that is suddenly recalled, it is, after all, part and parcel of our psyche, of our unconscious property—and causes us no end of uneasiness and spiritual discomfort.

The familiar cast of someone's face is offset precisely by what is concealed, kept secret within its features, and Jodoin has said on several occasions that she has often deliberately hidden or covered the face, completely cropping out or veiling the eyes. What seems to be outside us (the face of the metamorph, our own nameless Other) is really working inside us in the act of seeing. But we feel that the heart that beats is the 'self-same'. And we are chastened, maybe christened too, as a result.

I don't wish to launch into an extended treatment of the Freudian Uncanny *vis à vis* the nightmarish but consummately human face of Jodoin's work, but I suppose one could. Certainly, her work is in line with Freud's operative thesis: the uncanny segues with anything we experience in adulthood that calls forth the unconscious, triggers recollection of earlier psychic stages or the primitive experience of the human species itself. This is why I referenced 'primordial' memories at the outset. For Freud, the uncanny arises as the recurrence of something long since repressed and forgotten, but deeply emplaced, an iconic but far from vitrified artefact of our archeopsychic past.

I would also argue that, unlike when reading gothic fiction, say, we do experience measurable uncanniness in the faces of metamorphic beings that surely never existed in our life-world when they materialize out of the well of dark shadows in Jodoin's artwork. Why? Her work is always viscerally felt even as we psychically tune in to its strange wavelengths, fey frequencies, listening for the beating of a human heart, however fugitive. And we are not disappointed. She convinces us to suspend our disbelief and to enter the nightmare of War with all its hurly-burly violence, its combatants and victims and innocent bystanders. We know we are experiencing the aesthetic thing but the weird verisimilitude carries us over the edge, into a deep trough of angst and uncertainty, a sense of being haunted. Such is her power to summon from the void faces and metamorphic entities that trouble both the visual and the imagined and collapse the distinction between the 'real' and the Jodoin-'invented'. Fantasy merges with reality here as readily as human flesh grafts onto base metal and becomes functional and 'at one' with it. Somehow, in absorbing Jodoin's work, our perspective itself morphs into that of the anchor character; we project ourselves over there and shudder accordingly. Projection and recognition bring with them in their wake a deep-seated feeling of angst.

Sophie Jodoin, *Helmets & Gas masks and Headgames* (video projection), 2007-08. Photo: Éliane Excoffier, Battat Contemporary, Montreal.



Sophie Jodoin, *Helmets & Gas masks and Headgames*, 2007-08.
Photo: Éliane Excoffier, Battat Contemporary, Montreal.



Jodoin conjures the uncanny in her art through morphologies that would have made Alfred Hitchcock proud, plundering atavisms from the deep mine of the human unconscious and offering them up as worthy trophies in the seeing.

Apparently, the artist wishes to keep the *Headgames* drawings together as a group. A word about the installation: it was impeccable, seamless—and pristine. Installed with no apparent fuss, and nothing baroque to offset the power of the drawings, the heads lined up on staggered levels, and the installation suggested they are meant to be indivisible. They seemed tailor-made for the space and were complemented by a collaborative black-and-white video projection with the artist David Jhave Johnston that certainly conjured up a worthy environmental volume—a spectacular result for an exhibition of what were, after all, mostly drawings. In spite of what I suggested earlier, they could certainly be reprised for one hugely auratic and haunting installation anywhere in the world.

JAMES D. CAMPBELL

Sophie Jodoin, de la série *Helmets & Gas masks*, 2007-08.
Conté sur mylar, 36 x 28 cm. Photo: Éliane Excoffier.

James D. Campbell lives and works in Montreal, and is a writer and independent curator. He is the author of over one hundred books and catalogues on art and artists and contributes regularly to art periodicals such as *ETC*, *Border Crossings* and *Canadian Art*. His most recent publication is *Channeling Ghosts: Marion Wagschal Paints the Figure for the Plattsburg State Museum*.

NOTE

¹ See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" [1919], in *Collected Papers Volume IV*, trans. Alix Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1959), p. 368.

