

Reno Salvail, *Les rivières de feu*, Centre VU, Du 10 octobre au 9 novembre 2008

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Numéro 82, été 2009

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/537ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Les Productions Ciel variable

ISSN

1711-7682 (imprimé)

1923-8932 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Campeau, S. (2009). Compte rendu de [Reno Salvail, *Les rivières de feu*, Centre VU, Du 10 octobre au 9 novembre 2008]. *Ciel variable*, (82), 71–72.

Were Renwick's *Masks* in a visual "dialogue" with Thomas's *Wampum*, as if to better frame the images on the large centre wall, I wondered. These were six imposing portraits from the series *Mustang Suite* by Dana Claxton, who describes herself as "Lakota Sioux Canadian." Certainly, the hyper-modern, humorous look of the large colour photographs flirted with the canon of advertising images. Members of an Aboriginal family (e.g., *Family Portrait [Indians on a Blanket]*) posed in various scenes caricaturing North American hyper-consumption, where they exhibited seemingly traditional Aboriginal artefacts. These works could not fail to catch the eye... of the media!

This "triptych" in the first room seemed persuasive to me, as did the curators' bold idea of placing on the walls the artists' personal reflections about their identity quests. Even if they were but mediations, some of the texts shone light on the artists' creative attitudes for viewers strolling among the works in the second gallery.

Whether it was a few excerpts from the late Carl Beam's *The Columbus Project* or the *Teensy Nun Production* videos by the young Métis artist Thirza Cuthand and Brock Dick-Dog by Bear Witness (Cayuga), a number of variants on the theatricality of identity plays, exposed specifically through photographic portrait sessions, awaited viewers. The "Cree/Scottish" photographer KC Adams set the tone with her alignment of constructed portraits produced during a creative residency at the Banff Centre, the *Cyborg Hybrid* series, for which she put her artist friends in "glamour Indian make-up." The "imaginary museum" in three photomontages (*Ann. E Visits Emily*, *The Artist in Her Studio*, *Searching for My Mother*) by Rosalie Favell ("Métis, Cree/English," as she describes herself) revisited, in a surrealist mode, icons such as Emily Carr and the Virgin Mary, with an embroidered *Kateri Tekakwita* on her heart. *The Emergence of a Legend*, small self-portraits in disguises, embossed on metallic paper by Kent Monkman (of Cree heritage), were in the vein of set pieces. For Monkman, although pomp, costumes, and permissive socialization of the dominant world (the West) allow flights of



Dana Claxton, *Baby Girlz Gotta Mustang*, 2008, from the series *The Mustang Suite*, c-print, 127 x 157,7 cm collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

individual freedom, they also reveal confused acculturation: "A lot of my work also deals with colonized sexuality due to the influence of the church on our community – as forcibly as putting people into residential schools – and the influence of Judeo-Christian values. We've been colonized on many levels and one of the things that has been affected has been our sexuality."

Of course, the heritage of civilization was not absent. While the black-and-white "classic" photographs of a David Neel (Kwakwaka'wakw) pay tribute to traditions and its great portagers and promoters (e.g., *Sitting Bull*, Bill Reid, Elijah Harper), Gregg Staats (Kanien'kéhaka) with his photomontages combining territory and members of his community (*Breathe, Accept Loss*) brings out the underside of the place: the current precariousness flowing from wounds, "reductions," and censorship of Aboriginal languages, today almost all in peril. Staats reintroduces the need for a healing process.

One photograph caught my eye for its truth of the "steely gaze": *Time Travels*

Through Us, the famous framing of golden wood and finely woven beadwork with a beautiful black-and-white photograph of three Iroquois women at its centre – three generations of faces that, by their light, and the composition of bodies pressed against each other, breathed not just survival but confidence. From this subtle work by Shelly Niro, I felt the universal message: that of hope-individuals and hope-communities.

As I left the exhibition I glimpsed in the Gallery's imposing windowed entrance hall *Ayum-ee-aawach oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*, the famous megaphone designed by Rebecca Belmore to speak aloud to Mother Earth. I reflected. Although very interesting, this exhibition needed some nuances, especially in these times, when it is perhaps too easy for anyone to be anyone else, the term "Aboriginals" is used as a syncretism homogenizing all First Nations to name, without distinction, Indigenous people, Amerindians, Métis, Inuit. It must be kept in mind that there are 611 First Nations spread from east to west on reservations in Kanata,

including 10 in 54 communities in Gépèg. To these are added the Métis Nation of the Prairies and the Inuit of Nunavut and Nunavik, as well as non-Status mixed-blood individuals – whence the richness and complexity of inter-nation identities.

In fact, the works in *Steeling the Gaze* were mainly by Iroquois, Prairies Métis, and Northwest Shore Indian artists, with none from east of the Great Lakes – thus none from Gépèg. There is, however, an Aboriginal photographic art presence in the east. One has only to think of Rebecca Belmore's magnificent self-portrait *Fringe*, on view throughout 2007 on a billboard at the corner of Duke and Ottawa streets in Montreal above the premises rented by the Grand Council of the Crees. What can be said about works by Jeff Thomas and Gregg Staats, two of the artists in *Steeling the Gaze*, who were also represented in the exhibition of large photographic banners *Zacharie "Tehariolin" Vincent et ses amis* at Espace 400^e (Québec 1608–2008)? There would also be much to see of the "photographic spirit" behind the work of Sonia Robertson in *Mashteuiatsh* among *Piekuaka Inuatsh* (Innu), but it is also the revealing "photographic mission" titled *Photographe sans condition* by Kathleen Penosway, Tracy Stella Brazeau, and Mani Sigon Papatie exposing the difficult living and housing conditions in Kitchisakik, the Algonquin reservation in distress in Abitibi-Témiscamingue that I remember. It was presented at the new Hôtel-Musée in Wendake in May 2008.

Thus, the "steel gazes" projected into the future will soon have to be broadened from West to East. Translated by Käthe Roth

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Reno Salvail, *Le réveil de l'ours noir*, 2006, de la série *Les rivières de feu*, épreuve au jet d'encre sur papier chiffon, 120 x 137 cm

Reno Salvail

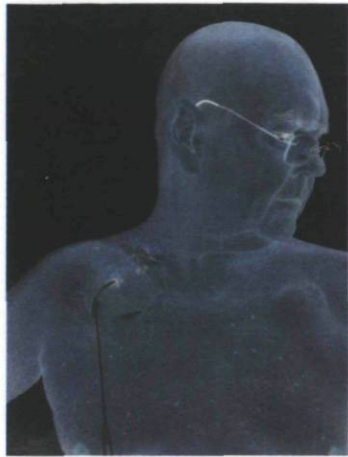
Les rivières de feu, Centre VU
Du 10 octobre au 9 novembre 2008

Il est difficile de ne pas mettre en parallèle les œuvres de Reno Salvail avec les pérégrinations dont elles proviennent. On sait combien cet artiste a valorisé l'excursion comme expérience inédite dont il sait tirer ses pièces, fussent-elles à l'occasion construites au sein même des lieux visités et documentées grâce à des installations où différents médiums s'activent à relancer l'œuvre et faire ouvrage à nouveau. Tout est d'ailleurs dans ce fragile équilibre où cet artiste a su faire son nid, périple en des coins reculés d'où il ramène des pièces qui forment elles-mêmes œuvres et mémoire de l'expérience.

Cet aspect, il faut le dire, est un peu négligé dans *Les rivières de feu*. Il a, cette fois, ramené images et projections vidéo-graphiques qui forment une véritable boîte à images, au sein de laquelle on déambule et qui nous intime de reconstituer une sorte de géographie du récit. Mais la séduction opère mieux que jamais. Dans le carré presque parfait de l'espace américain du Centre VU, il a agencé ses images en des regroupements divers. Certains présentent des blocs de 2, 9 ou plus d'images, rassemblées en des agencements à l'aspect régulier ou non, ordonnés en une ligne verticale et longiligne de 7; bref, le tout varie. Ces groupes font voir agglomérations et concentrations. Ils offrent, en un cas bien particulier où ce sont 31 images qui constituent une forme un rien ovale, une mosaïque de cartes et d'itinéraires,

saupoudrée d'images du bourlingueur et de ses bourlingues. En d'autres lieux, ce sont lichens, animaux dont plusieurs ours, détails des terres vues et explorées. Les images sont, la plupart du temps, hautes en couleurs et l'usage occasionnel du noir et blanc rehausse, paradoxalement, ce foisonnement.

Quant à leur contenu, il est diversifié mais tourne essentiellement autour de quelques axes. Il y a, on l'a dit, les cartes et représentations géographiques qui offrent une idée des voyages effectués pour glaner ces images. Il y a aussi celles des environnements immédiats et des habitants accidentellement croisés : animaux et détails de la flore, formations géologiques, montagnes et autres accidents de terrain... et de rencontres. Mais l'essentiel du propos tourne autour de ces *Rivières de feu* qui sont des références à des sites volcaniques de toutes sortes du Nord du Québec, du Kamchatka (Sibérie) et de la Terre de Feu (Chili). Ces endroits approchés, visités, sont présents par des vues en plongée de méandres semi-liquides, de lacets et sinuosités, de figures de la terre, amas de neige et autres hiéroglyphes de la planète comme vue du ciel, depuis un satellite. L'on se retrouve sans cesse à voyager entre les images à ras de sol, prises dans le cours même de l'expédition, et celles saisies à distance, comme désireuses de donner du recul et du souffle, de l'air, à celui qui vit le tout en différé, le spectateur.



Reno Salvail, *L'intimité des fluides* (diptyque), 2008, de la série *Les rivières de feu*, épreuve au jet d'encre sur papier chiffon, 165 x 107 cm

On ne peut s'empêcher de conclure à une sorte de géographie du récit, une sorte de construction qui offre la terre et ses lieux comme propos narratif, en une sorte d'effort de liaison qui forme discours et histoire. Mais, en un sens, il n'y a pas lieu de voir ici un travail tendant vers une histoire en propre et en détails. Certes, il y a bien des allusions, des semblants de fils narratifs qui tressent leur filigrane. Quelque chose se trame en fait qui est du ressort de l'histoire et du cumul biographique. Car il y a évidemment carnet de voyage, journal de bord.

J'ai gardé l'essentiel pour la fin : la projection vidéographique qui vient, depuis le plafond de la galerie, se jeter sur un écran à même le sol. On y voit d'étranges compositions liquides, des miasmes, liqueurs, sérosités, plasma, lave, magma. Le tout dans une farandole où tous les composés s'étirent, se recomposent, serpentent. Les rivières de feu volcaniques deviennent fluides aqueux corporels; cet état premier, essentiel de la matière géologique, inorganique, renvoie aux éléments du corps, aux écoulements sanguins, réseau fonda-

mental qui rejoint toutes parties et tous membres, irriguent depuis le cerveau jusqu'aux organes. Du coup, confronté à ces images, le spectateur s'interroge et se repositionne par rapport aux autres images. Il les regarde maintenant avec un zeste de suspicion. Il y a, là-dedans, il le voit bien maintenant, des prises rapprochées de corps, des images de satellite, des photos d'os, le tout organisé pour évoquer des volcans, des éruptions, des mouvements chthoniens. Le diptyque final vient sans doute tout éclairer. Il met en parallèle l'image bleutée d'un homme, torse nu, manifestement en train de subir un traitement de chimiothérapie et l'image rougeâtre d'une sorte d'hématome ou de lésion en version agrandie. Les tumeurs auraient donc envahi tous les organismes et celui de notre planète rejoint le corps propre de l'homme, lui aussi en butte à la déliquescence funeste.

Sylvain Campeau a collaboré à de nombreuses revues, tant canadiennes qu'euro-péennes (Ciel variable, ETC, Photovision, et Papal Alpha). Il a aussi à son actif, en qualité de commissaire, une trentaine d'expositions présentées au Canada et à l'étranger. Il est également l'auteur de l'essai, *Chambre obscure* : photographie et installation et de quatre recueils de poésie.



Thomas Corriveau, *Noyade*, 2008, from the series *Autofictions*, 2005-2008, Inkjet print on paper, 96 x 120 cm

Thomas Corriveau

Autofictions
Galerie Graff

November 13 to December 20, 2008

We are living in a telematically attuned present tense. We are bombarded, even besieged, by endless streaming images and data feeds coming in from all sides, all the time. How we fend off the barrage or negotiate détente with it shapes the condition of our being here, in an image-fraught universe.

Coming to terms with our entrenched "telematic culture"¹ has meant cultivating a new set of behavioural norms, ideas, media, ethics, and – for artists – expressive means. Either one grows a thick epidermis and returns to the art of yesterday, or one cultivates open pores and uses technology to pursue the art of the future. Thomas Corriveau has open pores, all the better to absorb by osmosis and creatively transform the wealth of images into the supplest integers of an aesthetic wholly and uniquely his own. Effectively, he becomes not servant, but proprietor.

In his new works from the series titled *Autofictions* (*Self-Fictions*), Corriveau creatively redirects and mediates the flow of data, choosing images from the Internet, newspapers, and other archives – from the trash stratum to the iconic. He then mediates them, appropriates them, exercises control over them, and makes them his own with ingenuity, gusto, playfulness – and a certain measure of the macabre.

Corriveau's expressive means are impressively varied. He elides photography, drawing, painting, and digital print-making in the construction of his works. He begins by identifying a pre-existing image that possesses, for him, real immediacy, and that has visceral impact; images that he recognizes as highly charged or somehow iconic, he will appropriate and infiltrate accordingly, transposing his own image within the *mise-en-scène*. He then

methodically divides the image into a multiplicity of coloured zones. These are meticulously and laboriously redrawn. He often employs a geometric grid, as he regulates the composition, and then reorders these re-drawings using digital technologies. While photography rules here – the image is the crux, the inspiration, after all – Corriveau the draughtsman is triumphant.

His face does not scream out at us, even if it does appear, at times, to be screaming. Sometimes, we identify it only after we have digested the overall work. Then, uncannily, the artist's face emerges from the backdrop with a spooky ubiquity, a Woody Allen Zelig for today. Whether the image is appropriated from art history or from across the full array of the popular culture, the instant of recognition is accompanied by a powerful sense that Corriveau has subsumed and somehow owns it.

I mentioned the macabre earlier. One of the most delightful works in the show was Corriveau's fictional obituary, with his birth date (1957) and death date (the date of the vernissage of his exhibition). The portrait of the artist drowning derives from found images of someone swimming, which the artist transformed into a harrowing record of his own death by water.

These works were decidedly not clever fictions that merely offered a vicarious thrill for the informed viewer. While Corriveau is the protagonist of his own self-fictions, he