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Kapsula

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KAPSOULA



HOTEL
JANUARY 2014 BAD HISTORY 1/3



KAPSULA

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Mumbo Jumbo

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The first instalment in our third theme, this New Year's monthly tackles the notion of [bad] history and its problematic tendencies. History cannot be explored or discussed in an objective manner—to attempt this is a losing game. But the implausibility of a single agreeable history sets the stage for revisionism, artistic licence and imagined pasts.

In our submissions, we were pleasantly greeted with works that pinpointed rather than 'flew over' the myriad issues associated with the term "history." ~~The suggested problems do not simply arise from an erroneous use of the word. Rather,~~ Problems often arise for artist and author alike from the impossibility of addressing the multitude of histories that exist. Unavoidably, personal and collective biases creep in, creating the blind spots in our historical vision. But these blind spots can function as a kind of map in themselves. They can just as easily expose suppressed or neglected histories through a trace(ing) of the gaps. However, such a task presupposes—to paraphrase Hal Foster—that whomever attempts to discuss it need not only be familiar with the particular structure of each scrutinized culture to map it, but also with this culture's history well enough to narrate it.

This cruel necessity of history—to always speak for others—is possibly nowhere more apparent than in the Artist's attempt to re-present history. Some artists—like those discussed in this monthly—have taken ownership of this problematic nature and mounted it as a stratagem for their work. They have made a genre of illustrating the narrative gaps.

Alison Cooley's piece presents a rich investigation of Andrew Hunter's intervention in the Art Gallery of Ontario's Georgia Ridley Salon (specifically the introduction of a work by Toronto cartoonist Chester Brown). Exploring historical revisionism, Cooley questions the value of the Institution's attempt to layer several parallel histories in a cohesive manner. Specifically discussing the social function of the Salon as a Cana-

dian-nationalist form of cultural production, Cooley suggests that the disclosure of the "Other" is what has truly defined Canada as a nation and culture.

Bambitchell, a Toronto art-duet formed by Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell, presents its project *Where the Trees Stood in Water*. [Bad] History is conveyed through their series of cyanotypes that track the transformation of Toronto's harbour over years of gentrification. **Important:** The images are interactive. On rollover, hidden text will introduce you to a semi-fictional narrative envisioning settlement and displacement in relation to the historical re-construction of bodies and spaces.

Alexandra Busgang's interactive piece illustrates the complexities of discussing history using Zaha Hadid's Serpentine Sackler Gallery project (2013) as a critical example. Busgang picks up on the discourse of simultaneous paradigms, first introduced by theorists like Fredric Jameson—and focuses on the presence of several modernities and post-modernities. Her preoccupation with the foibles of contemporary architecture serves to highlight the co-existence or montage of histories that seems to fuel our consumption for novelty in contemporary aesthetics.

In keeping with the tradition of New Year's resolutions, we KAPSULITES are keeping this prologue and many more to follow short and sweet. So, on that note, we bid thee well for now and wish you a close read and a delightful 2014. We'll return with more BAD HISTORY next month. In the meantime: don't touch that figurative dial.

The KAPSULA Team
 (Caoimhe, Yoli & Zach)

p.s. Have a question or a general comment?
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Cultural appropriation of the Other assuages feelings of deprivation and lack that assault the psyches of radical white youth who choose to be disloyal to western civilization.



GRAPHIC INTERVENTIONS

Chester Brown at the Art Gallery of Ontario

There is a particularly ubiquitous breed of nostalgia alive in the Georgia Ridley Salon at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Aside from being a familiar scene for perennial AGO-goers, the salon drips curatorial convention. Its walls painted a deep muted pink and hung tightly, floor-to-ceiling, with ornate gold frames, it is representative of the now-established gesture of the major museum salon hang. As the stand-in for the Art Institute of Chicago in the 2012 Hollywood movie *The Vow*, the salon hang in the European wing of the AGO evinces the interchangeability of salon sites: any gallery's salon is an effective substitute for any other's, so long as it follows the established formula.

Intended to mimic the atmosphere of academic art exhibitions in the 19th century, this salon at the AGO is fundamentally disjointed—and we like and expect it that way. It exists as a heritage re-creation in an emphatically contemporary building, a small space knit with history in an institution that continually asserts its modern desirability. The works represented in the salon vary in style and content, but represent a slice of acceptable and interesting subject matter from 1867-1917, the initial years during which the Ontario Society of Artists organized their annual juried exhibitions in this style.[1] Consisting largely of conventional oil portraits, landscapes, pastoral and domestic scenes, the works hung in the salon trace a view of Canada's art scene and stylistic entanglements (from the picturesque to the impressionistic).

On the centre wall of the salon a relatively small, framed ink drawing further reveals the salon's anachronism: a portrait of Louis Riel by Toronto cartoonist Chester Brown.

Many may not immediately recognize the subject. Andrew Hunter, Frederick S. Eaton Curator of Canadian Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario noted during a symposium in November that “if you grew up in Toronto, up until Chester's book, you probably didn't know anything about Louis Riel.” [2]



Hunter describes Chester Brown's work in the salon as an intervention—one in a series of planned on-going interventions into the Art Gallery of Ontario's collection. Placing the work in dialogue with what he deems the salon's "nation building narrative," the intervention is geared to re-thinking which actors have shaped Canada's history. A didactic panel next to Riel's portrait suggests that depictions of key historical figures and events are missing, and that the intervention of the portrait into the Salon is an attempt to address these omissions.

While the inclusion of Riel is admirable (especially in its attempts to re-assess the presence of Ontario artists within the institution), the intervention of Brown's comic into the AGO Canadian Collection represents several fundamental confusions: between the illusion of contemporary and historical within the institution; between inclusion and exclusion; between high and low art; and between the perceptions of appropriate subject matter for major public galleries.

Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography, first published in 2003, is an anomalous kind of comic—thoroughly researched and painstakingly crafted, it makes a definite case for the emerging genre of non-fiction comics. It is tightly drawn, with six uniformly sized panels to a page, by turns sparse and densely detailed. The narrative follows Riel and the Métis people through conflict with English speaking settlers and the newly-founded Dominion of Canada, the establishment of a provisional government after seizing Fort Garry (now Winnipeg), Riel's escape to the United States, return, election to Parliament, later exile from Canada, the Battle of Fish Creek, the Battle of Batoche and, finally, Riel's hanging for treason at the hands of the Canadian government in 1885.

Despite the easy association with the glossy (and glossed-over) histories told in pop culture, Brown's perspective on Riel is nuanced and even equivocal. Throughout the book, Riel's devout Catholicism and stubborn-nature shine as Chester Brown crafts a complex portrait of a figure who, though often viewed in a heroic light and openly acknowl-

edged as a founder of Manitoba, remains unpardoned in any official capacity. Brown's own politics, as he notes, drew him to Riel's biography, where he saw his own anti-authoritarian politics reflected in the under-celebrated eccentricities of the Métis leader. Brown's then-identification as an anarchist morphed, as he worked on the book, to a more libertarian stance—a politic which informs and complicates his view of Riel as an iconic dissident.

In the adjoining Max and Madeline Clarkson Studio original artwork from the Louis Riel graphic novel, including the scene of Riel's flight from Fort Garry and a later sequence depicting his hanging, afford the opportunity for closer inspection. Brown's delicate drawings are seductive at their original scale, where Wite-Out splotches and paste-up corrections which are imperceptible on the printed page become fascinating, attesting to the laborious process of the book. Brown describes the pieces in the installation as essential places where silent panels force a slow and contemplative read of the work. "So much of the book," Brown says, "because I had to cram so much information into such a short space, it goes very quickly, and I tend to like the scenes that go more slowly." [3]

For Brown, the small installation and intervention are opportunities for the slow reading and formal (pictorial) decoding of the work, places to sit with Riel. This, he suggests, is the advantage of the gallery space over the printed page. And, on this, he and curator Andrew Hunter appear to agree: that comics deserve their appropriate time and their due as legitimate art media.

Hunter is not unfamiliar with curating the work of cartoonists. In 2009, as part of RENDER at the University of Kitchener Waterloo, Hunter organized a national tour of Guelph-based cartoonist Seth's "Dominion City." The exhibition expanded the artist's vision of the fictional Ontario Dominion City into the realm of scale models, drawing from the mid-20th century architectural conventions of booming Canadian cit-

ies. In collaboration with Hunter, Seth realized parts of his city at full-scale inside the gallery, populating a life-sized imitation of an 1940s-style theatre with early National Film Board documentaries at the exhibition's stop in the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery's Eastman Gallery.

The salon intervention is a different case: it has already been identified as a site within the AGO where omissions run rampant. Re-designed as part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's *Transformation* project in 2008, it is already an institutionally curated meditation on itself and its own history. In imitation of French academic exhibitions, salon exhibitions in Canada, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were exclusive spaces, privileging a model of professionalism inherited from the European system. The associated visual tropes of those historical exhibitions resonate through the genre of the salon-style hang (and the Georgia Ridley Salon at the AGO) and so does the corresponding privileged professionalism. In this sense, the salon operates as an educational tool as much as an aesthetic strategy: it serves to describe, by some combination of visual evocation and historical explication, the history of evaluative systems in art institutions.

In a curated move to correct and question some of this exclusionary evaluation, Georgiana Uhlyarik, the Salon's curator for 2008's re-hang, aims to address women's inclusion early Canadian salons. In her current curation, Uhlyarik imagines how salon exhibitions might have appeared if women artists of the time had the privilege of being considered professionals [**bodies such as the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and the Ontario Society of Artists forbade women members at the time**], and, resultantly, been given opportunities to exhibit and sell their work in an academic context [4]. Something of this inclusion of women's work is apparent, even without reference to the gallery's didactic panels. As Linda Nochlin notes, systemic barriers to academic art-making success for women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries resulted in limited availability of subject matter and training [5]. Even in the grandiose medium of oil paint, the small-scale, the domestic, the everyday and the informal parade across the walls of the salon. Meanwhile, works on the longest (and chronologically latest) wall by Mary E. Wrinch and Kathleen Munn show immense foresight: Wrinch's *Saw Mill* is an early depiction of industrialization in Canada, while Munn's work heralds in abstraction, a visionary quality for which she was recognized during her life, but which was later all-but forgotten [6].





Uhlyarik's curation of the Salon at the AGO ensures that it already presents an unconventional, even feminist view of Canada and Canadian painting. Only a few of the works in the salon present what we might typically recognize as Hunter's "nation-building narrative," with early landscapes and pastoral scenes suggesting something of settlement, and later landscapes describing cities and industry. Bureaucracy and government policy barely make appearances on the walls of the Salon, save in George A. Reid's *The Other Side of the Question*, which depicts debate in a small town council chamber. And while women performing domestic duties at home, workers in fields, children in costume, pots of flowers, figures reading, freshly-hunted game and painters painting are surely markers of Canada's culture at the time, they are not the heroic nationalist icons Hunter's intervention seeks to counter. Rather, the Salon reveals the subject matter and lives of 19th and 20th century artists, and whispers stories of the developing Toronto art scene, artists' social circles and daily affairs.

There is something to be said for disrupting the idea that these subjects are not culturally charged shepherds of insidious cultural control. (We know that in the 19th and 20th centuries, as today, culture has been a mechanism of dominance.) And this may be the goal of Hunter's larger interventional curation into the collection. The latest step in the project has been the inclusion of Meryl McMaster's *Victoria* (from a series of photographs exploring overlapping Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian identities), a work that questions the naturalness of European cultural signifiers in Canadian contexts. Not prepared to denounce this necessary and important premise (the result of which remains to unfold the AGO collection), I wonder whom the portrait of Riel responds to, in a salon curation that is refreshingly free of portraits of great men. Heroic portraiture is at best a digressive response to the narratives of subtle cultural coercion.

The more radical move in the intervention-exhibition is the inclusion of comics as a medium. Against the rigid requirements of historical academic painting, comics are a powerful reminder that artwork need not adhere to the conventions

of fine art to be good, serious or engaging. The curatorial intention to legitimize comics is solidified by the adjoining mini-exhibition of original pages from *Louis Riel*—an additional nod to the work and the book, accompanied by talks at the Art Gallery of Ontario by and about Chester Brown at the time the installation of his work in the collection was revealed. The ceremoniousness to this intervention, its lack of subtlety and the public declaration of its presence recall Andrea Fraser's claim that Institutional Critique has become a gesture performed both inside of and around the institution, which enables public evaluation of the ways the museum represents itself as a critical body. [7]

Comics and art blogger Robert Boyd notes, in reference to Seth's "Dominion City" exhibition, that curatorial instincts governing cartoonists' work often veer towards the pop-cultural—to putting comics together in exhibitions with other works that reflect a popular aesthetic. He suggests that this premise is faulty because, rather than provide the opportunity for gallery publics to engage with the thematic and conceptual nature of comics, it affirms only a surface-level interest in the contemporaneity and popularity of the medium [8]. Championing comics requires more than simply the inclusion of comics, but the serious treatment of their content—a step that the Art Gallery of Ontario's intervention has not yet achieved.

Hunter's decision to champion this particular work of Chester Brown's is strange in that *Louis Riel* (although an excellent work) is not particularly representative of Brown's production. Much of Brown's work deals with sexuality and the sex industry, from the discomfort of navigating adolescent sexuality in *I Never Liked You* to the influence of Playboy magazine on the author's sexuality and perceptions of race in *The Playboy*. Brown's most recent graphic novel, *Paying for It*, continues his exploration of sex work and transactional sex via an account of his experience as a John. Much of Brown's work is darkly humorous and improvisational, almost

stream-of-consciousness, and his earlier short self-published comics, anthologized as *The Little Man* and *Ed the Happy Clown*, betray a fascination with the legacy of surrealism—one that resonates with innumerable contemporary artists working with surrealist aesthetic strategies.

The decision to include this particular work in an intervention—slotting it into an exhibition space with minimal context—may be motivated by the false perception that the rest of Brown’s work would not be appropriate within the greater context of the AGO. In an interview regarding the installation, Brown suggested his comics on the sex industry would not be sufficiently wholesome for children and families visiting the AGO. [9]

Within the gallery’s European collection, however, works such as Tissot’s *The Shop Girl*, reflect on the transactional nature of sex, representing veiled metaphors for sex work in what Hollis Clayson describes as “eroticized commerce in the Parisian shop.” [10] Couple this with a 2001 exhibition of turn-of-the-century erotic postcards entitled “Naughty Ladies,” and a picture of the acceptable domains for sexual subject matter within the AGO begins to emerge. [11] Within historical collections, where their distance from contemporary culture is maintained by novelty, these works invite contemplation. The potential for historically situated dialogue around the sex industry exists at the AGO, but Brown’s oeuvre remains represented by *Louis Riel*, if not a less controversial work, then at least one which invites controversy on established institutional terms.

A reticence to address other aspects of Brown’s oeuvre, and to nod to his comics with an edgy inclusion of the contemporary and the popular within the historical does little justice to his broader themes. Furthermore, it relies on the false assumption that his ideas and explorations of sex, politics and autobiography aren’t interlinked—to explore Brown’s work seriously might require dealing with the manifold dimensions of the artist’s work, which are political, personal, uncomfortable, honest and skillful. Nor should any discomfort with Brown’s personal politics on the AGO’s part be

avoided. Rather, curatorial power to direct this discussion towards other works in the collection could benefit both a nuanced treatment of Brown’s work and the larger thematics at the AGO.

The role of an intervention is often to de-legitimize or critique a curation that excludes. To intervene within a curation that already attempts to perform an exercise of inclusion does not necessarily peel back a layer of history to reveal a more inclusive one. Given the salon’s place as an educational exercise—a vision of how, historically, institutions have conferred art’s status, a kind of period room which plays at authenticity—curatorial steps to correct its historically-mired narratives are also steps to contemporize it, to draw it away from its own history. These moves can be important gestures, steps to fill gaps and right exclusions, but they build with the increasing potential that curators are intervening on a sort of straw-man, a convenient ficto-historical representation of the gallery’s own systems. Rather than position comics as symbolic correctives to the institution’s process or as token representations of contemporary culture, institutional curators have the privilege and resources to treat comics with seriousness, attending to their political and social nuance. As the first step in an on-going intervention, Louis Riel’s portrait fails to set the terms of the project: who or what is being intervened against, and where in the AGO are they? Where Hunter has inserted Brown, he has quickly and easily emphasized comics’ lack of belonging within the collection, but he has not brought the struggles that play out upon their pages into the gallery.

Alison Cooley

is an emerging curator and critic based in Toronto. She is a recent graduate of the MA program in Art History at York University, and currently hard at work on a podcast about art in Canada, set to launch in March 2014.

WHERE THE TREES STOOD IN WATER

BAMBITCHELL

The following is a series of cyanotype prints by Toronto-based artist duo Bambitchell (Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell). Each print investigates an era in the dramatic transformation of Toronto's Entertainment District through various stages of colonialization, industrialization and gentrification. Employing fragments of archival cartographic and textual material, *Where the Trees Stood in Water* positions the processes of settlement and displacement as the entangled remaking of bodies and spaces.

Please Note

Roll over each print with your cursor to view the hidden text.

Bambitchell (Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell)

met in 2008 and have been fostering an artistic collaboration ever since. Their practice uses feminist frameworks in order to reimagine borders, historical patterns of movement and mobility, labour, migration and memory. These frameworks, often showcased through irony and a camp aesthetic, allow for an invitation to think through these ideas in nuanced and complicated ways. By working in various media (print, video, sculptural installation and performance), they explore these constantly shifting narratives through the use of images, architectures, language, sound and bodies in order to re-think and reform common understandings of immigration and colonial practices.

In 2009, they created *Inextricable*, a 5-Channel film and video installation, which attempted to queer the ways that the diaspora and nationhood are imagined by letting go of a prescriptive tie to 'home' and 'homeland'. In 2011, they created *Border Sounds*, alongside musician and audio engineer Heather Kirby. *Border Sounds* is a sound and video installation, examining figurative and territorial borders, through an immersive silent disco in an underground parking garage. The work seeks to position the participant within a performance of border crossing, both requesting and constricting movement and mobility simultaneously.

Bambitchell's most current video collaboration is a trilogy titled, *Citizen Kenney: A Love Letter in 3 Parts*. The video responds to the immigration and human rights policies of the Canadian conservative government, by addressing Jason Kenney's, ('Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism') public antics.

Bamboat and Mitchell both have independent art practices, which range in mediums but are housed mainly in video art and film. They are also both actively involved in programming and curation and are members of the Pleasure Dome Experimental Film & Video Collective in Toronto, Canada.

ALEXANDRA BUSGANG



Notes

- 1) Douglas Murphy, "Architecture, 'avant-gardes' and Failure." Delavsko - Punkerska Univerza, Ljubljana, Slovenija. Lecture.
- 2) Glen Hill, "Aesthetics of Architectural Consumption," in *Aesthetics of Sustainable Architecture*, ed. Sang Lee (Rotterdam: 010, 2011), 30.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Patrik Schumacher, "[Patrik Schumacher on Parametricism—'Let the Style Wars Begin,'](#)" *Architects' Journal*.
- 5) Bruce Thomas, "Culture, Merchandise, or Just Light Entertainment? New Architecture at the Millennium," *Journal of Architectural Education* 50.4 (1997): 257.
- 6) Reinhold Martin, "Architecture's Image Problem: Have We Ever Been Post modern?" *Grey Room* 22 (2006): 7.

Alexandra Busgang

is a graduate student, artist, and filmmaker from Los Angeles. As a master's candidate at York University, her current research involves architecture, aesthetics, and consumption in Los Angeles.

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