CANADIANART

REVIEWS

Review: Public Studio Turns Images into Witnesses at O'Born Contemporary

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From left: Linda Sormin, ***Bol Sein***, 2015; Public Studio, ***3D Bol Seine***, 2015. Courtesy O'Born Contemporary.

"All this happened, more or less," the opening line from Kurt Vonnegut's ***Slaughterhouse-Five***, could describe our current relationship with history, or the idea of history. Nineties poststructuralist theory prompted us to distrust it fundamentally, crippling history (and art history) departments in the process. Since then, we have arguably rediscovered history as an important if relative truth, indeed a need. New, alternate histories, heretofore suppressed, elided or unwritten, have emerged to empower, motivate and unsettle. We've not surrendered our urge to commemorate, and for good reason. The recent nationwide legalization of gay marriage in the US was marked by a rainbow projection on the White House, undoubtedly an image for the ages. That same day, Barack Obama sang "Amazing Grace" in Charleston, an unprecedented act for a president. History persists, more or less.

At "The Accelerators," the recent exhibition at Toronto's O'Born Contemporary by local duo Public Studio (Tamira Sawatzky and Elle Flanders), history was a web, a flock, a knot. The approach actually recalled poststructuralism—not the movement's repudiation of history, but certain of its adherents' attempts to broaden history through what has become known as "new historicism." This paradigm rejects linear, hierarchical, symbolic interpretations of the past, often using sociology, psychology and anthropology as key tools. Periphery and centre merge; strange, idiosyncratic connections are made. The narrative quality of history is vital, not suspicious. In the words of scholar Julie Thompson Klein, "new historicism replaces synecdoche with chiasmus." Instead of parts standing for wholes, they form networks and openings.

"The Accelerators" read as an exquisitely materialized riff. In a sleekly designed blue-and-orange leaflet, Sawatzky and Flanders explained its casual genesis. "We're sitting in our home on a Sunday morning leafing through the ***New York Times Style Magazine***. This is what it is meant for—a browse, an amble through a stylist's best offering. Desire created, fulfilled and forgotten." On one page, Sawatzky and Flanders stumbled upon an image of a bowl in the shape of a breast that rested on a triangular rams' head pedestal. The caption: "The Bol Sein was first produced in 1787 by artisans at the legendary Sèvres porcelain factory in France for Marie Antoinette, who used it to drink fresh milk… The mold was rumored to be based on an exact replica of her breast. Today, only 30 bowls are produced each year."

Comical yet disturbing, and with obvious ties to agrarian work and political revolution, the bowl led Sawatzky and Flanders, along with collaborators Lili Huston-Herterich, Tory James and Alex McKay, Linda Sormin and David Miller, to create a Wunderkammer-like show of associated images and objects that stretched across the world, and through time. Many themes motivated "The Accelerators," notably the ways in which politics inevitably become product, and in which commodity fetishism, specifically the materialization of history, erases dissent and rupture.

"The Accelerators" thus asked significant questions despite the frivolity of its initiation. Can an exhibition that re-presents depoliticized historical objects manage to repoliticize them? Should it want to? Can the harnessing of new historicism, the presentation of history as free-associative and even playful, be meaningful, or merely academic and coy? It's worth noting that while most of Sawatzky and Flanders's references were familiar to me, they may not have been to many. The leaflet included an impressive, Mark Lombardi–like map of all the exhibition's references and their proposed connections; still, the duo was remiss not to include more information about the curious objects they displayed. Even brief, oblique didactics would have helped.

That said, the "The Accelerators" had, in its decontextualization, a strong, dark, smirking aura; it seemed a gallery of evidence from some unidentified tribunal. The image of the Bol Sein was matched by a 3D-printed reproduction (unsuccessfully done 25 per cent larger than the original, and in this error giving a false, funny, Russ Meyer–ish impression of Marie Antoinette's cup size) and by Sormin's reproduction, moulded from her own breast, atop Chinatown tchotchkes. Beside these objects was a collage of postcard images of Château de Rambouillet, where the bowl was originally presented to Marie Antoinette in 1787. Then a site of pastoral fetishization, the Château became a residence for Napoleon and later for Charles X, who abdicated there in 1830, the same year he invaded Algeria. Next to the postcards was a striking wall sketch recreating Le Corbusier's master plan for the city of Algiers on the centenary of French occupation, one that retains the kasbah as an orientalist ghetto-cum-playground. Here, a simple if neglected truth: the European upper-class appropriation of working-class culture paralleled the subsequent colonialist appropriation of world cultures.

Adjacent sections on Algeria dealt with Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo's ***The Battle of Algiers*** (which permitted Flanders and Sawatzky to recreate, through rudimentary computer animation, the opening sequence of Pontecorvo's unrealized film about Òscar Romero's assassination, a fascinating if tangential exercise). Elsewhere, Public Studio meditated on the Fleury-Mérogis Prison in France, one of the few prisons to realize Jeremy Bentham's idea of the panopticon, and a recurring site of radicalization. The faces of Nathalie Menigon and Joëlle Aubron, who in 1987 assassinated Renault CEO Georges Besse, hung next to a luxe-looking eBay-purchased ad from 1986 for a Renault 21. These and other images prompted endless riffing. Fleury-Mérogis was reputedly built in part to house the droves of arrested worker-activists in France who supported Algeria during and after the War of Independence. One might also make a link between this and the writing of Michel Foucault's ***Discipline and Punish***; Foucault co-signed the 1971 manifesto of the Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons, written in large part in response to damning reports coming out of Fleury-Mérogis. Such histories continue to be written: the Algerian Kouachi brothers, responsible for the ***Charlie Hebdo*** attacks, were said to have become jihadists in Fleury-Mérogis.

A section of beautiful photographs of goods that were exchanged to the Mississauga for the Toronto Purchase suggest the importance of understanding history as a perpetual act of making. The purchase, a swindle by any other name, was signed in 1787 and suspiciously went missing until 1805, at which point Lord Simcoe realized the document was legally needed. This put on record an injustice, one monetarily redressed in 1986 to the tune of $150 million.

The record of history, even if corrupted and erroneous, furnishes proof. It is indeed, as Obama asserted in his first inaugural address, possible, and unadvisable, to be on its "wrong side." Of course image making has become history making; images function, as they did in "The Accelerators," as witnesses. "As objects of contemplation, images of the atrocious can answer to several different needs," wrote Susan Sontag in ***Regarding the Pain of Others***. "To steel oneself against weakness. To make oneself more numb. To acknowledge the existence of the incorrigible."