

Understanding Montreal's Biggest Art Event

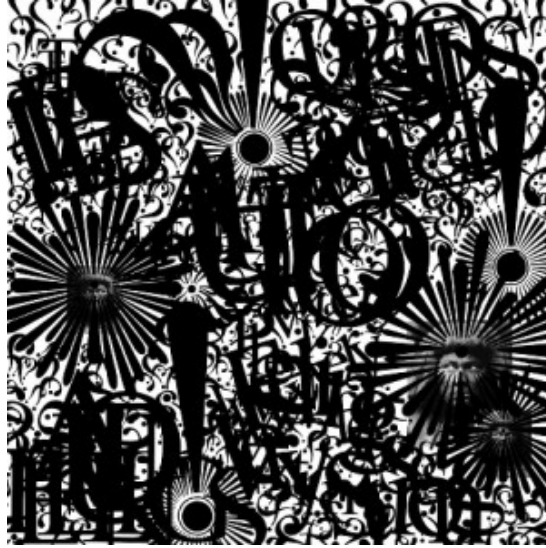
By Lisa Sproull on October 28, 2014 in Art & Design



"Courtroom Drawing" by Andrea Bowers

Last Wednesday evening, hundreds of fans and curious onlookers lined up for upwards of an hour on a chilly evening to get into a downtown venue filled with local and international stars. Sounds like a rock festival, doesn't it? In fact, the venue was the Musée d'art contemporain (MAC), and the line-up was there for the opening of the 2014 Montreal Biennale, a major international art event that takes place every two years.

From Oct. 22 to Jan. 4, 2015, the Biennale will exhibit 150 works by 50 Canadian and international artists, spanning the artistic spectrum from paintings, prints, sculpture, films, projections and sound installations.



Work by John Massey

This year's edition marks the first time the event was organized through a newly established independent organization whose sole purpose is to produce the Montreal Biennale, which it has done in partnership with the MAC. Given the new organizational structure, new team, new funding sources and new leadership by executive/artistic director Sylvie Fortin, it was only fitting to build the exhibition around the theme "L'Avenir (Looking Forward)."

According to the Biennale's curatorial statement, the exhibition "aims to look backward from possible futures to consider the present and to address the connectedness of the local to the global in that context."

References are made to another major forward-looking expo Montreal once hosted — Expo 67 — when many members of the general public had reason to be optimistic about the future with its clean modernism, exciting new technologies and evidence of social progress.



"Eternity" by Nicolas Baier

Having seen many of the hopes of 1967's stargazers dashed or fallen short, we're not quite so rosy-eyed about the future these days, and you'll find a dark tone to many of the works on display at 14 venues across the city.

The MAC is where you'll find the bulk of the exhibition, including standouts like Montreal artist Nicolas Baier's *Eternity*, a three-metre-high mirrored sculpture of the word "eternity" spelled in cursive, the letters obscured by the sideways perspective with which you have no choice but to view them.

You'll also find *Deep Weather*, a nine-minute film by Swiss artist Ursula Biemann, which juxtaposes the withering Athabasca river suffering the effects of the nearby tar sands with a Bangladeshi community racing to build a levee by hand to protect themselves from rising water from melting Himalayan ice.

One of my favourite displays is *HEXEN 2.0* by London's Suzanne Treister, whose deck of tarot cards depicting pillars of scientific and cybernetic development points to the idea that the expansion of scientific knowledge and technology, as much as our present lives rely on it, can be as enigmatic and mysterious to many of us as the religious mysticism it has ostensibly replaced as the keeper of our faith.



From HEXEN 2.0 by Suzanne Treister

If cybernetics doesn't grab your attention, there's a good chance *400 Nudes* by Florida-based artist Jillian Mayer will. The artist has chosen 400 nude and semi-nude selfies from around the Internet and reproduced them onto postcards that visitors can take away. The truly observant may notice something unusual about these images: though many different bodies and settings are depicted, these women all have the same face — the artist's own. This piece raises some important questions around the selfie as a feminist practise, about the erasure of identity that can happen when female bodies are sexualized, and since we don't know if these images were intended for private sharing or public consumption, questions about consent, manipulation and loss of control.

These themes are echoed in a powerful and heartbreaking display presented by Andrea Bowers, the L.A. artist whose *Courtroom Drawings (Steubenville Rape Case, Text Messages Entered as Evidence, 2013)*

reproduces snippets of text-message conversations between several parties involved in the sexual assault of a passed-out high-school girl after a party. Though difficult to view, this is an important work in a climate where examples of the same victim-blaming and misplaced sympathies that were prominent (and roundly criticized) features of the media coverage of the Steubenville case continue to add to the challenges facing survivors of sexual assault.

The highlights above represent only a tiny sliver of the works on display. Offerings from Isabelle Hayeur, Arctic Perspective Initiative, Lawrence Weiner, Edgar Arceneaux, Shirin Neshat, John Massey and many more are exhibited across the Biennale venues and are well worth your attention. ■