



Visual Arts
ARTS WEEK

Canvases of fire?

>> Controversy surrounds the Musée d'art contemporain's *Of Fire and Passion*

by KEITH MARCHAND

It has been five years since the Musée d'art contemporain fled the relative isolation of the Cité du Havre and moved to its present downtown location. To celebrate this event, the Musée is staging an exhibition, showcasing 22 young Quebec artists chosen by the show's curator, Real Lussier, to be representative of the province's artistic future.

This is an ambitious task and, as one might expect from an undertaking of this scope, the show has seen controversy from the get-go. In fact, there has been an uproar in the local arts scene the likes of which I have rarely seen.

The list of complaints is an exhaustive one, representing just about every aspect of the exhibition.

One of these is that the Musée is out of touch and too stodgy to properly represent the truly current trends in art. Most dissenters have cited the title as a perfect example of a supposed unbridgeable generation gap.

Granted, *Of Fire and Passion* is enough to set one's teeth on edge. Are the bellies of young artists really full of fire and passion? Not likely. But this is, after all, only a name and is fairly trivial in the scheme of things.

Related to this complaint is the somewhat wobbly argument that the works of contemporary artists are somehow compromised when shown in the large, characterless environment of traditional galleries. It is true, I suppose, that some of the works tend to appear a little anaemic and insignificant in the massive white corridors, but the Musée's walls just may function as a test of the staying power

and significance of the works involved.

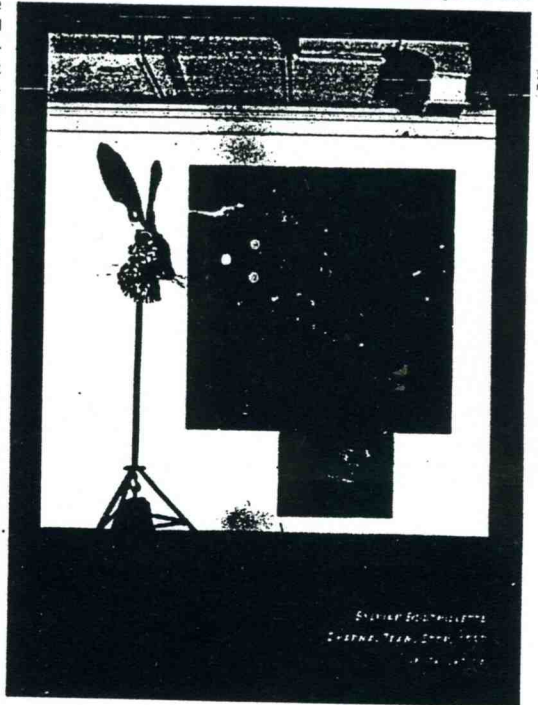
Debating the shortcomings of a building that is already five years old seems, to me, an exercise in futility. There will always be a degradation when an art work is moved from its intended site, but not so much so that a truly good piece becomes bad.

Significantly, there has been some momentum to hold a Salon des refusés in response to the show's hotly contested selections. This is fair enough, as the choices for the show were subjective, and the foreseeable outcome would be an opportunity to see more art from young Quebecers.

The exhibition is a sprawling affair presenting an ambitious cross-section of media, including photography, painting, video, sculpture and installation. *Of Fire and Passion* has (according to Lussier) taken care not to present an exhibit with a homoge-

neous or thematic approach. This is a good thing. Let the audience find its own way and draw its own conclusions as to what (if anything) connects the art. The show moves from high-tech to traditional, from jocular to quiet, giving off more of a tangible attitude than a concrete agenda.

Most of the work is strong, energetic and only occasionally underdeveloped. Alain Bonin's offering, however, is simply puerile. Kamila Wozniakowska's two large paintings are strong, incorporating an arresting appearance and some clever play with the tools of narrative. Sylvain Bouthillier's "Dharma, Tram, Stop" delves into spirituality and religious representation and features a deconstructed rabbit-totem-Buddhist incorporation. François Lacasse



Sylvain Bouthillier
Dharma, Tram, Stop, 1997

Photo by Thomas-Max Blomster

does a nice job with two triptychs that serve to confirm the strengths of good, solid painting (obviously, I found painting to be the strongest component of the exhibition).

I do not agree that this show is a failure simply because some thought it not hip enough or because others thought that the lineup should have been different. *Of Fire and Passion* is more than adequate to get a taste of the Montreal and Quebec scene. What we may be seeing is a flare-up of tall-poppo syndrome, wherein people delight in cutting their fellows down to size. ☺

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