

Chalk and Butter

University of Guelph
MFA Candidates

Group Exhibition

Amanda McMorran

Ashleigh Bartlett

David Hucal

Dawn Johnston

Erica Mendritzki

Jessica Groome

Julie Hall

Laura Marotta

Marco D'Andrea

Martie Giefert

Maryse Lariviere

Melissa Hamonic

Nadia Belerique

Tiziana La Melia

June 9 - July 9, 2011
Opening Thursday June 9, 6-8pm

Diaz Contemporary

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Toronto ON M5V 1C5
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Tuesday - Saturday, 11 - 6



It gives me great pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the faculty, staff and students of the School of Fine Art and Music at the University of Guelph to our biennial MFA group exhibition, entitled Chalk and Butter. The quality of the work represented in this curated exhibition is yet another indicator of the reputation of the University of Guelph as one of Canada's pre-eminent graduate programs in the visual arts. As an art school, we are rightfully proud of our exceptional faculty, our dynamic student body and our gifted alums. We are also extremely aware that our reputation for excellence is due in large measure to those in the community (such as Benjamin Diaz of Diaz Contemporary) who continue to share our vision of creating a truly international caliber art school, capable of preparing some of this country's best and brightest young artists for distinguished careers on the world's stage. It is a big goal, but, as the quality of our students and the reputation of our alumni clearly point out, it is very much within reach.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Benjamin Diaz, both for his generosity in agreeing to take on this group show and for his consistent support and enthusiasm for the Guelph program. Toronto is very lucky to have a gallerist of his considerable insight and caliber as part of the community; we as a school are even more fortunate to count him as a friend. I would also like to acknowledge the work of FASTWURMS, James Carl and Katie Bethune-Leamen, who were instrumental in making this exhibition a reality. Finally, to the artists themselves, a hearty congratulations! At the end of the day, one can judge the quality of a program by the rigour and intelligence of work that is produced. And as this exhibition so admirably demonstrates, you continue to exceed already high expectations!

John Kissick,
Director,
School of Fine Art and Music
University of Guelph

Amanda McMorran

A painting whose depicted subject matter is that of luxury—the luxurious—painted in a manner further alluding to ideas of value, is a taut meta proposition. This is the case with Amanda McMorran's works *White Fingers* and *Untitled*. While the painted image can escape these vicissitudes in multiple ways, when such topic matter is embraced, there is an inevitable wormhole that opens up in the maw of the canvas. Amanda McMorran navigates around this vortex, even pointing to it with her lozenge-shaped, cameo-like canvases, complicated by florid, handmade frames. It is in fact these frames that can help position a viewer's entry into the work.

The delicate, porcelain-like lace that makes up the frames ensconcing McMorran's works forefront ideas of fakery and semblance. Hinting at doilies, they are made from baked polymer clay (ahem, Fimo), and resin-coated sugar. This mild-mannered, imitative deception destabilises any possibility of the paintings and their subject matter operating in a straight-ahead manner. Drawing her imagery from found photos, and literary inspiration, upon further consideration McMorran's compositions can be seen to butt up against notions of luxury, but are incapable of fully accessing such excesses.

Lodged in the realm of trying-to-be, ringed by their lovely yet chintzy frames, we are left with the inevitable conclusion that McMorran is investigating the middle brow—albeit a glossy, well-groomed one. Yet she is doing so with facility and earnestness that asserts this locale as itself being one of worth; even when located in hierarchies of socio-economic valuation, it hovers somewhere above a tasteful grandma's couch.



Untitled, 15 x 11", oil on canvas, Fimo, resin, 2010



White Fingers, 15 x 11", oil on canvas, Fimo, resin, 2010

Ashleigh Bartlett

Ashleigh Bartlett takes a macro lens close-up on cartoon imagery to source elements she proposes as a viable span across the frequently examined line between representation and abstraction. In the already mimetic—reductive yet amped-up—world of the cartoon, Bartlett’s selective mimetic operations create oscillating conversations between references. Her application of paint furthers this vacillation, as she plumps up limpid viscosity with medium to edge her applied blobs towards the sculptural. Thereby a second dialogue is created, here between types of material and how they are symbolically positioned—painting of the world, sculpture in the world.

As part of his examination of the mimetic and mimicry, German curator Anselm Franke writes:

We have to distinguish [...] two categories in mimetic art [...] the photographic and the cartoonist mimicry; the latter being the one of incorporation, a carnivalesque detournement of all imposed regimes of signification and truth, a play of endless mirrors, an exhibitionist celebration of life.¹

By generously allowing us access to her imagery sources—works in this exhibition are Hello Bow and Kitty in reference to the hydrocephalic Hello Kitty—we are allowed entry into the echo chamber of imagery that Bartlett has chosen to assemble her paintings from. Her iteration of select elements of this popular cartoon feline-girl-child, reproduced through plays of composition, texture and surface result in pleasingly complicated works that present the possibility for abstraction to slide into the representational and the firmament of space.

1. Anselm Franke, “Like, Like Being Like—On Mimesis, Mimicry And Mimétisme.” *ExtraCity*, 2008. Web. 28 April 2011
<<http://www.extracity.org/en/projects/view/10>>.



Kitty, 20 x 20", oil on panel, 2011

David Hucal

The Work of Abstraction.

In discussing his practice, David Hucal cites three sets of counterpoints: the figure and the ground, the collage and the painting, the portrait and the landscape. Through these triangulating references he is creating a series of paintings that tarry in the ambiguous space of abstraction wherein memory, experience, and thought can be called up. And if this is the ether in which these works are circulating, they are sitting on the firmament of a stolid work ethic that is just as indicative of the content of Hucal's oeuvre.

Hucal doggedly works through numerous iterations of the painted possibilities that his framework offers up to him. When Hucal expresses his need to work at a high volume of production, the inevitable conclusion is that something is being sought; to apply a work ethic to an enterprise is to indicate a goal. Hucal's work belies a directed aim to present abstraction's ability to dialogue with lived experience.

In size, Hucal's paintings and collages are manageable, embraceable, encapsulable, yet almost seem to be visual metonyms indicating compositions greater in stature. They are intense confabulations that consider paint itself, and its ability to impart form, thought. Seeking to continually resolve their stormy palettes into what will feel to him as viable propositions of figure/ground, Hucal's workday will perhaps never be done, as to ally an interest in the ability of abstraction to relate to experience with a continually shifting and eliding figure and ground interplay would seem to be a never-ending quest. Therefore the proposition remains open, the task Sisyphean, but as if Sisyphus got to engage in his enterprise of forever in the fields of a twilight Elysium.



Untitled, 16 x 17", oil on canvas, 2010

Dawn Johnston

At first look, Dawn Johnston's *Groundbreaking* and *It Killed John Henry But It Won't Kill Me* might seem to be fetishised references to acts and tools of labour, presenting discussions between those ideas and ones circulating around art work and the work of art. These items have been lifted from their usual roles and gilded—set apart. In this way, they could be valourisations of their common roles, or of the hands that might have wielded them. However, a consideration of the references framing the work, and it is further complicated.

John Henry is the name of a mythic everyman labourer who defied the industrialisation of his job as a railway spike-driver, and died as a result. *Groundbreaking* is the word for the ceremonial act of starting the excavation of a new construction site, generally with a special, dedicatory shovel. Johnston explains that the spike used for *It Killed...* came from the site of the joining of the east and west Canadian rail lines. Historically, moments when new rail lines are finally connected are commemorated with the driving of a special spike—often a golden one, as first done in the United States in 1869.

A gap is created, and the art objects are analogous to ceremonial ones already removed from actual labour, from actual function—the synecdoches of work, as wielded by captains of industry and financiers who mimic physical labour at the moment of its completion. A complicated instability is presented between the idea that these could be elevated readymades allied with the figure of the 'common man' (e.g. the titular John Henry) and the fact that the objects could have been directly lifted from PR exercises executed by the people that run the companies that employ them. This analogy can extend to the complicated relations between artists and the art market, and artist and the objects they create that exist within this market. If, as Johnston explains, it is the machine of capitalism that killed the mythic John Henry, here are the actual tools—now gilded weapons—that did the job, masquerading as art works and perhaps suggesting a different but somehow analogous threat.



It Killed John Henry But It Won't Kill Me,
6 x 3 x 2", gold-plated railway spike, 2010



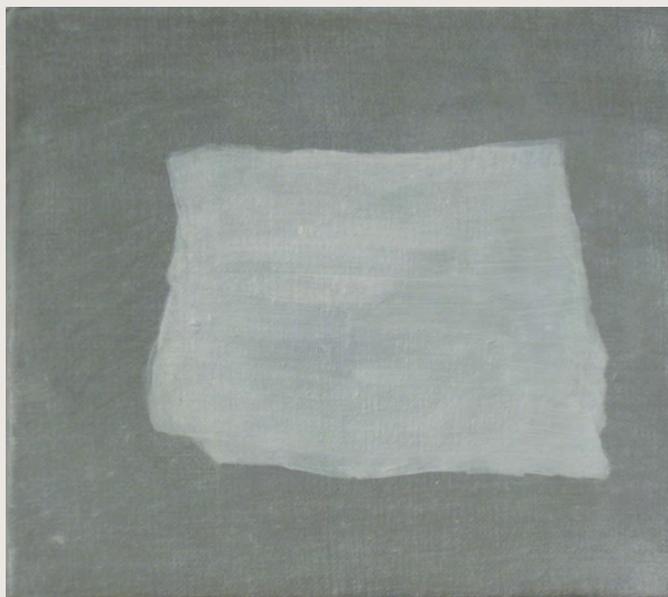
Groundbreaking, 52 x 12 x 12", gold-plated shovel, concrete, 2010

Erica Mendritzki

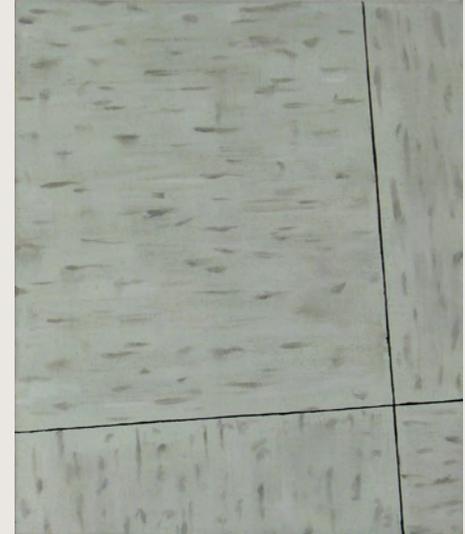
It is a common experience: as you try to recall the details of a dream and pull them into language, the dream fades and withers to the outskirts of perception. What was vivid and full-bodied shrivels to a palimpsest of the sense it had. Erica Mendritzki's paintings occupy a similar zone, sidling up to the limits of verisimilitude, but sitting resolutely on its littoral spaces. This discomfiting approach proposes consideration of the nature of objects and our relationship to them, and the role of painting in the representation and extension of this relationship.

Mendritzki succinctly describes the sense of objecthood she is interested in presenting in her works. Her paintings are not just of banal objects, but banal banal objects—unremarkably unremarkable subjects are chosen. We see a small section of plain, white foolscap (*Scrap*), an adequate representation of a standard, grey linoleum tile (*Kitchen Floor*), but also the squishy release and impasto magic of luminescence (*Proximity Blindness*). These are objects adequately presented, but objects as they live in our memories—the idea of this shadow life, their lack of existence in our lived experience indicated by their lack of shadows. These are bodies without souls.

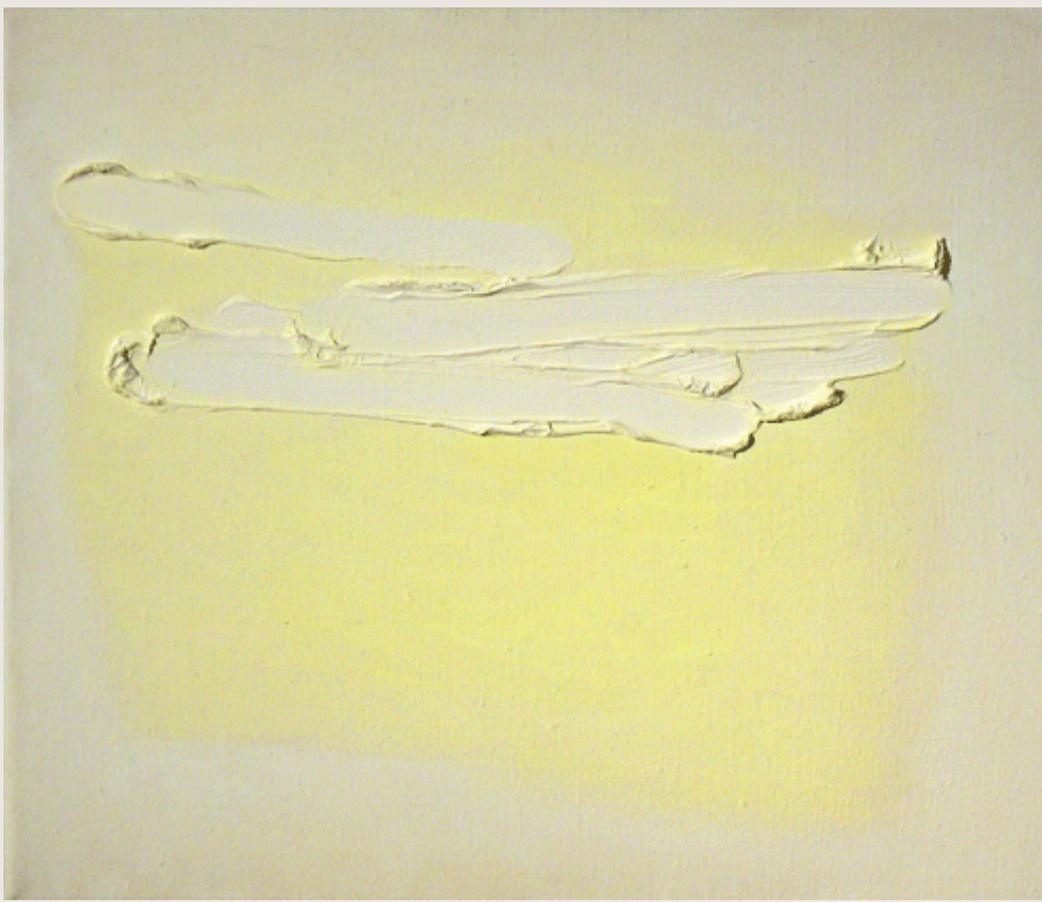
The indexical key of the title *Proximity Blindness* can further position our intersection with Mendritzki's interest in her works. When we are closest we can see the least. Yet in this moment there is also magnificence... As we gain focus, we might gain detail, but we lose sense.



Scrap, 7 x 8", oil on linen, 2010



Kitchen Floor, 16 x 13", oil on canvas, 2010



Proximity Blindness, 18 x 21", oil on linen, 2011

Jessica Groome

Careful, dedicated science of brush and colour on paper and canvas. A methodology adhered to. An enquiry pursued. A distillation. A search.

“Hello. I am orange. I was put on with a brush. I am friends with greige, over there.”

“I am big.”

“I am small.”

“I am paper.”

“I am paint.”

The scientist in her lab needs to identify elements, conduct experiments, document process, seek results. These results are harmonies—subtle, gladdening epiphanies.

This is how brown becomes acquainted with blue.

This is how brush makes conversation with canvas.

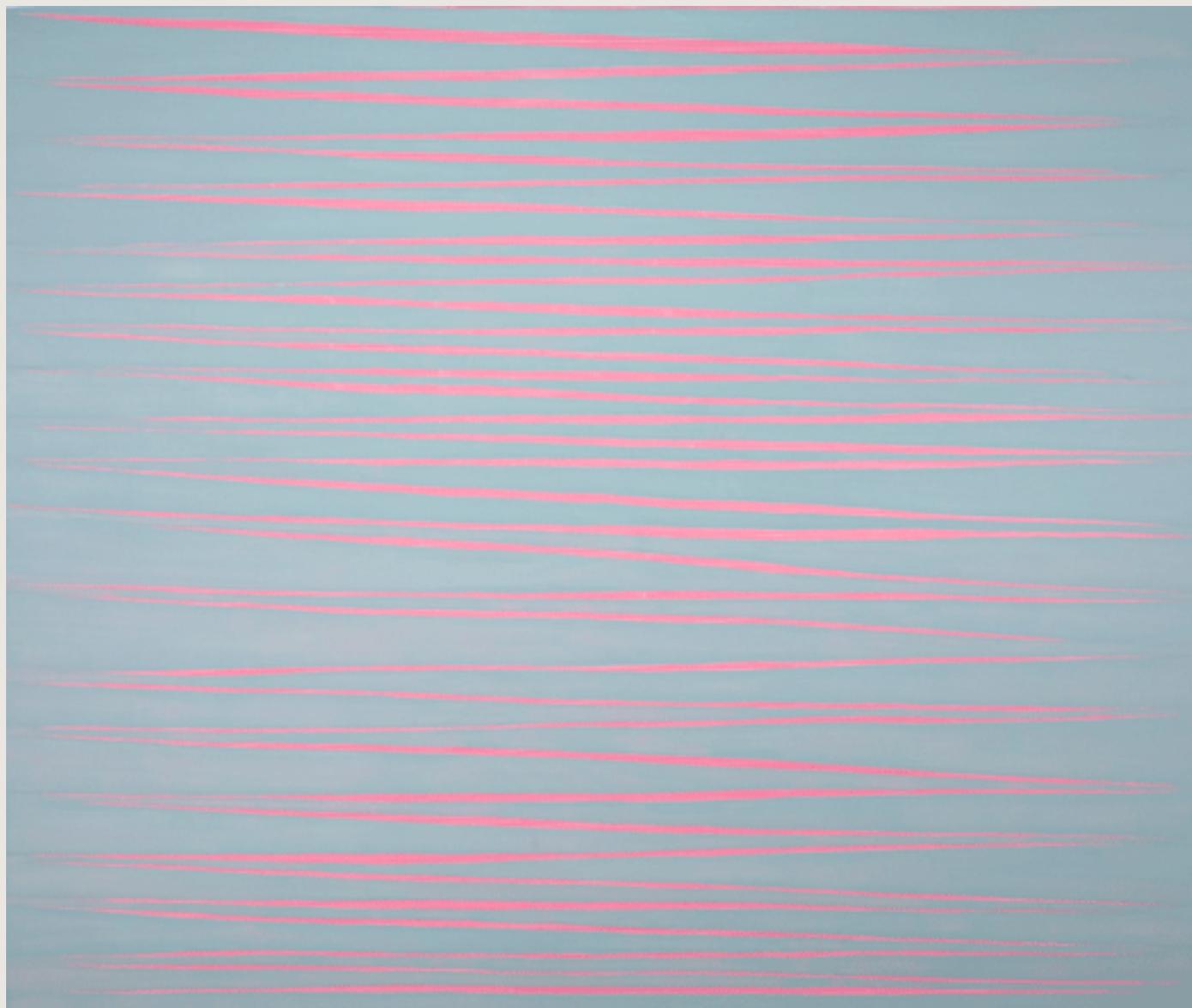
This is how paper talks to paper.

This is the wabi-sabi (侘寂) of line the hand makes when loosed in conversation with paint, with surface.

This is what it is.

This is what it can be.

Distillation.
Imbrication.
Application.
Observation.



Untitled (pink and grey), 38.5 x 46", oil on panel, 2010

Julie Hall

Enscorning rituals of childhood in the very adult medium of carefully composed photography and sculptural installation, Julie Hall's works *Blood Brothers* and *Bracelet* each denote layered narratives.

Staging lies and signaling untruths in her reiterations of childhood rituals, Hall arranges aestheticised morality plays that posit a distinctly adult ethos onto these interactions. In *Blood Brothers* the exchange of dots of blood mined from pricked fingers is initially hollowed out by almost comicbook-like panels that indicate to the viewer underhanded undermining of stated intent and given word. Of the two protagonists shown in the blood exchange, one is denoted, through a separate panel, as crossing her fingers—the child code for physically breaking the truth of any action or statement. The other figure clutches an opened takeout package of ketchup the contents of which it is suggested have been used in the stead of blood.

Ritual is by necessity built on layered cultural and social agreements and understandings. The notion of untruth in the realm of childhood is itself woven into the rituals of childhood—witness the standardised finger crossing as shown in *Blood Brothers*, or the need to cross hearts or vow to stick a needle in one's eye in order to assure the veracity of a statement or promise. These actions are then endemic to the ritual. The possibility for duplicity always present in the action.

Hall's work becomes an imbrication of one realm overtop another: adult morality onto juvenile morality. There is space here for narrative to be observed—judgment need not be passed. If anything, judgment remains on ourselves, and our need to read morality in action, our difficulty with accepting the layered nature of that which is said or promised.

We are left to consider whether the suggested narratives are observations or value judgments. And if we want to consider them as the latter, it is our moral coding of the more amorphous and morally ambiguous rituals of childhood that should be considered.



Blood Brothers, ea. panel 12 x 18", digital c-print, 2011



Bracelet, 90 x 0.5", embroidery floss, 2010

Laura Marotta

In Laura Marotta's studio the strong smell of off-gassing building materials is immediately discernible. MDF, plywood, kitchen laminates, carpeting, and other common domestic construction materials can be discerned to be quietly filling the artist's space with their subtle, toxic scent. Such materials are employed in all levels of construction in North America and other industrialised areas.

In *Model for Mattamy Contemporary 2011*, the colour palette and nature of the materials Marotta has selected, twinned with her careful titling brings the viewer to a specific use for all of these items—the suburban tract house, as conceived, designed and built (again, and again, and again, and again) by housing development giant Mattamy. However, Marotta has radically finessed Mattamy's vision, twinning their name, colour range and fabrication means with the formal iterations of International Style Modernist architecture.

Marotta's sculptural confabulations make immediate reference to the most archetypal of Modernist architectural propositions: different polyhedrons, including decahedrons and cubic units are linked and stacked-like Moshe Safdie's Habitat67 mated with Buckminster Fuller geodesic domes. The immediacy of this reference belies that it is an entry point, not necessarily the crux of the situation. In a general sense, Modernist building ideals are now reduced to utopic social forms. To mate these ideals with the beiges language of Mattamy is to flatten its architectural ideals into a milquetoast hybridity. Mattamy's neo-nuclear family habitat is perverted by the severe geometry and distillation of Modernism, and the Modern confused by the blandly accessible Mattamy materials. United under the moniker of Contemporary, they become a sure nod to the starchitect-designed palaces of art institutions now littered across the planet. In these ways, Marotta's sculpture devours and spits out multiple dominant architectural references, presenting a nuanced propositional form.



Mattamy Contemporary 2011, 96 x 51 x 58", plywood, particle board, Baltic birch, countertop, tiles, nails, 2011

Marco D'Andrea

For his work in *Chalk and Butter*, Marco D'Andrea has mined the location and locale of Diaz Contemporary to amass a series of sounds common to these sites. Working with his iPhone, or finding appropriate sound files online, D'Andrea has gathered an array of audio elements that are taken from, or make direct reference to the unassuming background noises that fill the gallery and its immediate neighbourhood.

Using the idea of foley as his technical reference point, D'Andrea has composed a sound work specifically for Diaz Contemporary. Mixed across four speakers, the work unassumingly fills the space, even passing unnoticed. What D'Andrea has done is rather subtle—reiterating the audio environment, but augmenting it ever so slightly. He has tightened it up, composed it even. It is 'better' in such a minor way that the impetus behind the shift is called into question.

D'Andrea is not creating field recordings per se—he is selectively gathering and reinterpreting the order of things. This minute shifting contains the suggestion that what the artist sees as banal can be proposed in a new and improved form, even if in this new iteration, the sound still passes unperceived.

D'Andrea's tiny auditory schism in reality calls into question our individual experiences of being, and our relationship with the work of art that in its intercession with the world alters it towards something more. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes a parable in which "the world to come"¹ is exactly as we know it here, but with the most minute of changes. These minor shifts are present not in "real circumstances, in the sense that the nose of the blessed one will become a little shorter,"² but in a hint of change to their sense and their limits: "It does not take place in things, but at their periphery, in the space of ease between every thing and itself."³ D'Andrea's minor modifications of the ambient sound environment of the Diaz Gallery space engages just such a minor shift.

Soundscape for Diaz Contemporary, 30 minutes, four-channel audio arrangement, speakers, CD players, mixer, 2011

1. Giorgio Agamben, "Halos," *The Coming Community* trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 53.

2. Agamben, Halos 53.

3. Agamben, Halos 53.

Martie Giefert

Martie Giefert works between the spaces of representation and trompe-l'oeil; between truth and half- (or perhaps double-) truth. Carefully photographing the spaces in which his works are to be installed, Giefert fabricates life-size printed iterations of these zones, confabulated from both analogue and digital images of them.

At Diaz Contemporary, the viewer is presented with a subtle dissonance that undermines the fixity of reality, but only just. Giefert's 1:1 scale image is not aiming to fool the eye—its presence as a shadow other of the space in which it resides is discernible, and while his images are very carefully crafted, there is no effort being made to hide their dissonant elements. His careful work goes into making the imperfect hybridisation seamless—elements remain 'wrong' but they are made to sit quite right.

There is a dryness to this flattening of illusion, and a viewer could perhaps be assuaged into thinking all is well and as it should be with the image. Those aspects of Giefert's work that are manipulated, are subtly woven through the image to the extent that they allow the photo to potentially sit innocuously as representation, not as lie. Their hybridity creates a sense of augmented as opposed to perverted reality. To gaze upon their tightly woven blending of spatial representation is akin to seeing a friend who has gotten a rather expensive and subtle nose job—things are not as they should be, but one is not necessarily sure how or why.



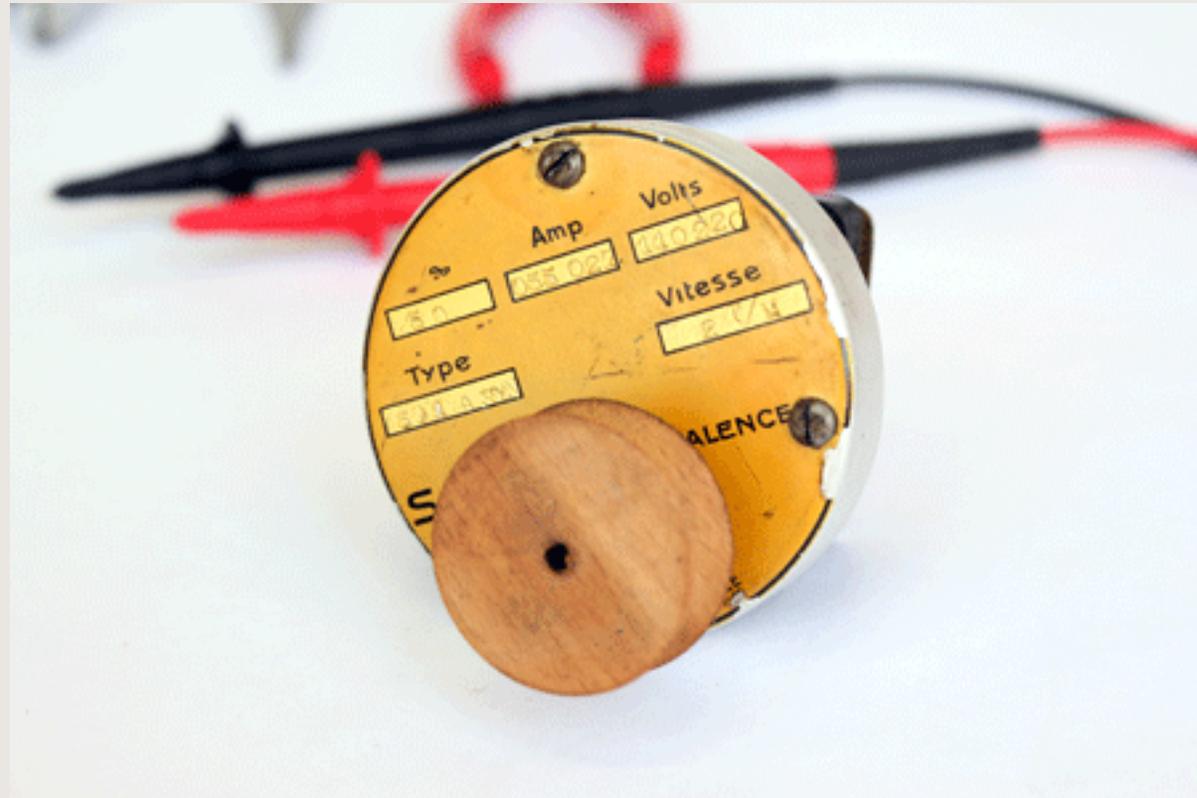
Re-construction (Diaz), Wall #1, 72 x 144", digital c-print, 2011

Maryse Larivière

Maryse Larivière's practice shifts between dreamed realities, psychoanalytic examinations, reposts to published work, reiterations and collaborations, and inhabits performance, video, sculpture, painting and other mediums.

Reykjavik, Iceland, May 25, 2011.

French author [REDACTED] — an interest of Maryse Larivière's not yet obviated in her multi-layered, cross-referential practice—is giving a reading at the Nordic House (Norræna húsið) as part of the Reykjavik Arts Festival (Listahátíð í Reykjavík), co-presented by the Alliance française de Reykjavík. I arrive early at the Alvar Aalto designed Norræna húsið, opened in 1968. It's a true fetish spot, with all furnishings and fixtures—for the most part—original, and designed by Aalto. I need to hem in my strong desire to purloin a signature Aalto vase or ashtray. Take something. A compulsion. To have, take, claim what I cannot have. I've been developing a crush on a man I met in Montreal. He is francophone, and he speaks English in one of my favourite ways—with a hybrid accent that is part Quebec francophone, occasionally part London English. It melts my head. I think about him rather constantly while I am in the Norræna húsið waiting for [REDACTED]'s reading to start—this is one of the indulgent luxuries I find are afforded by well considered, clean, aesthetic spaces (austerity as indulgence). Reverie. Fantasy. Except no, this does not happen the way I think it will. In fact, at a distance, walking towards Nordic House, it seems to me there are far too few cars. Upon entering the building, far too few people. I ask a man in a rather creatively knit, brown Icelandic wool sweater if I've made a mistake, if the reading is tonight—a question which seems to pain him. The eruption of the volcano Grímsvötn has thwarted [REDACTED]'s flight. He is remaining in Ireland. He is not rescheduling. I cannot ask him to sign a copy of *The Impossibility of an Island* for Maryse.



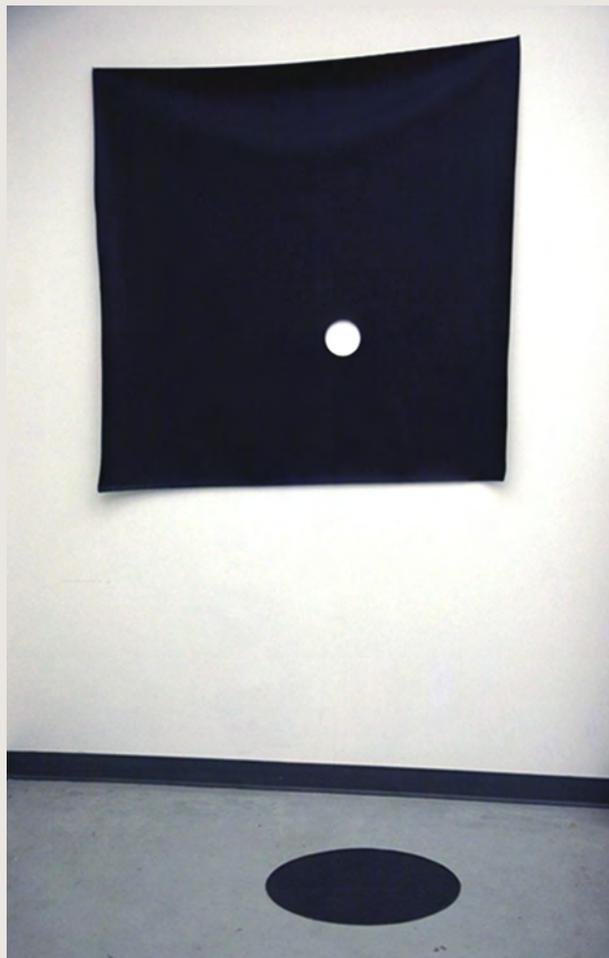
still from two-channel HD video installation *My Dream of Tinguely*, 8m & 20m, 2010

Melissa Hamonic

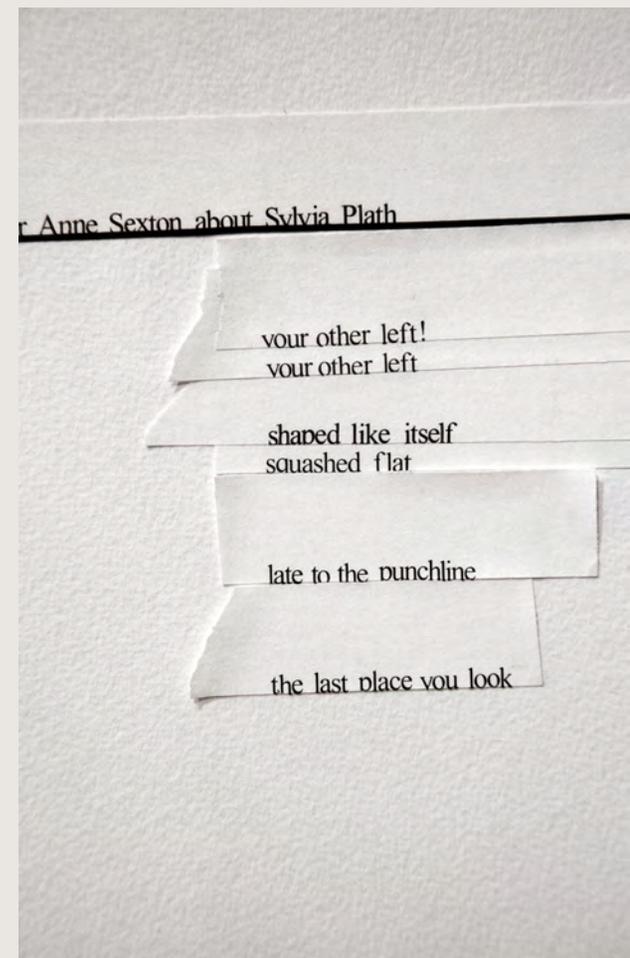
I am not sure I get it.

Melissa Hamonic's work hurts, at least a little. Using subtle visual gags and quasi-jokes, Hamonic engages the more minimally tragic aspects of humour, wherein that which hurts us makes us laugh, or at least squirm. In *Portable Hole*, the artist has created a stark composition reminiscent of Ad Reinhardt's endgame move—his "black" paintings. Here a spanse of black vinyl hangs a little slackly from the wall, not quite flush or flat, its angles not quite right, with a hole carved out of it. A very nice, very round hole. At its foot, slapped blankly on the floor, a black vinyl circle sits. We want to get it back into the comfy negative space on the wall, but it is definitely not going to fit. A mild optical illusion is suggested—could the wall piece be far, far away, the circle on the floor having launched itself in a tragic gesture? Or though they seem like they should go together, do we have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that this will never happen. This is the stick-on, black hole the Coyote attempts to use in his ceaseless efforts to entrap Roadrunner; the black hole that Roadrunner will never fall into, but that Coyote always will.

In further explorations of the more tragic and existential aspects of humour, Hamonic has made 'jokes' for and about contemporary American women authors. The structure of these supposed jokes involves the inversion of a joke formula, wherein it is flattened by the inclusion of the name of the trope employed, instead of a proper deployment of the trope itself. A meta joke, yes, but what is most painful/funny here is the way this double turn circulates around female authors. This is a deeply sad and subtle extension of the humour of the gesture. Hamonic has lifted the palimpsests of a poem Anne Sexton wrote for/about Sylvia Plath and her suicide, and reset them into this new form. She is thereby positioning herself amongst these tragic literary figures, rewriting as she is, their words, their lives. She is also making a fey attempt at levity in a rather sad situation—a gesture towards lightening the painful load of the situation alluded to.



Portable Hole, dimensions variable, vinyl, 2010



detail from *Joke I could not write for Anne Sexton about Sylvia Plath*, 12 x 16", dry transfer type, frame, 2010

Nadia Belerique

Nadia Belerique's work is doing something a little surprising, presenting as it does an engaging consideration of the mechanics of photography—an action that I think we could all be excused for thinking was already rather played out. A keen understanding of the scholarship surrounding, and history of both the distant and near past of photography is displayed in Belerique's works. In her photographic installations, the artist pays particular attention to the staging and methodology of lighting in the medium of photography, and the ways in which these formalities relate to the content of individual images.

It is Belerique's ability to elide slipping into the tiresome ease of irony or lax critique, while nonetheless harnessing materials related to a kitschy recent past, and reiterating no longer au courant colour palettes, staging qualities, and materials that creates such an engaging aesthetic proposition containing and delivering her investigations. In *Stage Lights (1 & 2)*, we see very basic black & white inkjet prints of outdated theatre lights, printed as mirror images of each other. Encased in self-aware aluminum frames, and sandwiched under a layer of glass that in one frame holds a red theatre gel, and in the other a blue, these works vibrate between photographic ease and being sculptural meta-objects.

Furthering the use of coloured plastics, in *Untitled (hidden tinsel)* a scrumpled clot of shredded gold foil has been humped into a far corner of the gallery. A glittering nest, its elevated situation converses with the idea of mounted light, while also indicating some sort of observatory capacity. As an element of installation, it feels as if it has consciousness, and is perhaps the control centre for what is going on below; a Janus whose face has exploded a thousand-fold into a gilded determinant of action. Could this be the literal punctum hovering above immanence? An asterisk asking us to consider ideas that bridge the documentary and the meta? A golden ternary blot.



Untitled (hidden tinsel), variable dimensions, gold tinsel, nails, 2010



Stage Lights (1 & 2), 33 x 38", inkjet print, gel, filtre, frame, glass, 2010

Tiziana La Melia

Tiziana La Melia's work stirs up exciting memories of early avant-garde and Modern practices that spanned across wide ranges of media—times when ideas being proposed as counterpoints to normative, bourgeois culture were expressed in theatre, dance, costume design for the same, as well as music, ceramics, furniture, painting or sculpture, and others, often by the same artist. Calling up such references, La Melia creates a multivalent proposition drawing from sources including historical theatre costume design, a character she has written into life named BIBS, theatre pieces she has written, performed as part of her installations, actors costumed in brightly coloured confabulations crafted from construction paper and other forms. The small sculptural works accompanying such installations maintain a sense of the prop—bright forms that are easy to read from afar, and which crumble a bit at their edges when you are near.

These elements are all part of an interrelated narrative that is itself an enquiry into the nature of personas expressed, and the expression of persona through or as painting, dramatic persona, or other embodiment. La Melia's sensitive aesthetic, sparse, seductive brushwork, often jewel-like palette, and deft ability with arranging a wide-range of interconnected elements draw us in to her complicated exploration, making us active spectators who perhaps become characters ourselves in her display.



Character Study of Bibs, varied dimensions, gouache on linen, oil on linen, plaster on burlap, 2011

DIAZ CONTEMPORARY

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Writing & Design: Katie Bethune-Leamen.