

Big statements and tiny provocations, in Governor General's Awards for visual arts at National Gallery

PETER SIMPSON April 9, 2015



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Último Suspiro*, or *Last Breath*, 2012, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.) At the National Gallery of Canada. (© Rafael Lozano-Hemmer/SODRAC, photo by Antimodular Research.)

Another year, another set of winners of the Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts, and in the annual exhibition that sense of time passing is eloquently marked by a brown paper bag.

The plain bag is in Montreal-based artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's wall-sized memento mori titled *Último Suspiro*, or Last Breath, which preserves a breath of air from Cuba's beloved singer Omara Portuondo.

Último Suspiro begins with a video of Portuondo exhaling, into the bag, "a sigh," as Lozano-Hemmer puts it during a preview of the exhibition on Wednesday. Next comes a sort of respirator, built in Lozano-Hemmer's studio, that bellows the sigh through a long, plastic tube that is hung in loose rings on the wall. At the end is the paper bag, which expands and contracts noisily as the singer's breath is pumped in and out, the motion and sound of the bag serving as the beat of life. A digital display on the respirator counts the breaths since the piece was created two years ago, and reads just over 100 million.

Lozano-Hemmer may be familiar in Ottawa for the installation he had last year in the lobby of the Morguard building on Elgin Street, which allowed passers-by to see themselves on a large video screen as their own eyes puffed trails of smoke. The artist is creating a new version of Last Breath, using a sigh from Canada's own beloved singer, Leonard Cohen. It'll be as if Cohen is speaking to us softly, from the Tower of Song.

In a video, Micah Lexier makes visual "puzzles and puns" with cardboard, books and other objects gathered during his travels. We see his hands move in and out of view to arrange and make patterns of the pieces of minutiae. I sat with Lexier and watched the video, and he explained how he decided to leave in his "mistakes" — such as

unintentionally having one image overlap another. The viewer wouldn't recognize anything as a mistake, but knowing the errors are there makes the video more human, accessible, and meaningful.



Red. 3011 Jackson. (Mortality), by Sandra Meigs at the National Gallery. (2013, acrylic on canvas; 183 x 762 cm. (© CARCC, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid)

Sandra Meigs' two large paintings include "Red. 2011 Jackson. (Mortality)," which is a response to her grieving the death of her husband from cancer in 2011. The five panels, more than seven metres in length, show the crawl space beneath Meigs' house in British Columbia, a choice that seems to almost claustrophobically allude to the intimacy of the subject matter. Yet the palette is not dark, as one might expect of such a location and so grave a subject, but is predominantly bright red, cast here as a "transformative" colour, and white, to show where the light seeps into a dark place, literally and figuratively.

Toronto-based Robert Houle's piece *Seven in Steel* brims with subtle references to Canada's art and social history. Steel panels are painted black and set low on the floor, to thwart the horizon that defines landscape painting. Along its lengths are seven small paintings that hint of landscapes, and which refer in number and subject matter to the Group of Seven. The landscapes are bracketed by visual references to indigenous imagery — a totem pole, or a hunter and game. One

landscape references the painting *Jack Pine*, by Tom Thomson, whose cabin Houle lived in while in residence at the McMichael Gallery of Canadian Art, where the work began. There are other allusions that I haven't mentioned here: there is much to see and discover in *Seven in Steel*.



Seven in Steel (1989, oil on steel and maple, 130.9 x 644 x 9.5 cm.) by Robert Houle, at the National Gallery, as part of the exhibition of 2015 winners of Governor General's Awards for visual arts. (Photo © NGC)

Winnipeg's Reva Stone has photographic prints from a prior large and interactive installation that was about "changing technologies and how they alter our mediated world." In the original installation she wrapped photographs of her skin and hair around 3D simulations of protein molecules, which in the video would react to the presence of viewers. The photographs show the surreal, vaguely human forms that she created floating in an dark and infinite space.

Rober Racine's corner of the exhibition includes 23 pages from his epic project *Mirror-Pages*. Over 14 years, the Montreal artist cut some 55,000

words from the Petit Robert dictionary and left only their definitions, etc, and then added his own annotations and other embellishments. The result is “an examination of identity through language, through a book that is a potent symbol of cultural identity,” the exhibition notes say. The sheer scale of the project made me want to look up “exhausting.”

Finally, Paul McClure’s provocative pieces of jewelry are based on tumours, illnesses and other troubling aspects of our bodies and health. “Jewelry is to be worn on the body, but my jewelry is also very much about the body,” says McClure, who adds that his work is “a little sinister.”

It’s not often that one sees fine jewelry that is politically assertive. McClure, who teaches in Toronto, created the brooch *Blastula* to represent, in silver and gold, the splitting of stem cells — a controversial resource for medical research that could split opinion in any conversation.

Also included in the exhibition are examples from other exhibitions that were curated by Quebec’s Louise Déry, who won this year’s award for outstanding contribution to the visual arts.



Blastula (2010, sterling silver, 18k gold, neodymium magnets, 4.5 x 4.5 x 2 cm), by Paul McClure. (Photo courtesy Galerie Noel Guycomarc'h,igital, photo by Digital By Design)