

How to Train a Dog — the 2010 Sobey Arts Awards

Prix artistique Sobey 2010 / Sobey Art Award 2010, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MACM) in conjunction with the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, October 8, 2010-January 4, 2011

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How to Train a Dog—the 2010 SOBEY ARTS AWARDS

John K. GRANDE

Billed as Canada's pre-eminent prize for a young Canadian artist, the Sobey Art Foundation's *Sobey Art Award* is awarded annually to an artist 39 years old or younger who has shown their work in a public or commercial art gallery in Canada in the past 18 months. As the 2010 Sobey Arts Awards catalogue introduction by Ray Cronin, Director and CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia states, the Sobey Award was created by the Sobey family to "spark public discussion about contemporary art." Each year's winner of the award receives \$50,000. For 2010 the long list consisted of 25 artists ... From that selection, works from the five finalists, Brendan Lee Satish Tang, Daniel Barrow, Brendan Fernandes, Patrick Bernatchez and the duo of Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby were on view at the MACM.

One of the real issues associated with the Sobey Art Award is not which artists are selected as finalists, but who is on the jury. For 2010, the jury members were all curators from established institutions, a sure fire

way to guarantee less risk taking and independent choice-making. (Jury members included Grant Arnold, Audain Curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery; Jen Budney, Associate Curator, Mendel Art Gallery; Philip Monk, Director, Art Gallery of York University; Lesley Johnstone, Curator, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; and David Diviney, Curator of Exhibitions at Art Gallery of Nova Scotia). The question then becomes where are the art critics, the art magazine editors, people involved with the arts who think independently rather than fashionistas and museo-mandarins. This year's Sobey Arts Awards jury tends to favour conceptually-biased, generic artworks that suit the curatorial and museological imperatives of our times. What ever happened to the issues of our times—sustainability, pollution, over-population, destruction of environments, recession... depression...? Asleep at the wheel, these artworks ignore the times we live in and declare nothing at all. Where is the experimental work? Creativity in our art schools has become a dogma and the resulting artwork worthy of a local crafts fair, not a public art museum or gallery... and tastes do change overtime but...! Today's artists are mostly university trained now, and somewhat too well trained, in Pavlovian reflexes to that old question Tolstoy asked, "What is Art?" Quirky, obscure, largely incomprehensible... this is the language of art these days. How can the public decode this brand of art, or is the artist's goal to mystify the sheep? Out of focus and lacking in clarity is the new tautology of

today's artspeak genre. Follow the right corridor, put your paw on the right lever, and you get an art biscuit, not a big cookie, but a tiny, symbolic, technically enhanced one. The university professors are the trainers and the artists are the dogs. And what tricks today's young artists have learnt! ... You should use a lot of materials, never offend anyone, remember the power of the elites, always be polite, always be obedient, be fearful and above all, integrate vague allusions to issues of gender and race. And if you have no idea what you want to make, you can always excavate, copy and recycle the more obscure aesthetics of the 1960s and 1970s. This gives you the gist of what is grist for the 21st century art mill. Is today's art genre very nutritious or edible, particularly when the "winners" are chosen by a fairly arid group of jury members? Probably not! Conservatism has crept into the same arts groups who once decried the arts establishment for not accepting their own aesthetics biases.

Born in Kenya, but of Indian ancestry, Brendan Fernandes' installation and video work is the easiest to access, and most readily understood of all the works in this display. Consisting of plastic deer, the kind found in hunter's stores all over North America, and with each deer wearing a white mask, Fernandes' *Neo-Primitivism II* (2007) plays beautifully on irony, and the very hybridity of identity in a society undergoing rapid influxes of peoples from all over. Fernandes reminds me of a much younger version of Shonibare whose headless 3-D sculptures of figures derived from Gainsborough's portraiture likewise reinvented the post-colonial wheel. The Masai spears, symbolic of tribal

culture, form rational lines on a wall. Silhouetted like an Ikea display, the spears are graphic, sharp and very contemporary. All about migration, and the ambiguity of those remembered or fabricated stories about homelands, countries of origin or the country we now live in, Fernandes' video-like visual display *Voo Doo You Doo Speak* (2010), with its mask graphics on wall-placed monitors, communicates clearly how similar we all are, ultimately, as a species, though the cues are geo—and bio-specific.

Another Canadian of hybrid ancestry, Brendan Lee Satish Tang was born in Ireland of Trinidadian parents. He now hails from Kamloops, British Columbia. Tang's amazing hybridized, sexually charged objects recall the great days of ancient Chinese and colonial porcelain and pottery. Tang integrates all this together in ingenious post-colonial, innovative ways. Oddly, his art forms share something in common with Shary Boyle's ceramic collages now on view at the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art in Toronto. *Manga Ormolu* merges Chinese Ming dynasty vessel forms with techno-Pop art forms, recalling the way the French in the 18th century gilded ormolu works, modifying them into curiosity pieces for aristocrats. Now the 21st century, artist Tang integrates the Manga stylistic of Japanese comic and picture books to subvert the 18th century elitist hybridity with a street-smart, very accessible Pop culture vernacular of our times.

Performance artist Daniel Barrow, (this year's Sobey winner) created an installation titled *Helen Keller in Sculpture Garden* (2008) that for all its object ablutions, low-tech awkwardness, and stretched metaphors is

Brendan Lee SATISH TANG, *Manga Ormolu Ver. 5.0-e*, 2009. West Coast and Yukon. Ceramic mixed media. 43.2x44.5 cm. Photo: courtesy MACM.



Brendan FERNANDES, *Natural Refuge*, 2004. Ontario. Ornamental grasses, fans, boxes, ceramic deer, paper. Photo: courtesy MACM.



alluring and could only be called maximal for the sheer volume of materials used in this far-ranging installation “about the angst of growing up, the beauty in the ugly and the rejects of society.” He could be called a “maximalist.” The opposite of what minimalism sought in the 1960s. Post-Millennial art seeks to use and abuse materials in grand scale and with an ever greater dependence on the latest techno-tools. While this is neither good nor bad, it reduces the artist’s ability to work freely, unobstructed by extraneous costs, as he or she jumps through the hoops and loopholes of gadgetry. Daniel Barrow accumulates object elements, some images are projected on the walls, others on mini screens, with projections based on childhood stories like Hans Christian Anderson’s *Little Mermaid*. It’s a child’s garden of derelict referencing in a digital age, oddly nostalgic in its weird dissonant juxtapositions... a Kleenex box with butterflies, vases with wilted flowers... For the volume and range of materials, Barrow’s art speaks of that unrelenting material deluge that fills the void of our spiritual emptiness these days. And you can change the image being projected manually by placing another piece of Perspex on the light box/table. These self-inspired narratives are difficult to interpret or decode, and out of focus as North American culture is these days. So there you go! God Bless!

Montreal’s Patrick Bernatchez has a heavy and heady “culture sensitive” approach to what he calls a “chronicle of a death foretold.” The



Patrick BERNATCHEZ, *Goldberg Experienced Ghosts Chorus, variation no 2*, 2010. Québec. Automated grand piano with integrated mechanism, Marshall amplifier, 5-watt mini amplifier, three aluminum blocks; score of the *Goldberg Variations*. Photo: courtesy MACM.

complexity of his approach mirrors the complexity of modern-day life. Bernatchez’s *Crysalides* (2006-2008), filmed on location at the Fashion Plaza where the artist now has a studio, was inspired by mould patterns from a found notebook. The videos deal with life, death, decay, entropy and the passage of time. Animal and vegetal elements intertwine in Bernatchez’s drawings. References to death, a universal eternal theme in art, can be found in five mirror paintings. *Goldberg Experienced Ghost Chorus, Variation no. 2* (2010) uses an automated grand piano, Marshall amp, 5-watt mini amplifier and three aluminum blocks to play elements from Glen Gould’s *Goldberg Variations*. There is also a film involving time travel and cryogenics. As with Barrow’s art, Bernatchez’s involves fragments, cues, elements that never quite hold together integrally. This, and the play on and with the time element, just as John Cage once did, and may be central to Bernatchez’s art. Heaven and hell all wrapped up in one artist’s imagination.

The Atlantic duo of Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby collaborate on video productions and the making of sculpture objects. Though difficult to follow, these installations quote aspects of the natural world. The video presentation is museological and correct and comic book-like,

even fashionable. The presentations are independent modules, set ups, with lenses and tiny boned creature assemblages, synthetic landscapes in miniature, a bat’s corpse encased therein and so on....

The selected Sobey Arts Award finalists works feel like art for art, but the pay off is not as good in a museum like the MACM. The display and presentation of the art seems to deactivate it from its original source and create a chasm between the artist’s original intention and the desired effect when on exhibition. The installation as art here looks too austere, too clean and contrived in its orchestrated and intentional messiness. Art is not really about museums, it’s about people, what we care

about, how contexts and experiences clash, collide, coalesce into something we can share—the artist’s vision. The medium is the message and the message is non-existent. Food for thought, n’est-ce pas? ←←

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←← Patrick BERNATCHEZ, *BW (Black Watch)*, 2010. Québec. Wristwatch (functioning prototype) with integrated winding mechanism, aluminum block, podium and Plexiglas cover, miniature microphone, amplifier and speakers. Photo: courtesy MACM.

Daniel BARROW, *Helen Keller in Sculpture Garden*, 2008. Prairies and The North. Mixed media. 20.3 x 30.5 cm. Photo: courtesy MACM.



Emily VEY DUKE & Cooper BATTERSBY, *Beauty Plus Pity*, 2009. Atlantic. Video still. Photo: courtesy MACM.