

Trevor Gould

Curtis Collins

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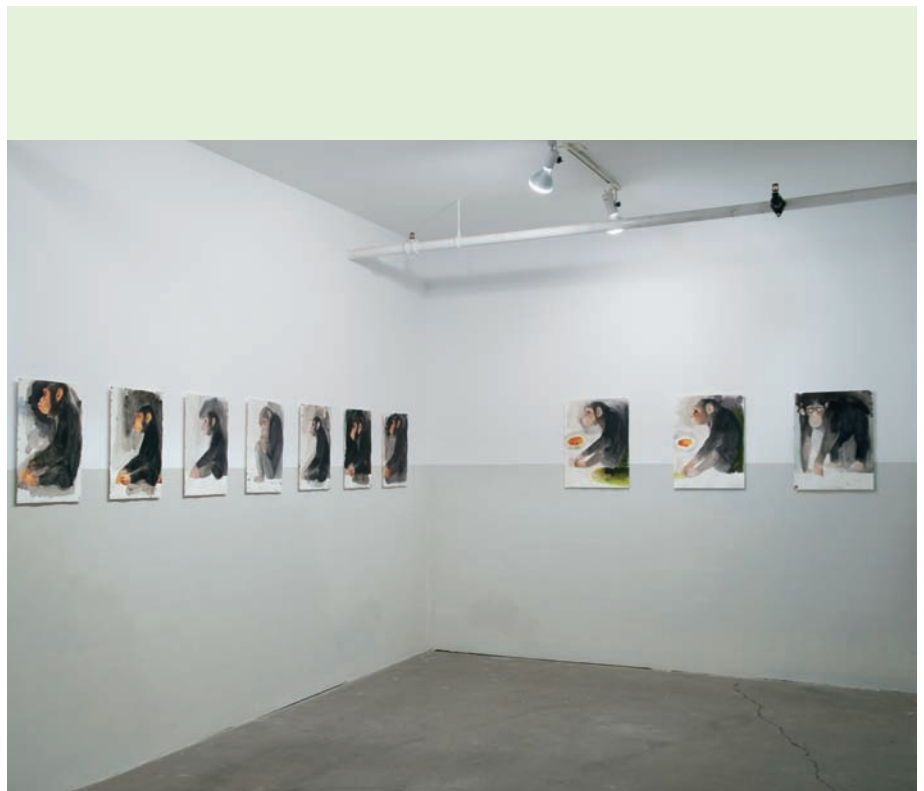
Over the past twenty years, Montreal artist Trevor Gould has developed a unique body of work that hinges upon symbolic treatments of contemporary situations. His art occupies an ever-shifting ground through the placement of animal and human figures in fictional settings that are loaded with timely aesthetic and social referents. The exhibition *Generations: Models and Drawings* at Galerie Lilian Rodriguez this past spring in Montreal's Belgo Building offered a unique selection of sculptures that encapsulated this artist's method of cultural play.



A miniature polar bear, made of plaster, paint, artificial fur and glass eyes, was situated on a white shelf along the central wall in the gallery's main room. Such a roughly rendered model was not meant to mimic the animal's appearance in an exacting way, rather it made an obvious rupture with the allusion of representation. The deliberate indirectness of Gould's approach became even more apparent when one took notice of the gaping hole in the bear's thorax. Furthermore, if the viewer crouched down and looked through this opening in the moulded carnivore he/she could see a full moon painted on the wall behind it. The inspiration behind such a peculiar sculpture came from a plaster tableau observed by the artist in a Frankfurt museum which featured a "Bear of the North" that had devoured a Turk and was about to consume an Austrian and a

Prussian Officer. Gould rerouted this allegory of the Russian Revolution to create an art object that obliquely referenced present day environmental conditions. From an aesthetic perspective the unnatural gap in the ursine figure made a postmodern turn to the work of the British sculptor Henry Moore. Gould quotes Moore, who physically punctured the body of his rendered beings in order to defy literal readings and thus transformed them into symbolic devices. The hole also served a secondary technical role for Gould during the exhibition's installation, when he shone a flashlight through the model bear and decided to paint the resulting reflection on the wall into a moon.

In recent times, the polar bear has become somewhat of a beacon for the dire consequences of climate change that has resulted from Capitalism's unabated industrialization. Rising air and water temperatures continue to dramatically reduce sea ice packs in the Arctic, which consequently reduce the ability of this predator to hunt seals and travel during mating season. Hence, the pierced body of Gould's bear makes an alternate symbolic association with the growing holes in the ozone-sphere created by carbon dioxide emissions from vehicles and factories that continue to advance global warming. This inference is confirmed by the work's title: *Midnight over the 21st Century*, a gloomy characterization of humankind's impending future and the polar bear's threatened present. The other model polar bear, located on the southernmost wall of Galerie Lilian Rodriguez's main room, lay prostrate on a white shelf with sections of torn blue and white cardboard jammed between its hind legs. According to Gould, the aesthetic effort here is to break "the formal aspect" of this sculpture as pure representation. Its title: "?," furthers the reflexive potential of such an art object for viewers as does the possibility to read the jagged cardboard bits as pieces of destroyed sky or diminished ice. The latent environmental caution of Gould's ursine models was completed by a cold bleakness in the room via the grey full moon set off against stark white shelves and walls. Such a subtle melding of objects and space seemed to propose an impending eternal



winter or earthly desolation brought about by human folly.

The sense of wholeness Gould's bear pairing created at Galerie Lilian Rodriguez was interrupted by a third sculpture situated on the main room's northernmost wall. Two male figures rendered in plaster and painted brown provided a blatant contrast to the scale, texture, subject and colour of the Arctic animals. The artist purposely shattered the viewer's sense of aesthetic and narrative completion in a manner that echoed the distorted ursine bodies. Standing back to back on a white shelf these odd chocolate-like miniature men were entitled *It feels like history*. In his combination of a young man and an old man here Gould claims these characters as: "symptoms of history... and the reconstruction of the past." The S-curves created by a careful positioning of their limbs also recalled one of Western art's most noted sculptures, the *Laocoön Group*. Such a tacit art historical quote from Ancient Greece added yet another postmodern layer to Gould's exhibition. The lost Greek sculpture and its subsequent Roman copy featured a father (Laocoön) and his two sons being strangled by sea serpents at the command of Apollo for their role in exposing the ruse of the Trojan horse. Gould's two men thus evoke a contemporary intertwining of fact and fiction as well as history and myth, presenting viewers with further points of access to the work. His reference to the *Laocoön Group* at a formal level also made sense on an emotional plane, for the pain of

strangulation experienced by the father and his sons parallels an unending worldwide stifling of flora and fauna wrought by over two centuries of Capitalist expansionism and its reckless child, Globalism.

Perhaps the most pressing issue Trevor Gould stresses in his construction of a 21st century allegorical space for the *Generations: Models and Drawings* exhibition is the difference between humankind's choice to conquer the earth or inhabit the planet. His punctured and prostrate bears seemed to suggest the excruciating consequences of the former as Western society prolongs its environmental misdirection. However, the social value of Gould's art is never so literal or closed and his effort to position such work within an equally important aesthetic context always remains at the foreground. Such a tension is not unlike that of the male figurines who are forever connected in an act of opposing each other, which may be a poignant cultural play on old ideologies versus the new. ←

Trevor Gould, *Generations: Models and Drawings*
Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, Montreal
March 21 – May 9, 2009

Curtis COLLINS is the new Director of the Art Gallery of Algoma in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. He also serves as a consultant for Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP Montreal and has guided this corporate finance law firm in building a unique collection of contemporary Canadian art. Collins holds a Ph.D. from the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University and his Curator and Director postings include the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of the South Okanagan.

Trevor GOULD,
Midnight over the 21st Century, 2009. Photo: Paul Litherland.

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Trevor GOULD, "?",
2009. Photo: Paul Litherland.