

Allyson Mitchell *Ladies Sasquatch*

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Allyson MITCHELL: Ladies Sasquatch

Gil McELROY

As a child, I entirely missed that period when we seem to think that monsters lurk beneath our bed or in our closet, and require an adult to reassure us that the coast is indeed clear before we're able to sleep. I don't know why that was the case. Maybe it was the monsters of reality that kept such ir-real things at bay. I guess I had other things to worry about.

Toronto-based artist Allyson Mitchell's latest work, a sculptural installation entitled *Ladies Sasquatch*, comprising an exhibition organized by the McMaster Museum of Art that has just completed a cross-Canada tour, posits a situational ir-reality loosely resembling a kind of aesthetic leakage into our grown-up reality of something like the scary monsters that lurked beneath our beds and in our closets.

Mitchell's installation comprises six of them — lady sasquatches, that

is — that she has theatrically arranged in the gallery setting, in a rough circle that is focused on a fake campfire burning brightly in the middle of the space. And they're enormous things — the lady sasquatches, that is — each a good three metres in height and each positioned in a uniquely individual pose.

They've all got names that run the gamut from the descriptive (Silverback) to the ever-so-slightly suggestive that seems pulled from a 1960s *Playboy* idea of sexuality (Tawny and Bunny) to the maybe slightly exotic (Oxana) and most definitely dated (Maxy and Midge).

And they're all made of fur. Not the real stuff, but the synthetic stuff generically referred to as "fun fur." They're furry from head to toe with nary a single patch of unfurred flesh to be seen. And they're well-toothed as well. Each of these sasquatches is posed open-mouthed, consequently displaying long, ferocious-looking canines. These females would seem to be meat-eaters, to be sure — nothing remotely vegetarian is suggested by their fierce dental appendages.

Turns out that Mitchell has rooted around in the world of taxidermy, and from it, brought out some of the artificial eyes, snouts, claws, and teeth that are typically used in mounting and stuffing species of real animals for those who inhabit that strange sub-culture.

But taxidermy is an integral part of the world of the hunting trophy, of the prize, of the kill, in which the biggest, the heaviest, the one with the most points on its antlers is stuffed and mounted so as to show others our hunting prowess. Of this (predominantly male) culture, Mitchell's work is definitely not a part. Rather, her aesthetic is what she terms "Deep Lez," part of "a strategic return to the histories of radical and lesbian feminisms." It's about as far from the goals and intentions of taxidermy and the hunting trophy as you can get.

Rooted in such an aesthetic, what we are given is a situational encounter with a group of sculptural



female sasquatch figures gathered together in the dim and dramatic lighting of the gallery around a faux campfire, arranged as if caught in the midst of responding to the presence of one another. All face toward the fire, their backs against the pseudo darkness outside the pool of central light. Well, not just their backs — one, bent over so that her hands rest on a ground that is made up of hooked rugs, presents herself in a pose powerfully denotative of sexual availability. This is Oxana. The scarlet red furry cheeks of her ass are provocatively thrust out. Her head is turned to one side, her long red hair cascades down the other. Her mouth is open, her teeth bared. Her eyes, looking up, are bright.

Tawny strands erect, leaning forward, her weight on one leg, as if looming into or over the campfire. Her arms are stretched up high, paws slightly curled. Her mouth too is open, teeth bared, but there is no threat in the eyes of this furry brown sasquatch with an inflamed red vulva at one end and improbable beehive hairdo at the other. The menace that might at first glance be read into the bodily gesture of her upraised arms

Allyson MITCHELL, *Ladies Sasquatch*, 2005-2009. Details. Photo: courtesy of McMaster Museum of Art.





drains away on further examination. There's tension here, but of some other kind.

Bunny, her fur imprinted with a loud floral pattern and with ass cheeks of brocade, stands admiring the back of one of her enormous paws while daintily holding the other out, away from her body; Silverback stands confidently before the fire, one leg stylishly set before the other; the truly enormous Maxi, all streaked hair, broad linebacker shoulders, and arms—one of which bears a textile tattoo of two doves sitting on an olive branch—long enough that her fingers brush the ground, stands mountainous and impassive; and the squatting Midge gestures with her raised left arm while in her right, she holds a tiny red feathered creature.

There are lots of such smaller-scale things—these tiny creatures resembling squirrels and birds and other indeterminate things, I mean—that populate the installation. Mitchell collectively calls them “Familiars,” and they’re everywhere to be found: the aforesaid one being held in Midge’s hand, one relaxing across one of Maxi’s giant paws, one sitting on Maxi’s shoulders, one resting atop the crack of Oxana’s scarlet ass, and still others stretched

out across the carpets in various spots of the installational ground, paying absolutely no attention to the goings on of their bigger kin gathered around the campfire. Collectively, they all have a vital use value: to drain away any residual tension in the work that might meaningfully be construed as having anything at all to do with aggression, hostility and antagonism generated between the lady sasquatches. In short, they’re idyllic creatures, their utter lack of offensive/defensive equipment like claws and canines and their much smaller size in relation to the six major figures are seemingly demon-

strative—and, I would argue, intentionally so—of something akin to the biblical notion of the lion laying down with the lamb.

Essentially, that’s the sum of the parts, here. The whole of *Ladies Sasquatch* is, of course, greater than a tally of the individual bits and pieces of which it is comprised. While Allyson Mitchell may very well be guided by a Deep Lez aesthetic, her work is, in fact, bigger and more encompassing, meaningfully touching upon issues far afield of it. The peaceableness, the idealization of relationships, and the overall sense of utopianism so overtly

evident in *Ladies Sasquatch* is certainly antithetical to something like Tennyson’s 19th century notion of “Nature, red in tooth and claw,” and definitively at odds with the workings of a natural world guided only by the mechanism of natural selection. While perhaps rooted in Deep Lez, Mitchell’s utopianism is an ideal that transcends borders and narrowness of group identity; I mean, who *wouldn’t* want the world to be one in which everyone just gets along, where the lion indeed can lay down with the lamb? But such idealism reeks of a simplistic, almost cartoonish approach to the profound complexities of the world, and *Ladies Sasquatch* is perilously close to tumbling over into such silliness. My initial analogy to monsters under the bed could be misleading. Maybe *Ladies Sasquatch* is closer to the teddy bears’ picnic.

Whatever the fitting analogy, in the end Mitchell’s show is salvaged by its better things, by its nuances and subtleties—like how it ends up addressing our problematic relationships with the natural world, for instance, albeit in an almost offhand manner. Or how it comments upon our equally problematic relationships with the body. In short, *Ladies Sasquatch* talks about culture and it talks about it intelligently, and with compassion and humour. To get there, you might have to scour the ground for a marked trail, but like the song says, if you go out in the woods today, you’re sure of a big surprise. ←

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Allyson MITCHELL, *Ladies Sasquatch*, 2005-2009. Detail. Photo: courtesy of McMaster Museum of Art.

