

Le Devoir - February 8th, 2020

Maclean Cans Plastic

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Though our plastic civilisation may not have entered its final phase yet, some are already devoting themselves to preserving its artefacts. Montreal artist Maclean is, for one. Using both humour and derision, however, he decided to collect, sort, and skillfully assemble remnants of the plastic industry. Is this resilience, or mockery? Salve, or sword? Possibly a little of both: the artworks grouped under the title *Arts plastiques* (Plastic arts) boldly brandish this lovely ambivalence. Here, the artist delivers a lucid yet poetic observation on our era. Sombre, but also full of light.

The *Arts plastiques* exhibit, Maclean's most recent contribution to the Bellemare et Lambert gallery, among many since 2005, offers a provoking new look at the artist's unmistakable signature style. This show might be his most playful yet, but not without Maclean's unique take on the transformation of manufactured objects. Until now, the man behind the repurposed "Arrêt" street signs and "A R T" signposts produced work evoking getaways, road trips, or other such outdoorsy pursuits. His new work speaks of hushed interior spaces, and of the reality of sedentary studio work. Having thus far been "landscape" painter, of sorts, Maclean has always seemed a great admirer of the natural world, expressing this through a subversion of road signage or through his canvas compositions. This time, his environmentalist message speaks louder than ever.

Accumulate rather than throw away

Maclean has been accumulating plastic in one form or another (discs, tags, bags) for the last twenty years; small bits and pieces as well as large, intact chunks. Rather than throwing away these objects or using them in the way they were made to be used, the artist has collected them to serve his creative ends. Some were quite literally conserved: his works *Les conserves*, *Colonne* and *Pyramid* (from *The Grand Scheme of Things*) are made up of accumulated pots containing elements from his plastic object collection.

This matter transformed (in a processing plant) and reinterpreted (in the artist's studio), like thousands of tiny "ready-mades", doesn't stray too far from Maclean's previous signature pieces. Sorting by colour is also one of the artist's most recognizable strategy. What takes the viewer

aback, in this particular piece, is the sheer abundance of objects and their spectacular presence. Maclean's poetry has always been subdued. *Colonne*, a ceiling-skimming contraption, is so huge and wobbly that it seems a whisper would suffice to knock it down.

This abundance successfully conveys the true nature of our consumption-based society, itself quite unsound and undoubtedly on the brink of collapse. These immense structures, seemingly so fragile, aptly illustrate the problematic warehousing of our own waste, to which we are now confronted. When environmentalist sentiment finds its way in artistic productions, most often through sculpture or installation, it often results in spectacular amalgams of repurposed objects. Maclean's approach differs through its archeological stance; his "encapsulated" artworks being true artefacts, as mentioned above.

In his *Pain quotidien* (Daily bread) series (2005 – 2019), the artist takes this reflection a step further. The piece consists of twelve panels, representing the twelve months of a calendar year, of this year to be exact. In other words, the artwork is a 2020 calendar. A plastic dating tag, as found on most sliced bread bags, stands in for each day of the year. The work speaks of a creative process made up of time, patience, and planning. Each tag bears a date ("best before"). Obsessively, the artist has managed to collect the 366 tags required to represent a leap-year, even the elusive "FEB 29". The repurposing is multilayered and affects matter, transforms the meaning of a date, breathes in life where an end once stood. Every calendar is condemned to irrelevance, but this one, being a work of art, can only gain in value.

Maclean is at once playful, yet has both feet firmly planted on the ground. The exhibit's very title reveals as much. Other works reinforce this statement, like the trompe l'oeil stacks of dollar bills or the play on words of the show's only painting, an acrylic on canvas piece that reads in bright orange "While supplies last"... Could we ever imagine a future without plastic?