

Still life looks like spent form in UQAM exhibition

HENRY LEHMANN
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Still lifes are traditionally meant as private moments for meditation on the relationship between self and time passing. But the works in a current show about still life and its roots rumble into view like items on a supermarket conveyor-belt.

Titled *Vanités: Regards sur la Nature Morte Contemporaine*, this lumpy cavalcade now on view at the Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal is an ambitious effort to check out the present condition of an artform that – in its pure sense – may have passed its expiry date.

To judge by the show, curated by artist Mona Hakim and including work by 17 Quebec artists, still life – at least for now – has replaced intimacy with bombast. And the melancholic sense that all things are perishable, has itself perished, like decaying fruit. Indeed, this exhibit of multi-media, multi-dimensional creations seems more an occasion to bury still life rather than to praise it.

Certainly Paryse Martin's acrylic relief titled *Les Glaces* locks still life into a deep freeze – in the form of a large bluish oval within a thick, kitschy frame. Thus ensconced in a kind of cryogenic limbo, the compacted remains await a better world, where art isn't just another word for nothing left to say.

Jean-Marie Martin's industrial-strength wall-relief, titled *Domestic Landscape*, turns architecture inside-out, liberating that unsung sanctum of self-gratification, the kitchen. Of course, this is the room dedicated to the preparation of meals, perhaps the one true remaining form of still life. But Martin's take on the "counterculture" has little to do with the sense that all things ultimately pass. The sole hint of transience in this work – industrial-strength Cézanne – is the drain of the stainless steel sink at its centre.

On the other hand, Michel Leclair, a protégé of the late popster Pierre Ayot, whisks us far from the raw realm of *Draino* to the land of grace and polish. What we get is fancy trompe l'oeil, a life-size hall table that is part cardboard photograph.

The amazing lack of seams and the crispness of design will appeal to the most stringent of house-keepers, but somehow questions about life and art get lost in the sheen.

Jean-Jules Soucy's invincible, hi-cal tidal wave of faux-pastries, covering a vast table, threatens to inundate the whole gallery – and the whole concept of still life. Ironically, the one saving grace of this work – at least in terms of implied idea – is its sheer artificiality. Suggested is the probability that true bliss doesn't live by cake alone, but needs layers of self-deception.

Monique Regimbald-Zeiber's monumental installation, one of the more interesting works in the show, simulates the descent of the still-life genre into oblivion. Fixed to the gallery wall is a tiny orange fragment, a blossom left over from older still lifes already consigned to the compost heap. But separated from us by a wide checkerboard floor of painted panels, this "fleur de mal" seems desperately beyond reach, a figment of memory.

Not so with Edmund Alley's numbing canvas *Slow Dance*, a graphic demonstration of how more is less. Nothing could be stiller than the police line-up of standard still-life props depicted in this too-slick painting.

It's much harder to situate Peter Krausz's almost too beautiful odes to memory on the emotional color-spectrum. No doubt the sickly orange-yellow overcast of the sky in parts of *Paysage et Mémoire: Tolède* does not signify pure contentment. This is the landscape of loss. But the lovingly painted hills in the background do hint at ecstasy.

Dominique Morel's menacing aluminum and latex pods have a more than passing likeness to ordinance and, we imagine, may well explode. One unlikely set of cones, titled *Fruit et Noyau I*, is an ominous cross between plant-life and airplane fuselage. Yet, though unfit for the dinner table – and too bulky even to fit in Joseph Brancino's colossal ceramic bowl nearby – these neo-symbolist forms have the powerful presence of latent life.

However, when it comes to allusion, Serge Toussignant's grand photo-triptych *Nature Morte aux Sphères* steals the light, at least in this show. Tou-

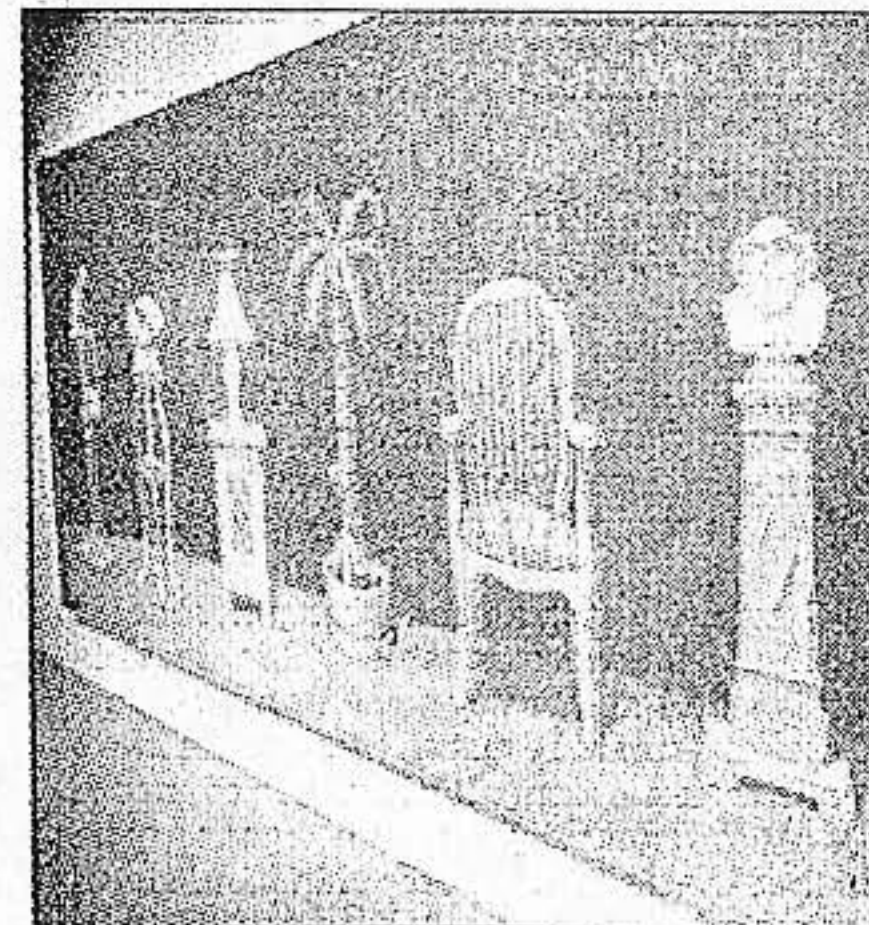
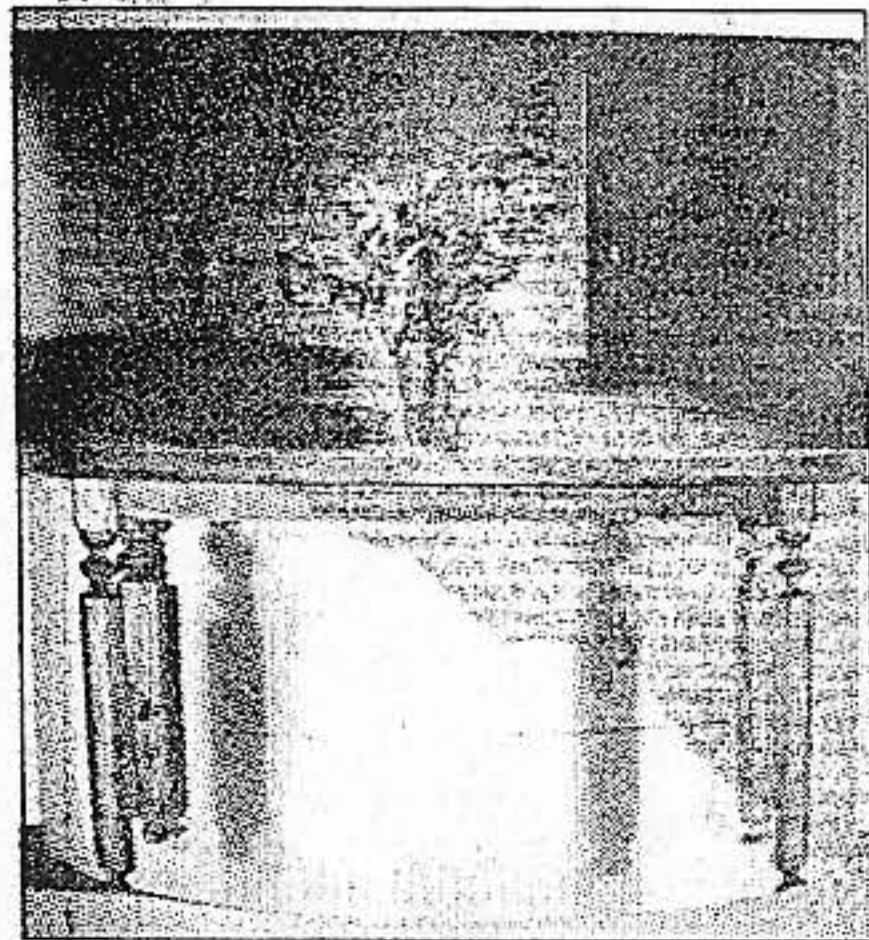
ssignant has long been interested in visual effect, which in his deft hands transcends mere optical decoration and aspires to archetype and myth. *Nature Morte* ransacks the closets of fashion for bits and pieces – a tinted glass sphere, some 1950s kidney shapes, a nondescript table. These allusions to allusions seem suspended in the timeless blue aspic of the id.

Michèle Assal's acrylic titled *Présent Imparfait* also walks the line, this one between genuine passion and cheap thrills. One of the more noteworthy pieces on view, this image, with a lowly ashtray at its aching heart, almost reeks of loneliness – of dreams going up in smoke. In fact, the work can be viewed as mock-serious. But it also can be seen as a simple statement of hard fact – that today pure love – or pure anything – is a heady mix of delusion and consumer hype.

Also among the stand-outs in this big exhibit are the delicately inflected black-and-white photographs by Ginette Bouchard. One work titled *Floris Umbra No. VIII* focuses on a kind of dried plant form, perhaps a deteriorating corsage cast off at love's end – of vanity gone to rot. And this plaintive cortex of crinkly shapes also refers to the possibility that the human psyche can become the ultimate nature morte.

In fact, the entire exhibit itself can be imagined as a vast still life for which more is never quite enough. Perhaps one reason the show never quite amounts to a coherent statement is the tendency to keep too much material. If classic still life is about the vanity of things, this one is about the angst of never getting enough, which may result in another type of emotional emptiness. Though tightly packed as any 17th-century Dutch still life, the exhibit seems oddly arid at the core – too many artists and too little true affinity on a thematic level. Still, such innovative attempts as this show to convey an idea are to be applauded.

■ *Vanités: Regards sur la Nature Morte Contemporaine* is on until March 1 at the Galerie UQAM, 1400 Berri St. (Room J-R120, Pavillon Judith-Jasmin). Information: 987-8421.



DAVE SIDAWAY, GAZETTE

Faux-Choix, a trompe l'oeil image by Michel Leclair, and *Slow Danse*, by Edmund Alley.