



Jenine Marsh, *utopia* (detail), 2023; concrete, wood, Styrofoam, steel, plastic vessels, plastic model figurines, pennies, newspaper clippings, hardware, 4 m x 4 m x 36 cm; installation view from "no order", 2023, Joe Project, Montreal
PHOTO: ALBERTO PORRO; COURTESY OF JOE PROJECT AND COOPER COLE GALLERY

think about the inviolable power of desire, and how it can exist even when its subject seems impossible to attain. Some writers have argued, for example, that Jenine Marsh's art implies a certain hope for a different, better world, but I don't know if that's explicitly true. What it does contain is the necessary spirit of a desire free from the expectation of fulfilment.

Marred coins, a Marsh staple, figure in the show as hole-laden connectors between rubber-encased flowers in *utopian content* (*What's the damage?*) (2023). In earlier exhibitions, coins would have been crushed by high-speed trains that Marsh placed on the tracks herself—an activity that has its origins in her childhood. Once youthfully curious and defiant, it could now symbolize a desire against the stranglehold of late capitalism's many grips. While mutilating these coins may seem futile in the larger scheme of things, their destruction is a way of keeping the energy of that desire in a state of activity, rather than a passivity that is not unlike ceding. For Marsh, the symbolic gesture is also an artistic one, serving as a reminder of the generative and sometimes insurgent potential of art-making. With the coins as a foundational reference, I considered the metaphorical bend on the trapped flowers, another Marsh staple. In these flowers is a refusal to relinquish the desire for capitalism's end, despite it being a force that feels as vast and almighty as nature. In the exhibition text for Marsh's fourth Cooper Cole solo show, Angel Callander observes that the artist has

an "affinity for the dialectic of building and destroying," and it's this dance that is the most notable quality within Marsh's oeuvre. In *utopia* (2023), the show's centrepiece, a waterless concrete fountain is filled with plastic model figurines, crushed pennies, and embalmed flowers. Surrounded by other works like *People's Voice* and the *Communist Trading Card* series (both 2023), which contain poetic cut vintage socialist newspapers, this link between the figurines and proletariat makes me think of the utility of desirous destruction. This build-destroy interchange of Marsh's oeuvre, alongside McCormick's cover-deface one, is the conceptual thread that ties their works together: their art is in the midst of itself. They exhibit an impulse for the ongoing, which is to say, something different.

"Utopia" literally translates to "no place." While this could be fodder for a cynic, a different perspective realizes that "no place" means never having anywhere to arrive—and that the liminal zone, where identity, beliefs, concepts, values, even the world, are all malleable, is the only utopic state. In an interview with the Art Gallery of Ontario, Marsh has noted that her intervention is inspired by science-fiction books where capitalism is "given an outside or a beside, where its definitions can be untied or rewoven." This utopic impulse, irrespective of its fulfilment, is the condition for desire. Without finitude or finality, things can still be possible.

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"Theatres of the Intimate" — Evergon

Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec City, 20 October 2022 to 23 April 2023

by Jamie Ross

The sprawling career retrospective of Montreal photographer Evergon demands that I open not with the clever notes I had originally drafted on lush '80s figuration and devastating elegiac gestures, but with the visceral reaction served up by my trembling body. Standing before the towering three-metre-tall photographs I've seen reproductions of for years, I crumpled under their scale, like the edges of the Polaroids curling delicately in their beautiful frames. I wept.

In the late '80s, the Polaroid company installed two of its largest cameras around the United States, and commissioned artists to work with the limited-edition models. With a car full of performers from Canada, the artist would load sets and friends into the life-size camera to create technically intricate compositions. Evergon's references are as much personal as they are drawn from the history of painting. These instant dye prints, typically 240 by 110 cm, invoke the phantasmagoric

romantic style seen in Derek Jarman's baroque cinematic tableaux like *Edward II* (1991) or *Caravaggio* (1986). In *Night Watch I*, from the series *Ramboys: A Bookless Novel. Works by Egon Brut and Celluloso Evergonni* (1990), a pair of punks in steel-toe boots and what might be jockstraps and horn helmets intertwine arms and legs beside the privacy of a blind, which casts a series of shadows on the plywood set. A twist of crimson fabric invokes the baroque at a towering height of 281.5 by 112 cm. The rich blacks and a warm sepia hue compliment the deep erotic charge created by the models.

But I don't believe this exhibition is asking for a cool, cerebral criticism of Evergon's technique. This work wants to be swallowed, digested, and shat back out onto damp ground. Across Evergon's practice, the documentary impulse exists in a powerful tension against the fantastical. The Polaroid behemoths that reduce the viewer to the scale of the devotee in a Greek temple is reversed in the *Manscapes: Truck Stops, Lovers Lanes and Cruising Grounds by Egon Brut* (1994–1998) series. The artist collected upwards of 7,000 of these photographs, though only ten are exhibited in a way that highlights the documentary nature of these series, drawing the viewer to a five-by-two grid of cruising-ground photographs. With cryptic graffiti, the images document cruising sites visited by the artist in his travels. Later iterations of the series introduce close-ups of bodies, and some nicknames even appear in the titles. In *Elf, Mount Royal, Montreal, QC* (1998), the subject reveals his penis to the photographer's Polaroid camera, loaded with 655 film. Winter sunlight casts a warren of shadows against the man's skin and the snow. In the final iteration of the three landscape series that all use similar titles (*Manscapes*, 2001), the photos take on

a deep chromatic cast, once again returning to innuendo from the burst of flagrant figuration.

In 1969, when the partial decriminalization of gay sex was enacted with an amendment to the Criminal Code, Evergon was finishing his undergraduate studies in art at Mount Allison, in small-town Sackville, NB. With the exception of an introductory room of ephemera from the City of Ottawa Archives on gay activism, the exhibition does not contextualize Evergon's practice in a larger history of gay liberation in Canada. When installed in a grid in this exhibition, they brilliantly insinuate the erotics of the forensic. This context is important, as the cruising sites of the *Manscapes* series are precisely those that were excluded from the partial decriminalization of anal sex in Canada in 1969. Pierre Elliot Trudeau's government's Criminal Code amendment decriminalized some forms of non-procreative sex. However, anal sex that occurred anywhere other than inside private property or with more than one other person remained illegal. While exceptions were added to the existing Criminal Code in 1969, the law was not repealed. Aspects of anal sex remained criminal acts in Canada until a bill repealed section 159 of the Criminal Code in 2019.

Evergon also refutes Bertolt Brecht in his apocryphal claim that one cannot write poetry about trees when the forest is full of policemen. The documentation of these sites of delight *in flagrante* captures not the rallying cries of activists, but rather a different, perhaps less legible form of resistance in the bucolic poetics of the forest, steeped in the same formal consideration of Western art-historical references as the rest of his body of work. The artist draws upon the literature of cruising, explicitly citing William Burroughs and

Evergon, *Night Watch I*, from the series *Ramboys: A Bookless Novel. Works by Egon Brut and Celluloso Evergonni*, 1990, Polaroid, 265 cm x 112 cm
PHOTO: MNBAQ, DENIS LEGENDRE © EVERGON



Jean Genet, celebrating an outlaw erotic demimonde. The implication of the rampant police violence that defines late-20th century gay life remains just outside Evergon's frame, but the work cannot be understood without it. And the many long-deserted spaces that Evergon photographs would be nearly illegible to a straight audience as sites of sexual sanctuary were it not for their titles. These images are empty of human subjects, without the cruisers but also without the police who still watch us. In *We Do It for the Stories We Can Tell, St. Catherines, Ontario, Canada*, from the series *Manscapes: Truck Stops, Lovers Lanes and Cruising Grounds par Egon Brut* (1995), the viewer is invited to gaze down a pipe as it crosses a river. Full summer foliage shades the riverbank. The title is borrowed from the same phrase graffitied on the industrial gate interrupting the perilous passage over the course of water. This theatre is a crime scene, a sacred grove.

Despite the heavy charge to these sites, the artist's wit is a sly through line drawn throughout the exhibition. Evergon's twinkle is droll in its sincerity. In the exhibition's highly entertaining audio guide, Evergon, with an audible grin in his voice, admits that the erotically charged room, divided from the rest of the exhibition with a silk curtain saloon door, "may not shock you." He means the silly wordplay. The self-portrait triptych *Homage to Michelangelo and David or the Tuba Lesson* (2005) consists of a print from a large-format negative. In the photograph, the artist is blowing a young man. This image, photographed in the artist's more recent well-lit studio-portrait aesthetic, is hung adjacent to the sumptuous analogue

chiaroscuro cock portraits from the cruising trails. While their materiality is so different, they share in their humour. Nothing about these exquisite photographs is meant to shock.

I turn to writer Jarrett Earnest's powerful claim in the introduction to his guest-edited issue of *PUBLIC Journal*, on the theme of queer history: "I've come to see this kind of work, in the absence of historical validation and institutional support, as, above all, devotional. Devotion here means a complete commitment to the people and stories we love." The adjacent hall is devoted to the artist's mother. Nearing the end of her life, the artist's mother Margaret became a central collaborator and subject of Evergon's photographs. In the delightfully camp portrait *Mama Bear* (2006), Margaret poses with the hint of a smile, nude from the waist up while wearing the legs of a bear costume. The love and creative complicity these two share is as much an elegy of devotion as the long list of friends, lovers, brothers, and collaborators lost to AIDS installed on the exhibition's final wall.

The unabashed queerness of this conceptual seam, the adjacency of these two pillars of devotion of so many queer lives, is electric. That a sincere devotion to the charge of libido, stripped of the trappings of iconoclastic rebellion, and a loving attention toward Margaret's aging maternal body might touch one another, through saloon doors, is one of the most powerful offerings of this show.

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Tassili — Lydia Ourahmane
Mercer Union, Toronto, 28 January to 15 April 2023
 by Jasmine Yangqingqing Yu

Neighbouring Libya and Niger, Tassili n'Ajjer, translated by the exhibition wall text as the "once fertile plateau of rivers," is now a cultural heritage site with rock formations featuring numerous prehistoric cave drawings. Depicting Tassili n'Ajjer's landscape and prehistoric art, Lydia Ourahmane's 47-minute film *Tassili* (2022) follows the homecoming of a rock that the artist picked up from the site on a scouting trip prior to filming. As the film plays on a loop in Mercer Union's gallery space turned viewing room, animated 3-D reconstructions of this rock accompany a musical exquisite corpse composed by musicians Nicolás Jaar, felicita, Yawning Portal, and Segá Bodega.

As a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site, Tassili's monumentality invokes the persistence of ancient objects and cultural otherness, even as these descriptors are themselves fickle and incredibly precarious. The cosmopolitanism of monument management organizations like UNESCO has given rise to the hyper-monumental, where memories specific to a culture are othered, mystified, pre-emptively fossilized and made into a simulation of themselves, under the assumption of universality. Aware of Tassili's losing race against time as cave drawings wither and water sources deplete, precarity and urgency underlay the making of the film. Due to political tensions with neighbouring countries, to gain access to the site, Ourahmane and a team of international collaborators had to obtain visas and follow government-approved routes, relying on local Tuareg guides.

Ourahmane's representation of Tassili is in conversation with the long history of photographic documentation of the site, where the forceful penetration of a camera's gaze is imbricated with France's archeological pilfering of Tassili. Monumentality's key feature is its commemoration of a specific community. The global visibility that comes with being declared a World Heritage site, and Tassili's history of archeological treatment, reduces the site and the people who live there as exotic, static, and dead. The hyper-monumental cannot conceive of Tassili as a living entity that actively co-produces meaning with its viewers—meanings that are subject to ongoing re-evaluation.

In Ourahmane's animation, the rock wanders in an other(ed)world in which language edges on ecstatic incomprehension. There is a moment in the film where the camera lens inches forward in between dark, chilling crevices of rock formations, refusing a viewer's gaze and invoking an elusive and uninviting spiritual guardianship against being seen. In this way, the film resists comprehension mediated by language, as the ecological perturbs the syntactical. Edward Said, in his essay "Reflections on Exile" (1984), ponders, "We take home and language for granted; they become nature, and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy." In *Tassili*, the risk of withering cave drawings raises perplexing questions about life-governing rules (like that of the hyper-monument) sedimented through language, and the contradictory act of preservation.

Lurking just beyond the frame, the terror of military drones instigated by the hyper-legalization and