

Beautiful Illusions: Recent Works by Melanie Colosimo and Charley Young

January 10 - March 8, 2015

curated by Ingrid Jenkner

Beautiful Illusions is composed of works in graphic media by two young Nova Scotian artists, Melanie Colosimo and Charley Young. Colosimo's principal practice is drawing; Young favours drawing and indexical techniques, such as casting and monoprinting. For both, materials and process are key determinants of the meanings of their works. Themes of memory, transitory states and trace imagery pervade their art.

The exhibition's title evokes the realism with which each artist renders such objects as the façade of a wooden building, a range of mountain peaks, or the intricate patterning of twisted wires in a chain-link fence. Virtuoso mimicry is not the sole effect of such image-making, however. "Failures" such as smudges and anomalies of scale disrupt the illusions. They serve to remind viewers of the usually compliant but sometimes faltering hands and memories upon which the illusions depend.

Charley Young's impression of a Gold-Rush-era boiler shop in Dawson City (*False Front-False Frontier* 2012) was achieved by means of an indexical procedure: cotton fabric was laid over the façade and ink applied with brayers to register the details of the wooden planks and framing. The result is a life-sized monoprint—alternatively a frottage or rubbing. Young's monoprint is indexical because the image and the building it signifies are causally connected and both existed at one time within the same physical space. From a printmaking perspective, the Dawson City boiler shop served as a plate from which Young and her assistants took an impression or print.

Young has taken similar impressions from the multi-storey facades of historic Halifax buildings that were scheduled for demolition. Normally her scrimms were left *in situ* for a short time, the equivalent of being exhibited, until the building was torn down, and then not seen again. *False Front* is the exception; at only fourteen and one-half feet high, it is short enough to be exhibited indoors in a gallery setting. At MSVU Art Gallery it was suspended from the ceiling with its back fully visible, theatrically underscoring the tenuousness of visual illusions.

The technique of frottage was notably practiced by the Surrealist artist Max Ernst in the early twentieth century, as a spur to composition. In 1992 Gerald Ferguson, the influential Conceptual painter who taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, adapted frottage by rolling paint into an unstretched canvas laid over an eighteenth-century cast-iron fireback panel. In these and subsequent frottage paintings, Ferguson allowed the accidental traces of process, such as smears, to remain visible. Young's engagement with printmaking principles in non-print media echoes Ferguson's aim, using similar methods, of suggesting a diffuse interconnectedness between physical reality and representation in painting.

Young's dimensional *Rocky Mountains Diptych* is mounted on the wall with visible wooden braces. The left and right edges of the diptych project forward. In between, the two panels curve inward to meet against the wall at the centre. The left panel is a pencil drawing on frosted Mylar of a range of

snow-covered peaks. Its style is minutely naturalistic—except for occasional smudges caused by the artist’s hand brushing the surface. The right panel is black carbon paper carrying the faint, mirror-reversed impression of the drawing on the left. Both panels disclose the smudgy “ghosts” of broken lithographic stones which were used as backing during the drawing process. In this diptych Young, an experienced renovator of buildings, employs scaffolding as a framing device. Sturdily constructed in raw maple, the heft of each “frame” accentuates the comparative fragility of the drawing or print it supports.

Melanie Colosimo’s drawings of scaffolds and chain-link fences signify differently. They suggest the temporary structures erected at construction sites, an ephemeral architecture designed to disappear. As preliminary studies for her *Structures* drawings Colosimo built miniature scaffolds with wooden grilling skewers. Once she understood how each structural element served to support the others, she drew imaginary scaffolds in pencil over small pencil drawings of vernacular buildings derived from Google Earth photographs. The drawings of the buildings (chosen because they had been demolished in Colosimo’s native region, the Miramichi, New Brunswick, and elsewhere in rural Nova Scotia) are visibly erased and redrawn, suffering a loss of detail analogous to the fading of recollection. The superimposition of the scaffold motif, equally delicate but better defined than the underlying drawings of buildings, foregrounds the process of reconstruction one might attempt in memory. For Colosimo the principle of mutually supportive elements exemplified by scaffolding also alludes to the constituents of community. The the open ends of the drawn scaffold elements and the strange, spatially improbable gaps in the composition reaffirm the design as a work of the imagination, not a literal rendering of a three-dimensional structure.

Colosimo draws in pencil on large, stiff sheets of Stonehenge paper. Her faint gray marks occupy only a small portion of the sheet, making her work difficult to document photographically and demanding intimate engagement of its viewers. The requirement to view the drawings in close-up proximity heightens the viewer’s awareness of the artist’s process.

In the twenty-four-foot scroll drawing *Threshold* (2013-2014) Colosimo allowed the paper to roll up to the left and right of her hand as she drew the links of a chain-link fence. The process forced her to estimate the size of the preceding links as she continued to draw from left to right. The zones in the drawing that stray from rote description—the zones in which Colosimo’s memory or concentration momentarily failed—are precisely those most freighted with the dramas of struggle and recovery. The scroll is exhibited fully extended, but owing to the necessity of viewing it close-to, the viewer must retrace one by one the anomalies of scale and pattern that conspired to defeat the illusion.

Threshold was realized as a version of the Exquisite Corpse or *cadavre exquis* game of chance favoured by French Surrealists, which involves the collective assembly of a drawing. Each collaborator adds to the sequence by being allowed to see only the end of what the previous person contributed, the earlier parts of the drawing having been folded out of view.

Subsequent drawings by Colosimo incorporate cut-outs and the paper’s tendency to curl to introduce complications into figure-ground relationships, similar to the cut-out paper drawings and tarpaulins of the Canadian artist Ed Pien. *Chain Link Fence* 2014, in white chalk on black, partially cut-out paper has

life-sized links and measures seven by nine feet. Near the right edge of the drawing the spaces enclosed by some of the links are cut out, causing the stiff paper to curl in a fashion similar to the rolled form of an actual chain-link fence. Tacked to the wall with one end freely curling, *Chain Link Fence* offers a startling partial illusion.

The most recent work in the series, *8 sheets of Stonehenge cut like a chain-link fence* 2014, was drawn in pencil and fully cut out. Tacked to the wall in a dimensional mass, the web-like structure interacts with its shadows to produce a ghostly effect of endless reduplication.

The rigorously conceived, strangely poetic works in *Beautiful Illusions* exemplify the conceptually oriented mark-making practiced by artists associated with the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design since the 1970s. In these works, the primacy of process secures a mutual adjustment of expressive form and content. Expressiveness arises in an unconventional way, not from authorial gesture but paradoxically, from the interaction of materials, process and subject matter.

Ingrid Jenkner

Curator