

VISUAL ART

Annie Hémond Hotte

by Edwin Janzen



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If the election of Donald Trump accomplished anything, it is the return of human fallibility to the centre of political thought. Of themselves, Trumpist politics represent little that's truly new—the true failure of America surely spans a half-century—yet this man's rise has finally pulled back the curtain on a shabby public theatre: politics as slapstick, representation as swindle, leadership as farce. The house is sold out, of course.

Art lovers wondering where to turn would have enjoyed “Panic Myth,” a suite of paintings by Annie Hémond Hotte, on exhibition this past spring at Montreal's Centre Clark. Based in New York City,

Hémond Hotte confronts the failure of ideologies. Technology, the god we all worship unquestioningly, has brought us a surveillance society and global warming. Capitalism, as always, rewards the rich, but no longer promises, at least not convincingly, to “lift all boats.” Clintonism and Trumpism, meanwhile, claim to redress these deficits by force of personality alone.

Hémond Hotte's paintings examine this linkage between failed ideology and the deformed political personality. Her characters—monstrous yet pathetic, in conflict with one another and themselves—function more as dysfunctional gods or heroes than as ordinary people. In *The Monumentals*, for instance, two massive figures, male and female (Trump and Clinton?), with Trump-like haircuts, occupy most of the frame in an hilarious “American gothic” scenario. In the vein of Juan Gris, the two are stuck, flattened against the landscape they occupy.

Shaman Selfie depicts two female shamans, the arm of one around the other. One appears to have a prosthetic eye. In pathetic mimicry of traditional shamans who could disassemble and reassemble their bodies or exchange body parts with animals, these two partake in today's most popular act of pointless self-construction.

Dominating the exhibition is a very large painting, *The War of the Gods*, which shows several god-characters in conflict amidst luxuriant jungle foliage. One monstrous Janus-faced god reaches for another's conspicuous yellow breasts. Another, quite despondent, reaches down to recover his lost hot dog, but ends up contemplating his own little weenie. The characters are simultaneously naked and clothed, with a seamless transition between

topless chest and sleeved arms, often with prominent sexual organs (and ubiquitous curly pubic hair). The floor is strewn with diverse objects: two human heads, several vases, a Hand of Fatima and paper money bills.

The Lunatic Astronaut features a spaceman figure with a pinky-orange head, bulbous, telescoping eyes and gritted teeth between protruding lips. His body is covered with symbols recalling Matisse's cut-outs. Earth is far away, a small green sphere at top right. In the foreground sits a potted tropical plant, its vase covered in hieroglyphs from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. The astronaut seems preoccupied with his lost soft drink, which floats away in space.

The world of these characters is an encoded one, punctuated by symbolic objects: money bills, Egyptian hieroglyphs, various allusions to the history of art. Though they could scarcely be more different in terms of colour, lighting or painting style, there is something of the Dutch history painting in Hémond Hotte's work. Though situated in time, her works do not convey movement. Time is frozen, and the eye may ramble freely across the image, assessing each character's condition and reading the symbols positioned about it.

The painted god-figures possess a monstrous affect that recalls the qualities of comic-book characters. Not superheroes, whose physical forms remain always idealized, but rather “ordinary” characters—for example, Buddy Bradley in Peter Bagge's 1990s series “Hate”—whose faces and bodies are sometimes contorted by intense emotion, if just for a moment, into twisted, grimacing monsters. Hémond Hotte's painted characters function similarly, using the act of bestial

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“Picasso in Canada” and “Picasso: Man and Beast”

by Alison Gillmor

self-deformation to fully become themselves. In a way, this really is a superpower; few real people—aside, maybe, from George Carlin when he is talking about conservatives—can achieve it!

Since Trump’s win, fear has permeated the intellectual economy, and sales of the dystopian classics (Orwell, Huxley) have spiked. So, too, presumably, has the appeal of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, or of non-fiction “cautionary literature” such as Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums* or Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Yet, for all its defeated gods and failed ideologies, Hémond Hotte’s painted world is something of a different order from these dark futures.

Indeed, but for the air conditioning, passing time in this exhibition could be how meandering through a greenhouse on some peculiarly fecund, abundant, alien jungle planet might feel. A significant departure from her earlier, much darker works, the artist’s colours are so intensely saturated—yellows, greens, oranges—they are easily taken for neons. Even the gallery’s white walls quickly come alive with complementary colours.

Like our own world, this one is strange but not monstrous—even though ideologies may fail, and gods and humans lose confidence. It may remind us that if there’s anything we need to work on, it’s getting ourselves past the fact that the future is promised to no one. ■

“Panic Myth” was exhibited at Centre Clark, Montreal, from March 9 to April 15, 2017.

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Two related shows at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG) raise a tricky 21st-century question: How do we look at Picasso now?

Citing his seemingly unassailable influence, versatility and creative output, the conventional approach casts Picasso as the defining artist of the 20th century. The notion of genius floats around his name, a heavy designation that wraps the man and his work in a modernist mystique. More recently, revisionist histories have focused on Picasso’s life, revealing him as a bully, a narcissist, a wealthy cheapskate, a rapacious lover and neglectful father, and reinforcing another kind of myth—the artist as creator and destroyer.

Attempting to balance these two opposing approaches, this ambitious project combines the WAG-generated “Picasso in Canada” with “Man and Beast,” a rare full exhibition of Picasso’s “Vollard Suite” of prints organized by the National Gallery of Canada. While clearly relying on Picasso’s big-name branding and towering reputation to bring in the crowds, the work is displayed and contextualized in a way that draws out the complex connections between Picasso’s life and art, and foregrounds his tortured (and often torturing) relationships with women.

The entrance to the exhibition is flanked by a blown-up Arnold Newman photograph of the artist in his studio, which plays up his barrel-chested posture and pugnacious gaze. Picasso is one of the few men who can look combative while wearing carpet slippers.

Blockbuster shows are often big, brash and obvious, and a blockbuster Picasso show would seem likely to magnify these qualities. This potential pitfall is tempered here



by the fact that most of the works on display are prints, possibly the least blockbuster-ish of the visual media. All of the “Man and Beast” works and many of the “Picasso in Canada” pieces are etchings, including aquatint and drypoint variants, most of them small-scale and monochromatic, the skills involved in their production prodigious but pretty subtle to non-practitioners.

“Picasso in Canada,” as its title suggests, features 35 Picasso works from Canadian collections, some privately held but most from public institutions, in particular the Art Gallery of Ontario, the National Gallery and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. The selected pieces range from 1905 to the 1960s, and the accompanying didactic material gives a basic introduction to Picasso’s chronology, his artistic achievements often paralleled by the complicated, overlapping history of the women in his life.

1. Pablo Picasso, *Femme assise*, 1927, oil on canvas, 130.8 x 97.8 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario, purchased, with assistance from the Women’s Committee and anonymous contributions, 1954. © Picasso Estate / SODRAC (2016). Images courtesy of Winnipeg Art Gallery.

2. *Minotaur Kneeling over Sleeping Girl*, 1933, drypoint on Montval laid paper, 33.5 x 44.5 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Picasso Estate / SODRAC (2015).