

## VISUAL ART

## Les Ramsay

by Edwin Janzen

the rendering, the tape looks like an accident, an unpacking oversight, something meant to be removed. If the trompe l'oeil were more ostentatious, it would still be impressive, though the trick would be done in a wink. But it could go unnoticed. Even a discerning viewer might just think it a punk move—to leave tape on your painting. The conceit is so unassumingly integrated into the “junk” aesthetic of the assemblage.

Look in any alleyway, at a boarded-up strip mall, the DIY body-fill on a rusted fender—you’ll find myriad evocations of modernist abstraction and minimalist courtship of industry anywhere, and just as beautiful, treated with casual and rude functionality to the point of discard. Matt Schust has a hobo’s eye for this, a schooled eye for dumpster diver’s treasure—whether found in low-grade urban decay or the exalted vaults of art history. He has a gift for rendering precariousness with balance, neglect with attentive precision, impetuousness with breath-halting patience. In the end, a painting might be something you only hang on a wall to hide a crack in the plaster. Still, Schust tells us, it’s worth the time, care and finesse to get it exactly right. ■

“*Matt Schust: New Build*” was exhibited at *Renann Isaacs Contemporary Art, Guelph, ON, from March 2 to 31, 2019.*

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“The sea is everything,” wrote Jules Verne in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. “It covers seven tenths of the terrestrial globe.... It is an immense desert, where man is never lonely, for he feels life stirring on all sides.” As such, no human vision of the sea can be finite; each connects and merges with those of others elsewhere, sometimes quite distant in space and time.

Visitors to Les Ramsay’s recent exhibition “The Adventures of Atrevida Reef” will have encountered such a dynamic. As the media release states, “*Atrevida* is Spanish for ‘bold’ and references significant landmarks near the artist’s rural studio/home” on BC’s Sunshine Coast. Atrevida Reef is indeed an underwater feature off that coast a short way north of Tla’amin First Nation. Yet, the exhibition’s visual language traverses a broader circuit, pointing at themes and motifs from oceanic environments and seafaring cultures around the globe, even across millennia. The ocean divides cultures from one another, true—but to a soul with a boat, it is a superhighway around the world and has been since antiquity.

The painting for which the show is named presents an environment of blues and yellows populated by figures seemingly cut out from a peach-hued overlay. Above a great blue fish is a human figure paddling a canoe or kayak; below the fish, a lounging figure and an umbrella, the sea and sky visible through their outlines. In these figures and the work’s seemingly tropical colours we may understand a peaceful holiday idyll—yet, the peach and yellow hues also hint at pollution and toxicity. The visitor’s thoughts turn easily toward the Kinder Morgan pipeline project



and widespread fears of another *Exxon Valdez*, or to the plastic debris suspended throughout the world’s oceans. Indeed, in *Plutonium Baby* we encounter a navy blue mountain reminiscent of a crumpled plastic bag, against lighter blue waters, touched by wind-like gestures in radioactive yellow and brown. The bold hues of the three giant fruits in *Lamp, the Metamorphosis of Seasonal Fruit*—darker green, lighter green and yellow—speak of natural ripening or rot, or an even more repulsive toxicity.

The tropical seaside “paradise” has a long, problematic history, and, as such, the history of the compromised paradise is equally old. If the sea is a superhighway, then the island paradise is open, fragile, vulnerable to exploitation; you need only to think of the nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll, or the island nations today threatened by rising seas. Perhaps the Atlantis myth embodies an early iteration in this dystopic lineage.

1. Les Ramsay, installation view, “The Adventures of Atrevida Reef,” 2019, Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran, Montreal, Quebec. All photos: Paul Litherland. All images courtesy Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran, Montreal, Quebec.

2. *Proto-Sinaitic*, 2018, acrylic and modelling paste on canvas, 183 x 137 centimetres.



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Comprised mostly of paintings, the exhibition does include other media. *Stuffs and Things*, for example, is a framed needlepoint depicting boats, umbrellas, ladders, fruits, vines and fish in various greens and sunset hues. *Too Cool for School* is a small sculptural work featuring aquatic creatures (fish, eels, whales) carved of wood and brightly painted. The creatures are cartoonish—long, simple in form, more like artful gestures or strokes than representations of real animals. The latter work serves as an anchor of sorts for the artist’s sardonic yet resolutely playful sense of humour, which suffuses the show.

One work in acrylics and oils, *9-Patch River Showdown*, is an exercise in mimicry, painted to resemble a quilt composed of smaller pieces depicting vase shapes, diamonds and intricate patterns suggesting digital media. The mimesis operates on multiple levels and evinces a distinctly

colonial feel, conveying the sense both of European heraldic devices and of fabrics printed with bright floral designs often associated with tropical island cultures. Similar designs appear throughout the show in works such as *The Grateful Glove*, *For Once and Floral* and others.

These works—and the exhibition as a whole—recall French painter Paul Gauguin, who in 1891 travelled to Tahiti intending to live “as a native.” Of course, the Tahiti he encountered had been a French protectorate for the better part of a century and many aspects of its traditional society, from religion to arts and crafts, had been disrupted. The traditional elements in his paintings—notably the brightly coloured fabrics worn by his Tahitian women subjects—were not traditional at all and were in fact the yield of French industry.

The good-time vacation culture that today defines resorts around the globe is surely the inheritor of Gauguin’s illusions, the continuation of this cultural-industrial imposition by Euro-American powers. For the year-round residents of these places, however, the reality is usually less idyllic as they contend with weak, colonized local economies and the resultant poverty, political disenfranchisement and pollution. The tension between these poles plays throughout Ramsay’s work.

Two very large pieces, *Crystal Shatter* and *Softly Saving the Oceans*, might be a pair. Each appears to be comprised of earlier works cut up and stitched together to form a single canvas, which Ramsay has daubed with an array of coloured blotches (various blues in *Shatter*, and yellow, peach, mango and maroon in *Softly*). Further, each bears two or three vase shapes higher up, with diagonal lines reminiscent

of the rows of ships’ oars depicted upon certain ancient Athenian urns.

This link to the ancient past is pressed further in *Proto-Sinaitic*, its title referencing a Middle Bronze Age script found in the Sinai Peninsula, a distant ancestor of modern European alphabets. Yet, what is depicted here is not Proto-Sinaitic but English: the alphabet from A to Z represented in blended yellows, oranges and browns against a light blue background, lending the impression of a shining golden inscription suspended against sea or sky, and recalling, perhaps, our tendency as a species to inscribe our meanings, aspirations and fallacies upon natural forms wherever we find them—animal bodies, geographical features or even entire ecosystems.

In Ramsay’s painting *Towel*, a naked, genderless human figure (just a line drawn in pink on a burnt-sienna canvas) holds above its head a towel—literally the word “TOWEL” inscribed in red. A holiday-maker fleeing heatstroke or sunburn, perhaps, or maybe the marker of a deeper panic—a fear that, as we strive harder in the midst of our globalized economy and play harder on the world’s beaches, our words of determination to counteract and thus protect ourselves from an imminent environmental maelstrom of our own making will prove in the end to be no protection at all, nothing but words. ■

*“The Adventures of Atrévida Reef” was exhibited at Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran, Montreal, from February 27 to March 30, 2019.*

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