

FRAGMENTATION & DESIRE



An Interview
with Dominique Rey
by Sandra Fraser

There is a solitary quality to Dominique Rey's work: whether an isolated sense of looking inward or the exposure of laying oneself bare. I am intrigued by her ongoing explorations of subjectivity that never seem autobiographical. Perhaps it is how she approaches the construction of self that engages me, where the (nearly always) female figure pushes herself to the margins as a mode of fear, loss and searching. Yet, there is also an undercurrent of the forbidden, with its attendant boundaries of permission and agency, and the most gratifying—defiance and perseverance.

Using the notion of the 'other,' Rey holds up a mirror. Without invoking crises or drama, Rey's work addresses the mask—an ambiguous mask that may be more authentic than what it conceals. While some works, such as *Les Filles de la Croix*, 2005-15, and *Selling Venus*, 2003, operate within a documentary tradition, works such as *Erlking*, 2011, and *Self as Other*, 2015, explore an internal dialogue probing psychological complexity. What connects them is the tension of being outside one's own desires, a palpable absence of certainty and longing for connection—both from within and without.

Dominique Rey is a Winnipeg artist, who is working primarily in photography and video, as well as sculpture and performance, often combining aesthetic sensibilities from each. She has a MFA in Photography from Bard College (NY) and one in New Media from Transart Institute (Berlin). Rey's work has been exhibited across Canada, the United States and Europe, and can be found in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada and Winnipeg Art Gallery, among others. We originally connected about three years ago in Banff. Her work continues to fill me with delight; it makes me uncomfortable, and it seduces me.

Sandra Fraser: Winnipeg is such a great city for artists. You did your BFA at the University of Manitoba, where you are now an assistant professor. Then you went on to study in the USA and in Berlin. Would you talk a bit about how these various situations shaped your formation as an artist?

Dominique Rey: As an undergraduate student in the late 1990s, the School of Art and Winnipeg in general felt much more isolated than they do now. This was the era when The Royal Art Lodge first emerged, and they played a big role in bringing the Winnipeg art scene to the attention of the larger art world. But at the time, most artists of my generation were really in our own bubble, and that made it possible for unique practices to take root and not be as heavily influenced by contemporary trends and the market. The geographic isolation and long winters, rather than diminish the flow of artistic production, seem to have an alchemical effect on creativity that is supported by a generous and critically engaged art community.

Part of the balance of staying in Winnipeg is also leaving! I did graduate studies in both New York and Berlin because I was hungry to see what else was going on. These experiences and travel in general continue to inspire my work. This past summer I was awarded the Canada Council residency at La Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris to research the catacombs and the covered passages. Not surprisingly, I fell in love with Paris. As a Franco-Manitoban who has always lived in a minority context, it was incredible to spend four months in this French capital. Residencies tend to be charged experiences that promote rapid growth, and in this specific case I predict it will impact my practice for a number of years to come.

Although your work takes different forms, there is a distinctive thread of spectacle, from the paintings of circus sideshows in *Pilgrims*, 2010, the informal video and photographic testimonies of exotic dancers in *Selling Venus/Vénus au miroir*, to the photographs of performative personae in *Erlking*, and even the three-dimensional collage pieces of the nunneries in *Les Filles de la Croix*. I feel that you approach certain themes or ideas as a research project, setting out to uncover something, which then results in a provocation. When I say that, I mean that it seems that you are attempting to get under people's skin but not with a particular outcome in mind.

In the same way that I am endlessly fascinated by the human psyche, our drives and desires, I hope that in some small measure the work I create activates a similar curiosity in the viewer, one that invites an acknowledgement of the vast continuum of potentialities that exist within each of us.

The new work I am showing at Richard Rhodes is the most deconstructed iteration of this ongoing research. Rather than build towards something solid, the collages, even in moments of coalescence, point towards fragmentary states. A feeling of suspension pervades this work. Unlike previous projects, here the body is only alluded to, and when it does, it is out of bounds, merging, morphing, perpetually reshaping itself. There is a logic and beauty to this fractured space but also a great sense of uncertainty.

Tell me what you are working on for your exhibition at Richard Rhodes Dupont Projects.

The exhibition "Pieces of Me Pieces of You" on view this March, includes collages and a sculpture inspired by one of the collages. This form of translating collages into sculptures is something I started to experiment with in *Les Filles de la Croix*, where photographs I had taken in the Sisters' convents in Canada and abroad became the source material for a series of collages. Working

— DOMINIQUE REY

this way gave me a kind of freedom to distil and re-contextualize this extensive archive, specifically images of the physical spaces where the sisters live, interweaving themes of stillness, precarity, and temporality. The fragments of furniture, objects, and rooms become evidence of the detritus of life and the traces we leave behind, making visible a rapidly disappearing community that typically goes unseen.

The process of transforming my photographic archives first into collages and then into sculptures has become a generative working method. The final large-scale works read as sculptures, but more importantly I consider them to be photographic objects. The play of two dimensions within a three-dimensional space is an important facet of this work and forms the basis of my formal investigations. I want to push the boundary between photography and sculpture, reinvigorating ideas of surface, depth, and mirroring.

There are many artists working with collage. What about this technique is generative for you?

The act of collaging is for me both intuitive and direct. It allows me to bypass a lot of my own filters and patterns, and when successful, bring about a visual experience that feels fresh. All of my collages are derived from my photographic archives, either previous projects or photographs taken expressly for use in collages. My choice to reactivate this personal language becomes an added layer of inscription in the collages. Another way of saying this is that through their alteration, past experiences become an essential element of a present state.

What you are doing is really fascinating, with the photographic elements merging with this acrylic armature. The effect is a bit like a mirage—something that has form but is difficult to grasp. What is it that is motivating this exploration between the play between two and three dimensions?

I mount the photographs to 3/8" acrylic, which is not inconsequential in weight and depth, but the reflective nature of this substrate creates a paradoxical effect where from a certain angle it has a strong material presence; but as one moves around the work, it oscillates, and seemingly disappears. I like this quality as it continually challenges the space between two dimensions and three, and points ultimately to the photograph as an illusion, a construct of one's imagination.

The translation of the collages into sculptures has necessitated a lot of experimentation and mistakes. In the collages, the figure ground relationship is very important, and this is something I am interested in conveying sculpturally. One way I try to achieve this is by doubling the image, using white acrylic, and etched clear acrylic as an inverse of the photographic elements. The ways in which the positive and negative space takes form in the sculptures is as related to photography as it is to sculpture, and one of the reasons why I describe them as photographic objects.

Another aspect of this translation from two to three dimensions is in the confrontation with gravity and mass. Among other things, the collages allow me to play openly with notions of disequilibrium, while the construction of the acrylic forms, and their relationship to the armatures that hold them up, deal with gravity. There is a duality in that I would like the sculptures to feel tenuous, even weightless, but at its core each element must be negotiated precisely with its mass and centre of gravity in order to capture the intuitive gestures of the original collages.

When I look at some of the work that came out of your research at the nunneries, it strikes me how you invert what I think I'm expecting. I imagine the quiet and nearly empty spaces of the nunnery. Lots of space—and that is apparent in some of the photographs and the video. Yet with the collage on acrylic, I get more of a sense of movement and animation of space. It does not seem legible as anything. And then I noticed one of the photographs of the *Small Chapel*, 2006, where lamps and plants are arranged in an otherwise spare room in a way that does not make sense. But it is the sculptural quality of those lamps and plants that I associate with the narrow forms in the installation.

Inversion has always been important to my practice, particularly when I am working with female subjects that suffer from prejudice or stereotype. It's always a risk, but my goal is to subvert whatever preconceived notions the viewer might have by offering a complex portrait, the unveiling of which requires an active engagement. I want to establish an authentic conversation with the subject, but more importantly I intend the work to reveal the interconnection that exists between us.

I agree that the photographs are insufficient on their own as far as revealing the deeper layers of the work. In the process of recording these



Page 56: *Winter Green*, 2011, colour photograph, 61 x 91 cm, image credit: Dominique Rey; **Left: *Untitled #2 (Photo Assemblage)*** from *Under the Rose Arch* exhibition at the MacLaren Art Centre, 2015, c-prints mounted to acrylic supports, image credit: Andre Beneteau; **Opposite: *Selling Venus / Venus au miroir***, 2005, video, 17:10, image credit: Dominique Rey.

images, I imagined them from the onset as research, rather than stand-alone works. I felt that I needed to physically transform this archive in order to arrive at something unexpected. I gravitated towards the simplicity of the objects and spaces for creating photographic assemblages as a way of reflecting on my own experiences with these women over the course of several years. They are poetic interpretations of those relationships and are visual markers of an act of witnessing their disappearance. As the work was produced over a 10-year period, with other projects overlapping, it afforded me ample time for looking carefully. The spaces I photographed were documented without any intervention on my part. However, their constructed quality is a reflection of the aggregate moments I was seeking as I slowly made my way through their homes. *Small Chapel* is one of those moments

By taking these objects out of their original contexts, both in the collages, and then in the sculptures, they take on a certain agency as they become juxtaposed and merged with other heterogeneous parts, becoming a strange taxonomy of this world, and offering alternative and open-ended narratives of this community of women.

I wonder then, do you see what you are doing with this work as having a spiritual dimension? There is something about their sculptural form that suggests a crystallization of spiritual thought or mystery, or perhaps memory. The sculpture takes the collage beyond the rationalization of narrative towards meditative abstraction.

My research over the course of this project led me to St. Teresa de Avila's seminal work *The Interior Castle*, 1588, where she describes the soul's search for God as a journey from one dwelling place to another, each advance bringing one closer to a union with God. While there was the physical absence of the sisters in many of the convents, the spaces and the objects that filled them were imbued with their presence. In my work, the coalescing of these objects into sculptural assemblages are attempts at uncovering through abstract means the mystery of their faith, their sacrifice, and their devotion.

***Erlking*, on the other hand, is ecstatic and excessive. Your body is the armature for the additive sculpture of panty hose stuffed with balloons and other materials. It reminds me of Rodin, contorting the bodies of his models and vigorously pinching the clay. The video *Tundrrunning*, 2011, in particular, reveals a sense of humour, drawing attention to compulsive, unproductive rituals. Was it the absurdity of the forms that emerged that triggered something playful, or did you have in mind already when you drew upon this dark character, *Erlking*?**

The image of pinching clay as an analogy to the *Erlking* performance is compelling. By pushing my body to its limits, I was attempting to create a gap for the other, within, to emerge in all of its anomalies and grotesqueries. This was expressed visually through the push and pull of the inner and outer skins of my personas as I engaged in absurd and at times daunting physical actions.

Using an array of props and materials, many of which distended the body through bulbous protuberances, the personas evoked in *Erlking* were unfettered by the weight of the familiar and free to inhabit, albeit temporarily, ambiguous subjectivities. However, to willfully engage and manifest the unconscious is a futile endeavour, and this is where humour comes into play. This quality is most evident in the video *Tundrrunning* set on a frozen Manitoban lake where a figure clad in fluorescent green leotard with a bulging and flapping headpiece runs in endless circles to the blaring beat of Ukrainian folk-punk. The rupture the video provides plays a pivotal role in bringing levity to the otherwise tense and even forbidding photographs.

I like how you embody the *Erlking* in that series of photographs by becoming in effect a number of apparitions—mysterious forms that defy description, at once alluring and, in their strangeness, also frightening.

According to German folklore, the *Erlking* is a malevolent creature in the depths of the wilderness that calls the traveller to her fate. In my retelling of this story, the personas I embody vacillate between these two forces, as an attempt to bring the self and other within arm's reach. Julia Kristeva writes: "To worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends on how familiar we are with our ghosts." In her book *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva examines the outsider within society, as well as a deep sense of being we all have of being strangers to ourselves. I believe the stranger we perceive in the world is a reflection of the depths within the self that are beyond our reach.

One of the works that I am really drawn to is the video *The Self as Other*. I am entranced by the poetry of their bodies, their labour and commitment. I see a connection between this work and *Les Filles de la Croix*—a feeling of discipline, willingness to suffer as required, focused and stripped down to the essentials.

Having experienced the physical and emotional toil of the *Erlking* performances, I wanted to expand my research, and I was intrigued to discover what working with artists whose medium is their body would reveal.

There is a spiritual dimension to this work as the two dancers are frozen in a rapturous pose, their bodies closely intertwined, the control and mastery of their bodies palpable. The ecstasy of the gesture acts as a counterpoint to the torture their bodies inevitably endure as they attempt to hold the pose as long as possible. As time slowly ticks by, their resolve starts to crumble, and gravity overtakes them. Their laboured breathing, strained muscles, and fragile balance become an entrancing testament of their resolve and willingness to suffer for their art. One could draw many parallels between the labour and focus of the artist with the discipline and faith of the sisters, without which their way of life would be untenable.

In the video you are working on now, I sensed a narrative encounter of two figures in the woods at first. Yet as it went on, it felt entirely like a psychic space, where the figures stand in for impulses or desire and sensation. It is hard to avoid the psychoanalytical aspects of your work and the various ways you bring internal struggles to the outside. With *Erlking*, for example, there is a struggle of repulsion. In *Self as Other*, it seems to be a struggle to stay unified and fulfill the promise of trust between the dancers. Whereas, in this new video piece, the figures are deeply attuned to one another as if they are one and the same, despite their physical difference.

This new video work, yet to be titled, extends my research of the self and the other, with nature acting as the fertile ground for an encounter between the two. However, this meeting is always thwarted as the two figures, the hunter and the traveler, are purposefully acted out by the same dancer. Through their movements and gestures there is an attempt to reconcile, to embrace what is in opposition to oneself. In the end, there is no resolution to this sexually tense encounter, what prevails is the courage to attempt it in the first place, not as a choice, but as a deep necessity to one's survival.

In some ways *Selling Venus / Vénus au miroir* is one of the most straightforward projects you've done. Whether or not you take a position, the position is embedded in our society. An outward prohibition against the sale of women's bodies, which is, nonetheless, sanctioned by centuries of marriage laws. It is no wonder that we have such conflicted responses. I am intrigued by the fact you noted the length of time each woman has worked as a dancer. I read all sorts of emotional responses to that, imagining how they change throughout their experiences.

Straightforward, yes, but coming from a place of resistance. I wanted to upend what the viewer expected to see by representing only the reflection of the dancer in the dressing room mirror as she engaged in the process of self-transformation prior to going on stage, the interstice





Self as Other, video, 11:20, image credit: Dominique Rey.

between her personal and public self. The installation of these portraits is hung higher than normal, to give them a towering presence. A similar but conceivably more aggressive approach was utilized in the video installation where the moving image would abruptly disappear and, through rear screen projection onto reflective glass, confront the viewer with his or her own mirror reflection as the audio continued to play, thereby dismantling in an instant the voyeur's privileged place.

Do the portraits succeed in breaking down the social stigma that these women endure? I'm not sure. I accept that in the end, the

portraits are but mirror images of these women, and that finding truth in them is an illusion. While the titles may give us an impression of the days and weeks each woman has worked in the industry, my aim is that she remains outside our grasp and beyond our control.

"Beyond our control" is really a key expression for this work! Control is absolutely what is at play here, whether our imagined control of these women or the control of our own impulses and judgment toward them. The mirror is quite an effective tool to frustrate any attempt to come close or "grasp" them as subjects. Before we wrap up, I want to ask if you're still performing with Abzurbs. Can you talk about the relationship between performance and your work in other media?

I would say the Abzurbs are on hiatus, but we are a viral group, and that means we could pop up at any point and disturb the peace in some way or another, as we were famously known to do. I think that for all of us in the band, our performances were a space for uncensored play that was incredibly freeing. Performance art is a difficult medium, and maybe because of this, performance artists have done some of the most powerful artworks of the last sixty years. In my own practice, performance is something I never take lightly, and I must always pluck up my nerve to do it, but somehow the risk is always worth it. And this translates to my approach to art in general, in that I am willing to dive into unknown territories and find myself there.

After your show at Richard Rhodes, what is up next for you?

I'm working on several new sculptures, one of which was just completed for the exhibition at Richard Rhodes. I'm excited to

see this work evolve, and I am working on an exhibition that will bring together the sculptures with collages, photographs, and a video that I plan to present in Canada and abroad.

Sandra Fraser is Curator (Collections) at Remai Modern, where she thinks about the conditions of cultural production. She has curated over 20 exhibitions, contributed numerous essays for exhibition publications, and has a passion for collection development.