

**Concrete abstractions:
Reflections On The Exhibition**
La rencontre des masses : études et prototypes
(The Meeting of Masses: Studies and Prototypes)
Annie Conceicao-Rivet

ORLÉANS GALLERY
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By Ève Dorais

The exhibition *La rencontre des masses : études et prototypes* by Annie Conceicao-Rivet showcases a selection of experiments from two complementary bodies of work – firstly, works produced during an artist residency in Finland (2012) and, secondly, a series of studio works later produced in Montreal. The body of work presented here is based on two main principles: the imprint and, in the words of the artist, the residual material. This phrase is usually used to refer to certain types of waste material (biomedical waste, pesticides, snow, etc.), but, for the artist, the material rejected in her own artistic production (paper scrap, plaster, but also the remnants of earlier works) contributes to a broader sense of the conventional concept of “waste”. By using various rudimentary techniques, such as light projection, shadow play, border drawing, tracing paper, casting, stamping, freehand drawing and a collection of imprints left on processed items by their handling, a complex analytical practice is developed. A number of reasons justify these choices, including for instance material availability during artist residencies, a certain interest in being economical with her process, and, above all, a lucid desire to actively engage in reducing her environmental footprint. Furthermore, the choices reflect a certain obsession for studying the physical properties of matter.

The series of works made during the residency in Finland began with a milk container. The artist noticed the omnipresence of rectangular cardboard prisms in Espoo – the only containers used in this part of the world to transport milk and other dairy products. Interested in the problems created by our consumer society and engaged in a participative reflection on the life cycle of everyday objects, she asked her residency neighbors to bring her their used milk containers in the state in which they are usually thrown out. At the end of a domestic consumption chain, these banal objects find themselves crushed, folded, stacked in bags for trash or recycling bins, distorted by the hands that have held them as testimonies of our everyday use. The challenge was great. From a creative point of view, how could an insignificant and visually impressive object become interesting? By deleting the graphic element and through the development of a process of deconstruction and transposition of its material data (longitudinal cut, surface flattening, edge design, tracing paper, acetate transfers, reassembly into form, etc.), as well as by leaving visible the traces obtained through the process. The choice of the working methods speaks of a concrete engagement – this is not a discursive practice reporting on environmental adverse effects of our waste driven society. By using a mundane residual material in an artistic production, the artist proves that it is quite useful and greatly valuable in another study field.

Although it might not be evident at first, the presence of the body has always been fundamental in Annie Conceicao-Rivet’s practice. While performing, her body becomes a painted or transformed material by adding hand-made prostheses – ready to be moving in front of a public or to be dissected and partly shown through a camera. Her performance body is also fragmented because of the molding of some of her body parts, which in turn become the foundation for an anthropomorphic sculptural production. The artist originally exhibited *Le Grand*

Nettoyage (The Big Clean-Up) at Circa (Montreal) in 2011. The body of work consisted of a selection of her casts and a sound-based performance video. The recovery of the casts used for that exhibition was the source of a second body of experiments presented at Orleans Gallery. This creative residual material has become a pretext for making new variations based on the imprint process, where every exploration follows a protocol similar to the one used with the milk containers: handmade ink wash printing with a stencil, volume stratification, shifting edge design, etc. The body was also fundamental in choosing the consumption object in the body of work made in Finland – milk containers became a substrate recording the trace of their last common hold.

Both bodies of work chosen for this exhibition complement each other perfectly: the one made in Finland, whose original object remains recognizable, operating as an index for the viewer to discover the generative principle of the other work, the one made from variations of studio casts and whose results are more enigmatic. With these material experimentations, the artist is interested in the container as content: the reference to the object is flattened, as if saying that the most mundane object from a conventional point of view may be seen as very complex and phenomenologically fascinating from a formal point of view. This results in a formalist analytical practice where each body of work effectively borrows forms that belonged to a work preceding it, which bequeaths in turn part of its own form to a later work, what Didi-Huberman calls “a procession of forms, from piece to piece, i.e. (...) a transmission of syntactic elements for their eventual transformationⁱⁱ”. The presence of material and its evident potentialities, this continuously moving creative process, in short the studio, is key to this exhibition. This point is made concrete by the presence of a light table built from recycled elements on which are sitting design drawings the public may peruse. The title *La rencontre des masses : études et prototypes (A Meeting of Masses: Studies and Prototypes)* refers to the idea of a production line, from a processing of forms to their possible translation, from one material to another, from one mass to another, from one form to another form, as a whole or in part. The title highlights the experimental and temporary nature of the results.

Critics of such a practice could tax it of being shallow, but Didi-Huberman has given reproductive technologies associated with imprint their rightful status: “Artists often say they rely on an imprint gesture when they are missing the idea, the starting axiom. Making an imprint is then making a technical hypothesis to simply see what happens. The result is not short of surprises, surpassing expectations and opening horizons. This heuristic value of the imprint – the value of open experimentation – seems fundamental to me.ⁱⁱⁱ” Indeed, how not to be touched by the artist who shows such a humility in regards to the invention of forms and is engaged in a practice reflecting a fascination for materiality as such, be it industrial or artistic. According to the artist, “I find in these imprint methods an almost child-like pleasure in transposing a part of the real world unto paper to see a complex image being naturally created before my eyes. This process is almost magical, like the work of the developing bath in a darkroom.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ” Marveling at the beauty and complexity of the materialized shape is what this creation is mostly about.

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ⁱ Didi-Huberman, G. (2008). *La ressemblance par contact: Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l’empreinte*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, pp.151-152.

ⁱⁱ Idem, p.31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Words of the artist.