

## VISUAL ART

## Patrick Mahon

by Anna Kovler

meticulously rendered, fragmented bodies. The exhibition literature notes that Barker is interested in the point of contact between our bodies and the environment, which leads one to the possibility that the making of the costumes might be interpreted as another such point. Though it seems improbable to think of any of these figures being in contact with an environment, since any sense of a world outside the space of the page is absent.

The most effective pieces seem the least controlled. When Barker invites elements of chance into his process the works have more room to breathe, and it feels that we may begin to engage with the distinct textures and surfaces of the microcosmic world that the artist seems to find wondrous. The process of making becomes metaphoric. Here is the place that I can believe and feel the contact that Barker is looking for. Six abstract forms made of plaster each rest on individual plywood shelves. The forms slowly coalesce into pairs of hands. The simplest of casting processes allows for distortions that can be read as changes in emotive pressure, that is, you can see him work. Too often the verisimilitude of the two-dimensional works seems gratuitous, while these sculptures seem real, concrete, grounded. Bits of clay still trapped in the plaster give the objects the character of whalebone or antler; you can imagine him scrubbing them with a toothbrush once freed from their river-mud moulds. If you were prone to extreme reverie you could imagine Daphne's hands transforming as she slips Apollo's grasp à la Bernini. This may seem a stretch, but I do think that Barker is, intentionally or not, working through ideas related to transitions, forms and

textures going back and forth... trying to create a constant interplay between parts/surfaces.

It is not a stretch for a certain kind of artist to feel that the world is a still life waiting to be drawn, but what is really at stake? Barker is certainly not creating a new optic, let alone a straightforward narrative. He must be after something else, but I wonder if the woodland hermit can decide on what. One hopes this is the early beginning of an authentic search—the traveller is definitely equipped for the journey ahead, but a larger map might be needed.

Or perhaps all my scrutiny is beside the point. The works might be a cautionary fairy tale that could be hummed to the tune of "If you go out in the woods today you're sure of a big surprise..."■

*"Detritus" was exhibited at Lisa Kehler Art + Projects, Winnipeg, from January 2 to January 30, 2016.*

*Craig Love is a Winnipeg-based painter who occasionally writes about art.*

For the last decade or so the most apparent characteristic in the art of Patrick Mahon has been the motif of a network, mosaic or grid. Looking at a network it wouldn't be accurate to describe individual elements, since connections are what make a system functional. This conceit links Mahon's production to the ideas of Gregory Bateson, an English anthropologist and pioneer in the field of cybernetics. Bateson famously asked his students how many fingers are on one hand, and when they replied five he yelled No! That is a stupid question, there are not five fingers; there are only four relationships *between* fingers. Bateson saw the whole world as connections, and looked for the patterns that connect living things to each other. But he would never just spell out the answer. He had a unique way of presenting his epistemological theory as a series of scattered anecdotes, stories and observations. Patrick Mahon's exhibition "Nonsuch Garden" at Katzman Contemporary operates by the same logic. The viewer is asked to connect a cast of actors—vines and flowers, a backyard garden, nautical rope, a ship, a fence, pieces of wood—and imagine all the ways they relate. The work's ambiguity gives rise to many meanings.

The walls of the gallery house four variations of digitally printed collages; some are printed on Plexiglas and others directly onto birch panels or basswood veneer. In *Nonsuch Garden Perforation Drawing (Fence/Dots)* we see an image of foliage and flowers, an orange security fence and houses—a fairly mundane backyard scene printed on veneer. A pattern of round holes perforates the surface and seems to create a bullseye



1. Patrick Mahon, *Nonsuch Garden Sail/Botanical #2 (sweetgrass)*, 2015, digital print and stencilled resin paint on Plexiglas, 120 x 120 cm. All images courtesy Katzman Contemporary, Toronto.

2. Installation view, Patrick Mahon, "Nonsuch Garden," 2015, Katzman Contemporary, Toronto.

around the orange fence. There is a hint at relationships here, but what they are exactly is not disclosed. In the absence of human presence, the garden, fence and houses read as signals for the achievements of human labour, the ingenious and fraught relics of mastering the natural world. But the most striking element of the image is its pixilated, almost pointillist nature, as though a Lichtenstein was put through a Photoshop filter. The photograph appears to be made entirely of tiny dots.

In *Nonsuch Garden Wall Panel (Ropes/Potholes)* we see another garden of pixilated squash leaves in a vague backyard, this time with collaged circles depicting nautical rope. The juxtaposition of rope and garden vines as products cultivated by humans brings to mind the connection between the histories of navigation and botany, which became increasingly intertwined in the early modern period as Europe's colonial enterprises spread around the globe. It would be easy to jump to moralizing conclusions of meaning here (the perils of colonialism) but Mahon's presentation deftly leaves the "lesson" out.



As viewers, we are free to consider many coexisting realities, and the democratic process of pixilation these pieces undergo symbolically suggests that the whole needs each point to exist and vice versa. There are no individual dots here, only relationships *between* dots.

Imagery of nautical rope and ships throughout the exhibition generates many possibilities when thinking about relations. Sea navigation was central to the creation of the world as we know it, a vast endeavour for forging networks between disparate people, continents and resources. The specific ship depicted by the artist was a sea-faring vessel called the *Nonsuch*, to which the show's title owes its name. Explorers commissioned the original *Nonsuch* in 1668 in their search for new trade routes and passages. The efforts and explorations of these captains led to the establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company, which in 1970 commissioned the full-sized replica that appears in the exhibition. When Mahon was 17 years old he got a job repairing this replica, now on display at the Manitoba Museum. The narrative of the *Nonsuch*

connects it to innumerable other points including the history of the colonial project and Canadian society, Mahon's own youth, and the exchange of biological material that gained fast momentum during that period.

Relationships seem to interest Mahon not just in terms of history and imagery but also in the way he makes art. His practice has contained a collaborative dimension, including his exhibition "Drawing Water" in 2008, where he held drawing workshops with First Nations students from a school in Kamloops BC, and showcased images of their drawings in his show. In this current exhibition his relationships with people as an educator and artist are made emphatic. In the centre of the room is a sculpture made in collaboration with Dickson Bou, Mahon's former student and current assistant. Titled *Large Gardenship 1*, it is a network of arcing strips of wood veneer tethered around the gallery's load-bearing column. Some veneer has been printed with the same pixilated garden as the other collages in the show, and these strips intertwine to form a lattice



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## “1920s Modernism in Montreal: The Beaver Hall Group”

by James D Campbell

and then also to jut out in expansive swooping curves. The entire structure is held together with a network of ropes, echoing the connections made in the other works between rope, the Nonsuch and the garden.

Another collaboration in the show is a stop-motion video made with Jennifer Wanner, also a former student of Mahon's. *Swept Away* features strips of wood and wildflowers that energetically scurry into the frame and do a sort of dance as they overlap and intertwine before making their exit. Wanner provided the leaves and flowers—endangered species from around Banff where the video was made, and Mahon provided the strips of wood. The “dance” of the pieces could be seen to symbolize both the dynamic nature of biological relationships, and the lateral exchange of ideas between teacher and student.

In using a recurring cast of actors in this exhibition, Patrick Mahon sets the stage for viewers to see aesthetic connections, as well as mapping out geographical, historical, interpersonal and political relationships. Surveying Mahon's recent practice, it is likely that this is not the last time we will see a ship, pieces of wood and collaborators intertwine in his enduring drama. ■

“Nonsuch Garden” was exhibited at Katzman Contemporary, Toronto, from November 19 to December 19, 2015.

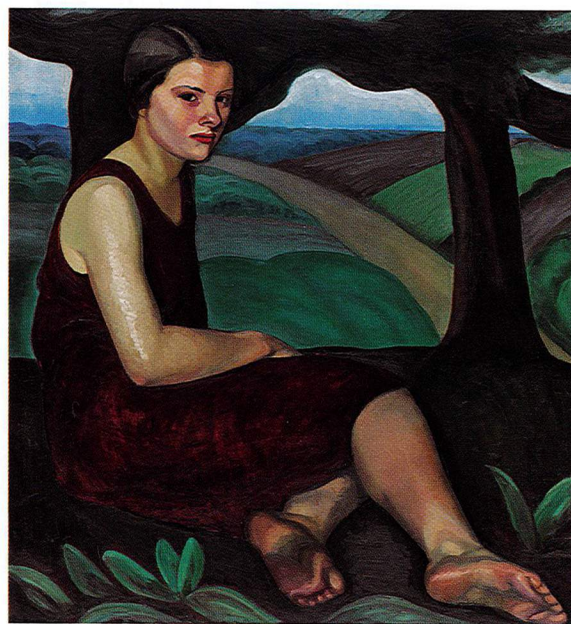
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This terrifically engaging and capacious exhibition of works by members of The Beaver Hall Group presented viewers with an unprecedented constellation of art stars who all shared Montreal as their firmament of Modernist genesis in the 1920s.

While the curators attempt to expose as empty myth the widespread belief that it was a women's group—they correctly point out that as many men as women contributed to the fame and fortune of the group, their numbers almost evenly split—a still more radiant and irrefutable truth emerged. The work of the women ruled in this show. Edwin Holgate is surely a significant male voice, but the curatorial historicist understanding is undermined, if not rendered moot, by the magisterial work of Prudence Heward, who effortlessly commanded the floor here.

Indeed, if there is a shining star in this show, it is Heward, who lived and worked in her studio on the upper floor of the family home on downtown Peel Street. It is no surprise that her paintings grace the covers of all Beaver Hall publications, including this exhibition's mammoth catalogue, and even stamps recently issued by Canada Post.

Some of her most compelling canvases are included. *At the Theatre* (a mainstay of the museum's permanent collection) never loses its elegant and deft mien. Heward had a rare gift for extracting from, or rather investing in the real individuality of her female subjects without resorting to the usual aesthetics of an overly patinated pancake make-up overhaul. A sense of fierce determination, self-possession and spiritual strength abides.



*At the Theatre*, 1928, is particularly interesting in that the two young women depicted are viewed from behind, their faces mostly hidden from us as they wait for the curtain to rise above the proscenium arch. That in no way lessens the sense of expectancy and avowal of the painting as a radical portrait of two women of their time unaccompanied by men. It is a work of inordinate depth. In *Girl on a Hill*, 1928, Montreal dancer Louise McLea is depicted sitting alone in a country landscape, and the gripping punctum is her bare feet with their soiled soles, which add a gritty realism of earthy industry to a portrait suffused with the considerable powers of empathy of a latter-day Nicolas Poussin. In *Girl Under a Tree*, a life-sized nude from 1931, the painter celebrates the curves of her subject with a frank honesty undreamt of by Giorgione.

“I once asked old AY [AY Jackson, a founder of the group and member of the Group of Seven] why my Aunt Pru [Prudence Heward] was excluded from the Group of Seven,” recalled her nephew, the

1. Prudence Heward, *Girl on a Hill*, 1928, oil on canvas, 101.8 cm x 94.6 cm. Photography: NGC. Courtesy National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

2. Lilius Torrance Newton, *Nude in the Studio*, 1933, oil on canvas, 203.2 x 91.5 cm. Collection A.K. Prakash. Estate of Lilius Torrance Newton. Photography: Thomas Moore. © National Gallery of Canada.