



Looping long-form videos fill Montreal gallery with hypnotic visuals

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Flames curl around the edges of a charred and crumpled paper that has been blown up to the size of a small car on an oversized video screen. But this fire is running backwards, retreating from the paper that forms from its own ashes as the sparks fly downward instead of up. Gradually, the paper becomes recognizable as the image of a Piet Mondrian painting, destroyed when this video recorded an actual immolation. Running film backward is a simple trick, but at this scale and intensity it becomes a metaphor for memory, which restores images and events from the ashes of past experience.

This sequence was the first thing I saw in the sparse rooms at Montreal's Galerie René Blouin, where Pascal Grandmaison and his partner, the artist Marie-Claire Blais, have installed two large, hypnotic video works. These looping long-form pieces tell no story, but are packed with fine-grained visual narratives about the complex interactions of time, appearance and recollection.

What can be done that's fresh with video of streaming clouds or tall grasses waving in the breeze? Nothing, I would have thought, yet Grandmaison's camera finds something revelatory in these banal subjects. The photographer – recently shortlisted for the \$50,000 Scotiabank Photography Award – films a sheet of dark paper rustling in a windy meadow, and his record of those turbulent movements expresses an energy and mass you wouldn't perceive if you stood looking at the scene itself. It's more real as a photographic representation, and therefore more magical.

But there are also sequences that make you feel the partial nature of representation, and the extent to which every screen masks the real. Flames streak across vertical sheets of paper, which curl away and reveal the land behind them. Then the footage reverses, and the paper seals itself up again, closing off the view. This perverse peekaboo scrapes against the

conventional assumptions of landscape as a genre, in which a chosen and therefore edited scene is presented as something naturally revealed to the artist.

The piece I'm describing is called *La vie abstraite: espace du silence*, and it runs on two double-screen surfaces that should be installed side-by-side or in opposed pairs. There wasn't room for either option in Blouin's gallery, so the second set of screens is in an adjoining room. You can see both sets only by standing in the doorway – an in-between kind of experience that feels completely in tune with the ceaseless transitions going on in this imagery.

The sheet of paper is a prop in this video landscape, as is the cast-plaster arm that dangles before the lens for several minutes, as flames curl over the palm and the wrist. The arm's ashy whiteness and its apparent immunity to the fire make it look like something already consumed but still able to retain its form. That's a simply constructed yet powerful image, full of allusions to the ambitions of religion and the stubborn persistence of life.

Landscape is also the basis of these works' self-consciously art-historical side. Mondrian began as a landscape painter who moved into abstraction; Kazimir Malevich, whose early Black Square appears in reproduction in *La vie abstraite: le temps transformé*, was forced to go the other way, finishing as a landscape painter in a USSR officially opposed to abstraction. The artists' contrary movement along the same axis offers one reason why images of fire running forwards and backwards, and of landscape revealed and concealed, found their way into these installations.

Water is there too, rebounding off the Malevich souvenir with such visual precision that it's as if you're watching the trajectories of molecules. Grandmaison gives you the vision of a superhero, and the view of ordinary things as a world of wonders; bubbles forming in liquid have never looked so luminously jewel-like. Technically, this is where these videos – shot with a \$80,000 camera, Blouin says – overlap with the gee-whiz imagery of science-minded photojournalists. But where that kind of photography impresses first and last with the power of its tools, Grandmaison and Blais freight their imagery with poetic resonance.

Both of these works have ambient soundtracks, created by Grandmaison. They colour and guide the viewer's experience, magnifying the breadth of what is seen with a parallel expanse in what is heard.

I don't respond to the Mondrian/Malevich theme as strongly as these artists might wish, but perhaps it's a ladder they needed to climb to reach this almost surreal level of dynamic realism. You can throw the ladder away – the viewpoint and its fascinations remain.

Blouin told me that one novelty of having these works in his gallery is that visitors get so absorbed, they have to be gently guided toward the exit when he's ready to close up shop. That seldom happens in spaces like his. When you can make people forget time in a suite of rooms that has only two chairs, you know you've broken through to a level of engagement that few contemporary artists can match. But the real test comes after you leave, when you discover that you don't just see this imagery – you are haunted by it.

La vie abstraite, parts 1 and 2, continue at Montreal's Galerie René Blouin through April 23