

VISUAL ARTS

Avant-garde! There's a Dadaist in the house



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THE EXHIBITIONIST
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John Marriott at the Optica Centre for Contemporary Art, Montreal

From March 12 to April 16, 372 St. Catherine West, No. 508, Montreal, www.optica.ca

Mid-career is a strange and worrying time for an artist.

The art world's marketing schemes parallel those found in mainstream entertainment industries – the young and the fresh are favoured, for the excitement they bring, while the old and established are considered safe choices. Artists a little less full on the bloom but not quite fallen off the tree are treated with suspicion, because they can provide neither novelty nor security. Mid-career, like mid-life, is a dangerous time.

Toronto-based multimedia artist John Marriott has been producing gleefully baffling and hilarious art for more than 20 years, with exhibitions across Canada and internationally. But anybody who knows Marriott's work will admit he's been more or less media absent for the past decade – constantly producing and exhibiting work, but not getting the same level of attention he once did.

This is not only unfortunate (if predictable) for Marriott, but for the rest of us as well. Marriott's work is simply too much fun, too mischievous and yet exquisitely finished (Marriott is a confessed perfectionist) to be overlooked. Marriott is a ricochet artist deluxe, capable of riffing off, and hitting, multiple cultural targets in one shot.

A new survey of Marriott's works, roughly encompassing the past 15 years worth of production plus a dozen or so debuting pieces, is set to open at Montreal's Optica Centre for Contemporary Art. It's about time.

Included in the exhibition are such widely distributed and discussed works as *Where the Cat's At*, from 1999, a film/photography project wherein Marriott enlisted a tabby to wander around the AGO's Henry Moore



'By sticking the sword through it, I'm colliding a bunch of cultural tropes, references and fetishes,' John Marriott says of his piece *Throen*.

IN OTHER VENUES

Aileen Cheung at 2 of 2 Gallery

Until March 12, 254 Niagara St., Toronto

Cheung's mixed-media dreamscapes look like they're disappearing into menacing (or soothing?) clouds of puff pastry.

2,000 Years of Jewellery at Zilberschmuck Art Jewellery

Until March 26, 910 Kingston Rd., Toronto

The assortment of antique jewellery would make Zsa Zsa Gabor drool with envy.

Marc Bell at Rodman Hall

Until May 1, 109 St. Paul Crescent, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ont.

The crazed king of the comix-fuelled graphic mash-up unveils his latest collection of candy-coloured delights.

R.M. Vaughan

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collection, *Scary Mouse Hole*, from 2001, a decal applied to the baseboard of the gallery in imitation of mouse holes from cartoons, and *Dream a Little Dream*, from 2009, a beer-can version of Brion Gysin's spinning “dream machine” lantern.

New works, however, make up the bulk of the exhibition. Look for *Throen*, a copy of an Eames bucket chair pierced by a fencing épée, *White Diffuser* and *Black Diffuser*, two sculpture-paintings that blend flatly painted canvases (in white and black) with common air-vent diffusers to create false walls and pockets in the gallery that allow sound to flow between the office and the exhibition space, plus a floor-to-ceiling column of printed paper

cup, all bearing the message-question “Why Are We Here?”

Marriott's penchant for mind games is especially evident in the ceiling-mounted *Pan Optics*, a fish-filled custom aquarium shaped like a security-camera bubble, and in the deeply baffling *Out of Time*, an altered Ikea Billy bookshelf.

Augmented with a printed appliqué that mimics the shelves' interior shadowing as seen in the Ikea catalogue, the sculpture is meant to befuddle viewers who will notice that the shadows in the concavity of the shelving do not follow the gallery's available light. Marriott's hope is that people will walk past the ubiquitous bookshelf and only gradually notice that the patterns of light and shadow, an optical illusion created by pigment on adhesive material, bear no relationship to either the gallery lighting or the time of day.

Or, as he freely admits, they'll just see the familiar bookcase, itself as visually intriguing as a white wall, and not notice the alteration at all. Either works for him.

Chat with Marriott about his practice and you'll discover that underneath his encyclopedic knowledge of art history (knowledge well-employed – practically everything Marriott makes is art about art) and academic tone (Marriott occasionally teaches) lurks a more basic, somewhat touching goal – to give the viewer a good time, a puzzle to play with and a laugh.

As he noted when we sat down over tea, “I'm happiest when people ask me lots of questions about my work, because it's all pinging around in my head all the time.”

Why does the Eames chair have a sword through it?

I'm messing with the legacy of Duchamp, because the Eames chair reminds me of Duchamp's urinal. By sticking the sword through it, I'm colliding a bunch of cultural tropes, references and fetishes.

The chair is something that has a structural integrity, but doesn't have a function. I'm interested in how we can mess with one function to create another.

What would the function of the impaled chair be?

To mess with your mind? Ha! And, you know, it's Freudian too, Duchamp as a father figure to me as an artist, one that I'm killing, and the castration anxiety of the sword ... or, more simple, when people spar, intellectually, it's like fencing, and this is a kind of sparring I'm having with the Duchamp legacy.

Your work is often read as an aggressive challenge to the viewer.

Really? Wow. I guess, and certainly shoving a sword through something is aggressive. But, because I like to be messed with by art, I see disorientation as one of the most interesting things available in art. I don't want art that reaffirms my values, I want art that unsettles me a bit, whether it makes me feel good or it makes me have to figure out where I am.

But I'd say my work is no more “aggressive” than putting a Sudoku in front of someone. For me, I like having to look for something, lateral thinking. And there's a level of craft in my work, and a level of humour, that indicates I'm not peeved at anybody.

But the viewer always has a lot to unpack with your work. Doesn't that create a distance between you and your public?

I wouldn't say it's a distance, because I'm actually quite fond of the pieces and their challenges, and I like people. The only time there's a distance, so to speak, is when people want my work explained to them, or because they don't like my nerdy predilections. Ha! But it's not an oppositional stance, what I do.

Is it fair to say you've been undercover for the last several years?

Yeah, you're right. I got exhausted, and I wanted to regroup. I'm aging, too. I'm 47 now and I'm less snarky – all that irony from my early career is now just seasoning. I took a bit of a back seat, sure, but also, with my perfectionism, I can't seem to make anything that doesn't cost a thousand bucks!

This interview has been condensed and edited.