

STÉPHANIE BERTRAND was born in 1979 in Montréal, Canada; she currently works as a curator and writer. Since completing an MFA Curating at Goldsmiths College, London, she has curated a number of exhibitions and projects, including “Democracy in the making” at *The Greek State Museum*, Thessaloniki (2009), “Letters from a front” presented as part of the contemporary art festival *Action Field Kodra 08*, Thessaloniki (2008), “Fire red gas blue ghost green signs” at *The Sassoon Gallery*, London (2008) and “Radio gA-gA” at Art Athina 08, the *Athens art fair*, Athens (2008). Bertrand is the co-founder of the contemporary art collective initiative *Société Anonyme* (www.societeanonyme.gr) as well as a member of the Montréal-based collective *L’araignée*. She has contributed to a number of international publications, including the exhibition catalogues for “Flexible Aura” at *Brain Factory*, Seoul (2009), “Calypso” at *Sala Rekalde*, Bilbao (2008) and “I desired what you were, I need what you are” at *Maze Gallery*, Turin (2008). Most recently, she has presented her research as part of the exhibition project “Curator’s Table” as part of *Reload*, Rome (2011). Bertrand currently lives and works in Thessaloniki, Greece.

STÉPHANIE CHABOT is a multi disciplinary artist that works primarily in painting, sculpture and installation. She received her Masters Degree from York University in 2008. Chabot’s work has been shown in many Canadian artist run centers including *La Centrale Gallery Powerhouse* and *Clark Gallery* in Montréal. Her work has also been presented in the United States, Spain (*Sala Rekalde*, Bilbao), England (*Sassoon Gallery*, London) and in Australia (*H-Block Gallery*, Brisbane). She is a member of the curatorial collective *L’Araignée*, and has been involved at *La Centrale Gallery Powerhouse* as both a member of the selection committee (2008–2011), and the interim artistic coordinator (2010). Chabot currently lives and works in Montréal.

The artist gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts.

Special thanks to Pierre Terzian, Yam Lau, Kristi Ropoleski, and Noémi McComber.

THE FALSE PROPHE-
CIES OF THE FALSE
IDOLS IN THE FLESH

BY STÉPHANIE BERTRAND

“Greetings! Welcome!” hails the over-eager head on a stick perched in the entranceway, tooth-grinned, immobile. “Please come right in!” Ironically, while this description might otherwise be read as a sarcastic chick lit account of the proverbial skinny shop-girl, it literally portrays Montreal-based artist Stéphanie Chabot’s intervention for the YYZ vitrine.

The work consists of an actual carved dummy head grafted onto the edge of a pole, held up by a slightly larger than life sculpted mannequin. The latter appears to have abandoned or forfeited its temporary post on display in the gallery’s showcase, and strayed off to engage in some deviant obscure activity or ritual, perhaps unwittingly driven by the madness of daydreams and random thoughts that prey upon the mind after a long time spent in isolation and idleness.

The greenish figure is uncomfortably crouched in a stiff and un-lady-like sitting position on the floor of the narrow vitrine – visibly designed for more properly erected sculptures, such as standing mannequins – its freakish model limbs pressed up against the wall and the glass confining it on either side. While the sculpture is awkwardly squeezed into the tight enclosure, it was manifestly created for the space; if it were to suddenly rise, it would stand proportionately to the seven plus foot high vitrine.

Facing the gallery with its back turned to the on-coming visitors, the sculpture seems to be performing some sort of penance (perhaps atoning for its apparent lasciviousness), or possibly staging a curious sit-in protest against its over-explicit presentation, as if laying claim to its man-made right for: “more exhibition; less exhibitionism!” The figure brandishes its body-less double like a placard, as both a form of provocation, and a means of saving face – of keeping up public appearances – by presenting an over-extended smile to the world.

While the autonomous head means to engage potential visitors (as every display object surely must!), it also paradoxically taunts them. Installed like a knob at the end of a stick, this sculptural element is a reference to the gruesome tradition of impaling decapitated heads—a historical practice meant to both intimidate and wreak vengeance upon one’s enemies. Considered as a form of retaliation against wrongdoing, such an allusion sets up a very particular antagonistic relationship with the viewing public. But this dynamic isn’t of the obvious confrontational: “you against me, let’s have it!” sort. Despite the installation’s violent overtones and strong theatrical presence, it goes beyond the plain slapstick strategy of horror prop in lieu of fashion mannequin. While it certainly and quite deliberately references the horror genre—even more so in view of the conspicuous broom in the lobby fashioned out of the same unmistakable jet-black hair as the dummy head and the model—the figure’s clean-cut rendering suggests a more symbolic interpretation.

By contrast to the typical headless or featureless mannequin, the sculpture does not only possess an expressive face, but also an added stand-in: an extra head baring a completely different expression. Instead of fading into anonymity, it is over-identified, thus revealing, on a first level, the nature of the site—the vitrine—as a place that is necessarily involved in the manufacturing of desire and consumption. Accordingly, the sitting figure looks up at the severed head, its eyes rolled up in their sockets, licking its lips with perverse admiration and gluttonous desire, as though caught in the crossfire of a wanton game of same and other, of separation, distance, recognition and violence.

Yet on another level, this strategic over-identification does not only suggest the particular context’s true character. It does not only serve to articulate a mere commentary on mannequins and shop displays,

and on the identity politics of desire and aggression towards a manifest other. Through this doubling, the sculpture also acquires a connotative surplus as a Janus figure.

Janus was an ancient double-faced Roman deity who was known as the guardian of doors and passageways. This divine figure represented, among other things, the transition between primitive life and civilization—a recurring theme within Chabot’s work. With one face looking towards the past and one face turned towards the future, Janus was traditionally associated with auspices and omens. And indeed, there is something undeniably witchy or supernatural about the dark-haired green-skinned figure and the strange whimsical broom in the lobby that appears as though it might be flying away. But if Janus allegorically signifies premonition, it literally denotes two-faced hypocrisy and deceitfulness, which begs the question: how might prophecy and deceit be coupled in a work of art, which is understood as the purveyor of a contemporary truth?

In the case of Chabot’s installation, this deceit or trickery takes the form of a withholding. Indeed, the work’s treachery lies in its refusal to announce what one has in store (inside the gallery). It signals the absence of a particular text, a didactic message, lost in the staging of the circuitous loop of gazes and the circuitous duplication of bodies on which it might otherwise have been inscribed. It suggests a missing script, misplaced in the perversion brought on by thoughtless repetition and endless deferral.

No, Chabot’s installation does not convey the false prophecies of false idols in the flesh, fashioned after our ideal representations. It presents hag-guard figures that stand for, and in the place of, a vanished text. The placard that the mannequin holds up in protest bares no writing. Instead it is a surplus face, a face in the place of a text that it withholds. The knowingness

registered on this face, on this head that greets the visitors, is a far cry from the Mona Lisa’s smile, breaking instead on the veneers of its deviant grin. So what then is this mysterious text that the work withholds? This text is the promise of future edification and betterment through acquisition – whether the acquisition of a luxury good or of a privileged knowledge, of the kind often implied by art. And therein, at last, lies the work’s secret prophecy: in the premonition of that lost promise, pre-figured by the sculpture’s explicit refusal to play its part.