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To see this art is to make this art

A door leads to a magic place, an electrified dress asks for empathy – but you must collaborate, **Kate Taylor** writes

OTTAWA

If nobody sees an art work does it exist? Consider the *Presence Meter*, currently at The National Gallery of Canada. It consists of a framed panel containing dozens of small gauges of the kind used to measure volume on an analog stereo. As you approach, their needles begin to oscillate; the closer you get, the more agitated their flicker becomes. Here is a work of art that is incomplete without the viewer – and that captures the spirit of *Caught in the Act*: The Viewer as Spectator, an exhibition of interactive and participatory art now showing at the Ottawa gallery.

And yet it is so much more as curator Josée Drouin-Brisebois uses a collection of classic Canadian installation art from the seventies and eighties to successfully examine more recent production, revealing that the theme of audience participation is a particularly fruitful context in which to place some crazy contemporary Canadian practice.

She begins with pretty scary stuff. Enter the special exhibition hall and you will find yourself plunged into darkness. Your first encounter will be with Jana Sterbak's *I Want You to Feel the Way I Do ... (The Dress)*. The 1984-85 sculpture juxtaposes a wire mesh garment encircled by a live electrical wire with a text beginning with the same provocative words as the title, apparently demanding a level of physical empathy that borders on sadistic revenge.

Continue on to a narrow slit in a wall and you'll discover yourself on the edge of some kind of stage or ring filled with sawdust that you can gingerly navigate your way around by means of a steeply raked boardwalk. This is Victoria artist Mowry Baden's *Vancouver Room*, from 1973. Next door, you can meet a table that will befriend you like a pet and follow you about the room. It's a computer-controlled robot originally created by Toronto artist Max Dean (and Italian engineer Raffaello D'Andrea) in 1984.

These classics of Canadian installation art always approached their viewers with a certain amount of aggression. Here, they serve as a lengthy introduction to a show featuring a larger collection of recent work by newer Canadian artists mining a similar vein. For Drouin-Brisebois, however, the encounter was originally reversed. She witnessed seemingly disparate and disorganized contemporary trends – the sly pop culture references of Toronto artists Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins (who created the *Presence Meter*) and the outrageously acquisitive practices of artists such as the Quebec City collective BGL, Montreal's Maassimo Guerrero or Vancouver's Geoffrey Farmer, wherein the artists put the entire contents of their studios on display – and then discovered their precedents in the installation work of previous decades.

The installation art of the 1980s grew out of the performances, happenings, environmental video and sound art of the sixties and seventies, work that swept aside the notion of art as a beautiful object you could collect. Yet the senior Canadian artists represented here are ones still immersed in sculptural tradition.

Yes, the strange space of Baden's 1973 *Vancouver Room* has to be rebuilt for each new installation, but his 2003 piece here, *The Light that Sees Us from Night*, invites us to walk through a well-articulated little line of gothic arches before we stand underneath a great oscillating band of metal on which a varying strip of light emerges from darkness like a kind of crazy, sped-up dawn. It is an experience to be sure, but also an elegant physical object.

Similarly, native artist Rebecca Belmore is represented by *Ayamee-anwach Oonamawon: Speaking to their Mother*, the giant, wooden megaphone she created in the aftermath of the Oka standoff, literally giving people a voice as she toured it around the country to various settings where people might want to speak through it. The exhibition includes a slide show recording its use but it is that big, beautiful piece of wood, not the documentation, that is to be considered Belmore's art.

What a contrast between that singular, monumental object and the wild, at times confusing agglomeration of bits and pieces of junk that seems to emanate from artists' studios in Quebec these days. The trio that makes up Quebec City's BGL (Jasmin Hildeau, Sébastien Giguère and Nicolas Laverdière) is represented here by what, at first blush, look like their storage shelves. And indeed, the Suzuki motorcycle, the wooden folk art, the stuffed moose and the many, many boxes in holiday gift-wrap do actually date from previous projects. Push through a utilitarian door and you discover that from previous practice comes current mastery: The door operates a pulley that operates a wonderful, quirky, jerry-rigged wooden teeter-totter that raises and lowers a disco ball.

Another passageway off the shelving is created by charred remains, as though this time new work was made by burning the old. Here the armature of a Gothic chapel encircles the form of a car, under wraps. A little slit at the back of the covered car gives us a glance at a burning hearth.

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Worshipping our cars? Make no mistake about BGL's ambivalence toward their own boardings: Their brand-new installation for this show mounts two modified currency counters on a lift of the kind that uses an accordion arm to install art in galleries or displays in department stores. Between 2 and 5 p.m. for the duration of the exhibition, a snowfall of \$20 bills will waft down from the heights of the gallery although a barricade and security guards will ensure visitors cannot financially profit from the experience.

BGL are not the only ones here to suggest art is that which finds itself in the artists' space. Since 2000, Guerrero has turned his Montreal studio, displayed here under the title *A Hyphen Between the Visible and the Invisible (Darboral)*, into a grand experimentation in life as art. Taking the body and time as his themes, he invites his friends and fellow artists to eat fruit, to linger, to allow their body parts to be cast in plaster, producing a detoured display of sculptures and their moulds, plastic grown from the seeds of the fruits, as well as drawings by the artist. The results are messy and mysterious – a series of thoughts or aphorisms mounted on the wall seems simplistic and out of place in this project. The public is free to explore and touch here, and the artist will be appearing on several occasions to invite people to help him work on a current sculpture.

Guerrero literally asks the viewer to help make the art; participation in the work of Marman and Borins is much more subject to the artists' control, and here it's mental work that is really required of you. One piece recreates a monolith drawn from the opening scene of 2001: A Space Odyssey. Another, mocking the outgoing U.S. president, uses a backdrop drawn from the Pink Floyd album cover for *Dark Side of the Moon* as a setting for a podium with a microphone that turns all words into gibberish. That piece also includes a colourful roulette wheel for the spectator to spin; participation in these works is easy and fun and yet the popular-culture references demand that the viewer engage in a playful but potentially complex game of decoding and interpreting.

The exhibition ends with a new site-specific piece by Rodney LaTourelle that similarly functions on various levels but returns us to the sense of aesthetic control found in the classic work at the show's beginning. In *Model for Inner Expansion*, the artist invites the visitor to enter a series of brightly coloured interlocking boxes that look like a hard-edge abstract painting of the 1960s rendered in three dimensions, cleverly offering us both a populist playground and a critique of art history. Like this show itself, the work uses the past to amplify the present; walking through its colourful spaces is a delight. *Caught in the Act* continues at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa until Feb. 25, 2009.