

One might argue that the whole history of art is a visual story of an infinite act of voyeurism in which the deepest human longings, fears, and dreams provide and embody the artist's genius and inspiration. If we are all actors on the same stage, art plays the role of the audience, generally, and the jury, individually, of our lifelong performance. Because art is something made by human beings, an artwork is a mirror reflection of our reality. It could be theatrical, spiritual, farcical, or even horrifying and sometimes it is all of these. Staying in front of artwork, one is naturally involved in a certain act of voyeurism, observing artistic fulfilled fantasy. Yet, if all artists are to be considered voyeurs of modern reality, are all modern-day voyeurs to be named artists in their deliberate transgression of social taboos and moral norms?

In catching glimpses of random, spontaneous and profoundly intimate moments of human life and human relations and further exposing them in artwork, an artist plays the role of a voyeur. Yet, the ultimate artistic goal is not necessarily to bring a sexual excitement to the viewer. Rather, artists seek to uncover the hidden culture of sex and the erotica making it visible and accessible for a broader audience to show that such sexuality has always been a primary source of inspiration in both the art of aesthetic and the art of living.

Contemporary art gives a tangible and visible form to all that we love most or hate most within us. In this essay, I shall explore the process by which today's art industry commercializes much of what has been historically deemed as wicked, vulgar, deviant, sexually abusive and morally repugnant. My research project will consider the roles of the work of the dealer, Guy Berube, and the artist Peter Schmelzer in the commercialization of the repugnant. An example of a gallery for such art could be found

in Ottawa's La Petite Mort (306 Cumberland Street). The artistic director, owner, and curator Guy Berube successfully promotes works of art that allure and amuse us in the same way they simultaneously disgust and corrupt our traditional understanding of propriety and aesthetic. Peter Schmelzer is one of the most exhibited artists in La Petite Mort Gallery. In his art, Schmelzer visually represents an abject world of absurdity, insanity, perversity and ugliness. His paintings depict humanoid and animated creatures that seem to speak for all these dark and destructive forces that, in fact, constitute an indelible part of what is to be a human.

What appears to unify Berube and Schmelzer is their common interest in exploring the thin lines between reason and nonsense, sexuality and perversity, innocence and vulgarity, beauty and ugliness, and finally between morality and its transgression. According to Berube, the role of contemporary artwork is to combine these "contradictions and extremes all in one"<sup>i</sup>. Sexual content has always been a controversial theme, raising an aesthetic debate. Is it erotica or is it pornography? Furthermore, is it art? The concept of modern art and popular culture lie upon various perspectives and interpretations, provoked by such questions of aestheticism the search for which answers is to be continued. The philosopher and critique of contemporary art, Arthur Danto, provides one answer, pondering over the perennial dilemma "why art needs to be explained"<sup>ii</sup>. In his view of today's art, "the experience of art becomes a moral adventure rather than merely an aesthetic interlude"<sup>iii</sup>. Modern artwork does not seem to intend living up to preconceptions and aesthetic theories of the past but has rather become a matter of individuality and personal taste.

A neutral observer becomes an active voyeur in art that deliberately challenges and sometimes even crosses the boundaries between eroticism and pornography, sexual fantasy and social reality. In the Oxford Dictionary, the voyeur is defined as “a person who obtains sexual gratification from observing other’s sexual actions and organs”.<sup>iv</sup> In mundane reality, the “voyeur is a powerless or passive spectator”.<sup>v</sup> In arts, however, the voyeur is not a helpless observer, but an intruder and a participator into a creative sexual imagery. The essence of artistic voyeurism relates to the notion of eroticism and pornography. The presence of a voyeur in artwork can be felt on the subtle line between erotic and pornographic image. In arts, eroticism is not about the pleasure of the flesh. According to Alyce Mahon, it “concerns the fear of sexual desire and the return of repressed desires”.<sup>vi</sup> The erotica is born from the constant tension between the individual’s right of sexual and artistic freedom and that of the individual’s artistic moral and social responsibilities.<sup>vii</sup>

According to George Bataille, the power of eroticism is in that it fundamentally “presupposes man in conflict with himself”.<sup>viii</sup> The power of eroticism in artwork lies particularly in its ability to unleash one’s fantasies while it still allows one to stay in disguise, as a voyeur, a secret intruder. Pornography, on the contrary, is explicitly intended to touch primarily upon the viewer’s senses. It is usually associated with works that exploit human instincts and expose human nature in its very rude form to the point in which a traditional art connoisseur is shocked, if not utterly disgusted. One may argue that pornographic images are no more than mere reflections of true aspects of life. Yet, pornography is still deemed as vulgar, deviant, ugly, and non-artistic.<sup>ix</sup>

The very word pornography has a “shameful” historical origin used as a “description of prostitutes or of prostitution as a matter of public hygiene”.<sup>x</sup> The etymology of the word comes from the Greek “porne”, meaning prostitute, and “graphos”, meaning writing or describing.<sup>xi</sup> Ideologically, the notion of pornography is differentiated from the erotica in the very intent and purpose of a work. Pornography’s sole intent is to stimulate sexually and its ultimate goal is to lead to sex or masturbation. It tends to dehumanize its sitters, subordinating them to merely sexual objects. The fundamental relationship between a viewer and a pornographic work is a matter of power.<sup>xii</sup> The spectator is disinterested in the emotionality and individuality of the sexual performer. A sexual desire is dependent upon the illusion of either domination or subordination of the viewer. He does not participate actively but is rather a passive consumer of a performance.<sup>xiii</sup> Erotic art also depicts sexual practices, but its primary intent is to play with the aesthetic imagination of a viewer. It challenges the notions of “good” and “bad” in art. Yet, sexual provocations in erotic art are intended to draw further attention on social, political, and religious biases and ideologies dominating in a society.<sup>xiv</sup> It is about establishing equality that is to affect every realm of human relationships. Sexual imagery in the erotica triggers questions about the issue of gender, sexual representation, and class relations.<sup>xv</sup> As Gloria Stein, a famous representative of the radical feminist movement, argues:

“Though both erotica and pornography refer to verbal or pictorial representations of sexual behavior, they are as different as a room with doors open and one with doors locked”.<sup>xvi</sup>

Sexual content and representation in artwork naturally speak to us. As viewers, we have freedom to respond to its messages, in return, mentally, sexually, or both ways. Yet, even though eroticism has been ideologically as well as aesthetically distinguished from its more “lustful” counterpart, a primitive desire is always there.

Artwork with both titillating and implicitly sexual content is found in La Petite Mort. Working by intuition, La Petite Mort’s owner, Guy Berube, wants “art to be reactionary. I want people to talk about it whether they hate it or love it”.<sup>xvii</sup> A visitor is welcome to explore the gallery’s sensual and liberating atmosphere. One feels entering the gallery as if one were being led into a modern-day boudoir. As the very name of the gallery suggests, La Petite Mort does not seek to offer a typically gallery experience. Instead, in Ottawa, Berube tries to “break the vicious circle of a gallery as a quiet place”<sup>xviii</sup> surrounded by serious music and people that are either whispering or talking about art. His choice of offbeat music and offbeat art on display stays in balance with the overall ideology of the gallery, an ideology of not following any particular ideology but life itself.

“A gallery is supposed to be serious. Then you realize its humor. It’s all about sex, life, and pleasure. I want my visitors to enjoy their experience in La Petite Mort as much as while doing sex. As with sex, there is nothing certain. There is always a chance for a failure. And with failure comes humor.”<sup>xix</sup>

Theoretically clueless about the meaning of art, Berube, instead, sells artwork with life-inspired content and a visually impressive form leaving strong impact upon its viewers. As artistic director, Berube is not interested in making people think about art but rather to “come here and react”<sup>xx</sup>. In his view the essence of contemporary art is in that it

“is meant for all reactions”.<sup>xxi</sup> Berube’s natural urge toward voyeurism influences his personal taste of art, motivating also his choice to put a particular artwork on display. His first experience as a voyeur, Berube confessed, was during his childhood involving “watching people having sex”.<sup>xxii</sup> From this unconscious form of voyeurism as a kid to his current occupation as an artistic voyeur, it seems that Berube’s personality is perfectly in tune with his present work as a gallery owner, for that they are both “totally voyeuristic”.<sup>xxiii</sup> La Petite Mort is dedicated to provide a space and publicity to local artists. Yet, Berube’s choice of artwork is exclusively dependent on the artist’s personality since the individuality of an artist is inextricably intertwined with the content of his or her work. He thrives on seeing artwork that can speak for all that is hidden within people such as sexual longings, fears, and sadness, for “death, life, beauty, horror, and sexuality”<sup>xxiv</sup> are all inherent parts of human existence. During my first visit to La Petite Mort, I saw sensually charged art pieces that provoked curiosity within me, tantalizing my imagination. During sexual intercourse, the culmination of pleasure is reached when both partners are in a constant cooperation between each other’s sexual desires. In a similar way, the ultimate success of a gallery experience is achieved when there is an active interaction between artistic and a viewer’s individual fantasies. “La Petite Mort”, as orgasm, is a rare glimpse of pure joy in which the spiritual meets the sensual, the good-its evil counterpart, and the human-its full being. La Petite Mort, Ottawa’s gallery, is all about bridging these two solitudes, emotions and reason, the flesh and the spirit, sexual expression and repression.

The first exhibition that took place in La Petite Mort last Halloween featured the local artist, Peter Schmelzer. Berube, himself describes his works as “humorous,

extremely beautiful, technically impeccable”, creepy, orgiastic and also implicitly “sad”.<sup>xxv</sup> Schmelzer’s art creates dystopia, a “damp drunk moment”<sup>xxvi</sup> in which humans transforms into alien creatures during orgiastic experience. Schmelzer creates his creepy sexual imagery drawing inspiration from a sitter.<sup>xxvii</sup> Schmelzer’s animated creatures are nudes, for that the artist depicts them naked and allows the spectator to observe freely intimate and even shocking moments of their carnal relations. For example, in one of his works, he shows a humanoid creature that is in a reclining position, lying upon other’s creatures flesh in a way that their bodies seem to be all intertwined and part of one painting. Looking at its face, the viewer recognizes a woman. The only trait of femininity is the presence of female breasts. Yet, Schmelzer’s nude is radically opposed to the aesthetics of the nudes appreciated in the dominant erotic tradition of Western arts. Schmelzer’s nude is depicted without a disguise. In his work, the nude is shown to be alienated and disinterested in the surrounding world. She does not seek to satisfy the ever-present “male gaze” of a spectator.<sup>xxviii</sup> Instead, she is shown in a moment of complete self-indulgence while masturbating. Moreover, her “beauty” does not correspond either to the aesthetic standards of eroticism or to the pornographic criteria of provocation. Rather, she belongs to an orgiastic world that goes beyond moral norms, social taboos, and even human reality, itself. She is a creation of Schmelzer’s fantasy that is also artistic expression of his voyeurism. His voyeuristic intent is obvious in the way he portrays her from a height, creating an impression that the artist is looking down on her. It seems as if the model is unaware of the artist’s presence.

Guy Berube, and Peter Schmelzer are both part of today’s art industry in which the boundaries between art, life, morality and fantasy are blurred, if not deliberately

violated, in the search for the essence of modern art as well as human nature. Berube and Schmelzer offer a visual experience that is unique in Ottawa's artistic scene. A visitor to La Petite Mort is able to change his or her daily gaze in order to adopt a way of seeing that assaults norms of propriety. Hidden behind the mask of a voyeur, a viewer is able to indulge.

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<sup>i</sup> Guy Berube, Artistic Director and Owner, La Petite Mort Gallery, Ottawa, interview by Ralitsa Doncheva, 21 February 2007.

<sup>ii</sup> Linda Weintraub, Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art's Meaning in Contemporary Society 1870s-1990s (Hong Kong: Art Insights, INC, 1996), 12. "Why does art need to be explained" is the title of the introductory, which is an essay on contemporary art by Arthur Danto.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>iv</sup> Judi Pearsall and Bill Trumble, eds., The Oxford English Reference Dictionary (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1235.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 1235.

<sup>vi</sup> Alyce Mahon, Eroticism and Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 37.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>viii</sup> George Bataille, Eroticism (London: Marion Boyars, 1987), 11; quoted in Alyce Mahon, Eroticism and Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>ix</sup> Alyce Mahon, Eroticism and Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14, 15, 16.

<sup>x</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 136 (from Dunglison Medical Dictionary 1857); quoted in Alyce Mahon, 14.

<sup>xi</sup> Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus, 885; quoted in Alyce Mahon, Eroticism in Art (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.* in Alyce Mahon, 14, 15.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, 36.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 36

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>xvi</sup> Gloria Steinem, "Erotica vs. Pornography" in Acts and Everyday Rebellions. (London: Fontana, 1984), 222; quoted in *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>xvii</sup> Guy Berube. Artistic Director, Owner, La Petite Mort Gallery. Ottawa: Interview by Ralitsa Doncheva, 21 February 2007.

<sup>xviii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.* "One Damp Drunk Moment" is the name of Peter Schmelzer's exhibition.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*