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How artists use plastic to talk about ecology

by **Mailys Celeux-Lanval** - December 2, 2022

Fascinating and ultra-malleable but also polluting and dangerous, plastic is a material of contrasts, subject to many debates. Invited to the Canadian Cultural Centre, the artists' and researchers' collective The Synthetic Collective proposes a multi-faceted study of it, through extremely varied works, most of them critical and political, some of them sublime. The exhibition goes beyond the simple aesthetic experience and attacks the traditional process of museum production... Captivating.



*Installation view "Plastic Heart" from The Synthetic Collective
Vincent Royer, OpenUp Studio/Canadian Cultural Centre*

In a corner, four full garbage bags are waiting to be emptied. In fact, they will wait until March, when the exhibition ends. The idea? To show the waste generated by the production of the exhibition, which has been reduced to a minimum according to the ecological intention of The Synthetic Collective. The artists and researchers of the collective took care to import only a few works from Canada, where a first version of "Plastic Heart" was presented in the University of Toronto's art gallery in 2021, and to call on French artists. They also asked the Canadian Cultural Centre not to prepare the spaces, nor to repaint the walls after the last exhibition, nor to fill in the holes. A keen eye will therefore spot the ghostly traces of the nails removed, as well as the foliage printed on the wall by a previous artist. As for the signage, it was cut out of salvaged elements.



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All of this is food for thought for the art world, which is seeing its traditional ways of working being shaken up and called into question. For it is impossible to deny it: art likes walls repainted between each exhibition, carefully printed labels, masterpieces on loan from distant museums. Here, The Synthetic Collective proves that it is possible to produce a (good) exhibition with fewer resources, less travel, less expense. And this approach goes hand in hand with the works on display. For example, with Pierre Hughe's *Timekeeper* (2002), a strange, cosmic-looking multicoloured stain on the wall... which is nothing more than a scratch made through the various layers of paint applied here over the course of the exhibitions, revealing blue, grey, black... "Even in this relatively new space (4 years old), this installation shows a significant number of layers of paint often made of acrylic latex polymers and resin binders," the collective explains.



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Because plastic, as we realise throughout this exhibition, is all around us. It is in the bistro chairs so typically Parisian, piled up in a spectacular totem at the entrance to the exhibition (*Chaise Polymère*, Synthetic Collective, 2022), in the sports shoes that Meghan Price agglomerates in an abstract and colourful painting (*New Balance 3*, 2017)... But also, in an infinitely more insidious way, in the landscapes. On the 10 square metres of the exhibition floor, Tegan Moore has gathered together all the plastic granules found on the same surface on a beach (*Permeations of a Dataset*, 2022), that is to say... 7268 plastic pellets, collected in Sarnia, Canada. Garbage, tampon wrappers and straws are brought together in this chilling collection, which resonates particularly with the neighbouring work, a map by Skye Morét that sculpturally summarizes the pollution of Canada's vast and important Great Lakes region (*Thank You to our Industrial Partners*, 2020).



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While some artists point their fingers directly at the appalling pollution caused by the use of plastic (Kelly Wood's photographs of piles of waste in the Great Lakes, Nyaba Leon Ouedraogo's of a landfill in Ghana), others keep a hint of hope and nuance in the picture. Christina Battle's visual and textual instructions for using plants to clean up polluted land (*THE COMMUNITY IS NOT A HAPHAZARD COLLECTION OF INDIVIDUALS*, 2021) are particularly noteworthy. Finally, and perhaps most disturbingly, some of the artists play with metamorphosis and ambivalence: J. Blackwell and his superb embroidery work made from recycled plastic bags (*Plastic Basket (B204)*, 2013), Alain Renais who masterfully films a plastic production factory in a hypnotic short film (*Le Chant du Styrene*, 1958) or Hannah Claus who orchestrates a *Chant pour l'eau* (2014) all in translucent pellets of images of rivers floating in the air. In praise of the purity of water, this last work tells us that it is perhaps because we value beauty that the world will one day manage to convince itself to pollute less.

Plastic Heart: Surface All the Way Through

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