

Art in America

Montreal Biennale

MONTREAL,
at

by Gregory Volk

Anton Vidokle and
Pelin Tan: *Episode 2*,
2014, from *2084: a
science fiction show*,
2012-14, three-channel
video installation, each
episode 22 minutes; in
the Montreal Biennale.



An exhibition with four curators, an artistic director—Sylvie Fortin—who came on board relatively late, and a mission to combine local Quebec, Canadian and international artists could easily be a patchwork affair. Instead, this thoughtful, compelling exhibition constitutes a dramatic improvement for the Montreal Biennale, and compares favorably with more renowned biennials elsewhere. Titled "Looking Forward" ("L'avenir" in French), the show takes place mostly in the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; off-site venues include Arsenal art contemporain, the Darling Foundry and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Throughout, diverse works speculate about what is to come, however alluring or unsettling that may be.

A highlight is *The Prophets* (2013-14), by the Canadian duo Richard Ighby and Marilou Lemmens. A long, spindly table displays miniature, seemingly abstract, minimalist sculptures made from string, wire, bamboo sticks and colored acetate. Playful and enchanting, these exceptionally un-monumental sculptures, each with a handwritten label, are based on graphs and charts in scholarly economic forecasts, such as "Four Possible

Steady State Paths of Growth." The precariousness of the mini-sculptures subtly suggests that these authoritative forecasts may prove flimsy in an unruly future. Ryan Gander's *Tomorrow's Achievements* (2014), four motorized curtains intermittently moving around a room, is comical and apt: a fluctuating system of revelation and concealment. Miami-based Jillian Mayer's series "400 Nudes" (2014) consists of startling takeaway photos in which her face has been digitally grafted onto nude female selfies found on websites. She's a protean figure in a burgeoning world of exhibitionism, voyeurism and self-presentation.

With artists including Shirin Neshat (who exhibits the sumptuous 2013 video *Illusions & Mirrors*, starring Natalie Portman) and Thomas Hirschhorn (whose hard-hitting 2012 video *Touching Reality* shows gruesome scenes of war and carnage), the Biennale has ample star power. Captivating works by less familiar artists, however, make for abundant discoveries. In Canadian Lynne Marsh's enthralling video *Anna and the Tower* (2014), a young woman, recently trained as an air traffic controller, crisply directs phantom airplanes to imaginary destinations from the control tower of an empty airport in Magdeburg, Germany. Shots of the woman, the silent airport and the sublime landscape meld in scenes of anticipation and desolation. In Egyptian artist Basim Magdy's neighboring film *The Dent* (2014), an enigmatic text hinting at what life was like in an indeterminate place and era—perhaps located in the past, or perhaps in the future, when big dreams have decisively faltered—is superimposed on images of a military parade, an elephant, a town seen from an airplane high above it, a caged bird and many other subjects.

Time is a recurring motif. Anton Vidokle and Pelin Tan's three-channel video installation *2084: a science fiction show* (2012-14) portrays an advanced era in which telepathic conversation can occur between entities like a donkey and a plant; and in Norwegian Ann Lislegaard's *Time Machine* (2011), an animated, nervous, talking fox, projected onto a mirror structure, stutters and grasps for language while recounting its visit to a remote future. New Zealander Simon Denny's colorful, digitally printed canvases, many attached to metal railings channeling visitors through multiple corridors, refer to a 2012 Munich conference of digital-era bigwigs. You are inundated with images, quotes and ideologies of fabulously wealthy leaders busily devising our future. The Montreal-based Mohawk artist Skawennati offers the tremendous "TimeTravellerTM" (2008-13)—nine machinimas (films made by using computer graphics engines) featuring two smart, sexy and utterly cool Mohawks who use magical glasses and computers to visit often harrowing past events (including an Aztec sacrificial ceremony and the violent 1862 conflict between Dakota Sioux and white Minnesota settlers). Ultimately, they relocate to a spectacular future in 2121.

Water is another motif throughout the Biennale. In Swiss artist Ursula Biemann's searing video *Deep Weather* (2013), a whispering female voice speaks of fossil fuel consumption and drastic climate change as you see bleak tar pits in Alberta, smoking factories and hundreds of brightly clad Bangladeshis sandbagging their coast, trying to keep the rising sea at bay.

Time and water converge in Berlin-based Czech artist Klara Hobza's wonderful 10-channel video and sound installation lining two walls of a stairway (*Diving Through Europe-Immersion Series*, 2014). Hobza is carrying out a years-long scuba-diving journey—illegally and in multiple stages—through bodies of water across Europe, including the North Sea, the Rhine River and, finally, the Black Sea. The monitors show short excerpts: Hobza plunging into canals, inching her way past swans and container ships, threatened by a passing ship, seeking solace in a chapel and propelling herself through powerful, murky waters. She's an antic, vulnerable, charismatic explorer navigating with difficulty toward an uncertain future.