

**Stop, Look & Listen. See What You Think:
On the Fine Art of Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens**

Over the last five, maybe six years I have seen the collaborative work of Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens on a number of occasions. Each time the word *philosophical* has popped into my mind as the adjective to describe their work. Not *reflective*, *rational* or *erudite* nor *thoughtful* or *deep*. Any of those words might just as well be the apt word, I suppose, for suggesting the nature of their work, and any one of them may be right for another viewer. For me *philosophical* was the word, and is the word that comes to mind again as I began to look at and think about the works which are in their *Horse and Sparrow* exhibition at the Vernon Public Art Gallery: *Virtuous Circle I and II*, *Titanic*, *Side Effects*, *Sesame Street Economics*, *Diagrams Concerning the Establishment of a Law and Economic Sciences*.

On some further reflection, but as a distinct afterthought, words like *didactic* and *scholastic*, *edifying* and *academic* also come to mind, to my mind, to describe the work. Ibghy and Lemmens themselves use a related word, the noun “pedagogy,” to describe to me one “category of intervention,” one of the three “categories” along with “communication” and “research” which altogether comprise *Horse and Sparrow*.¹ These are less happy words, for me, suggesting a potentially off-putting underside to their practice and their art. By that I mean, I get anxious when I think an artist is intending to teach me something or even that an artist expects that I will learn from their art! Although art is profoundly epistemological -- question of what and how we know are fundamentally part of the process of looking and radically so when looking at an artwork -- it is not the matter of education, of teaching and learning. Art is a more pervasively experiential matter. That said, I like Ibghy and Lemmens’ work. I like it a lot. I find it engaging, perhaps some of the real stuff as we look into the heart of a new century.

I feel fairly confident in thinking that Ibghy and Lemmens want with their work to change the way we think, the way we understand the world and, most importantly, the way we behave in it. There is in a sense an overriding mission well beyond aesthetics with *Horse and Sparrow*. After

all, if you stop and look and listen, they are often precisely didactic. Or perhaps it is just impossible today to be philosophical and not be perceived as onerously prescriptive and schoolishly homiletic?

As I look and think further, I have to admit that I also think we have to ask ourselves if Ibghy and Lemmens are serious? They observe, for instance, about their work *Economic Sciences (as a branch of psychology)*, in the text accompanying the work in the catalogue, that

...the initiative may also lead to insights into the causes of mental illness and other forms of non-productive behaviour, but we're not exactly sure how.

Is this straight talk? The form of discourse which the artists employ throughout the exhibition seems always to echo, if not mimic, scientific languages, words and sentences which are dispassionate and formed on a bedrock of factuality without guesswork.

Or, in the text for *Sesame Street Economics* they suggest that

....a playful tone [will] stimulate the learning process while reducing anxiety related to acquiring new vocabulary. Furthermore, the narrator's slow and deliberate enunciation improves word recognition, facilitates memorisation, and helps develop abstract thinking and classification skills.

Here the textual voice seems little different from that which we hear daily on television or read in direct mail advertising.

Is this straight talk? Can we trust it? We know that humanistic discourse of the last 100 years has been permeated with forms of irony and ironic perception. And we know that the everyday object and image - that is, the *non-art* object and image - have so infiltrated art practices so as to leave us often hard pressed to see how or why something is "art." Although it is a harsh judgement to be sure, the view of many is reflected in the popular online general-interest publication *Slate* where author Judith Shulevitz wrote

Four decades after artists began to turn painting and sculpture into the blunt linguistic messages and icky bodily functions that came to be called Conceptual Art -- “art that exists as ideas rather than as objects,” as 60s artist Les Levine put it -- it is now apparent that contemporary art is, in fact, a joke.²

Is *Horse and Sparrow* a joke?

It is hard to imagine, certainly it is hard *for me* to imagine, that Ibghy and Lemmens are merely pulling wool over my eyes, merely playing out an intricate joke. In one of their earlier works, a video titled *Panic Attack* (2004), Ibghy and Lemmens represent a man telling stories about his debilitating struggle with agonizing panic attacks. The format which the artists use is that of the stand-up comic routine: solitary man on a nondescript stage holding a microphone delivers a monologue - the speaker is even well dressed in a coat and tie. We only need to have watched a little television, only randomly passing by the Comedy Channel, to have seen the image a thousand times and know the form. Importantly in the artwork, the monologue is interrupted by laughter, the television sit-com laugh track, real but hollow laughter. In a sense, art mimics daily life here -- what could be more intimate to everyday life than TV? -- which itself, in this instance, is arguably an art form used to comment on daily life through humour. The laughter in *Panic Attack* has no basis in reality and by any standard is inappropriate. Yet *Panic Attack* is funny. It is also not funny. As is often the case with humour, we laugh in spite of ourselves. We feel a little confused about what we are feeling and what we think about what we are feeling. But the artwork is not a joke. Just because it uses a comic's pop medium to represent with humour a non-comedic subject is not reason to think we have been put upon. Art mimicking life which is mimicked by art which itself is mimicked.....the possibility for uncertainty is high and perhaps makes the art finally so much more compelling than the original model?

With such earlier work as *Panic Attack* Ibghy and Lemmens were beginning to use, perhaps were learning to use, forms which are not regularly understood as “art” forms and began the search, which is the Rubicon for every artist, the search for one's own subject matter, a room of one's

own, as it were, although bearing in mind that subject is never distant from form. The nascent elements of their art are evident in *Panic Attack* and more fully evolved and more subtly developed five years later with *Sesame Street Economics*:

- a **humorous**, but not playful, cast to their work which makes it easy to wonder, as I have, if I am seeing what I think I am seeing; am I understanding what I think I am seeing?
- a **minimalist** approach to the form and construction of the *object d'art* itself
- an obdurate suspicion that verbal **language** has more potential for meaning than visual “language”
- an equally obdurate fascination with language as **poetic** expression
- a **revolutionary** spirit

The last element, “a revolutionary spirit,” may be the most useful starting point for seeing the gist of the fine art of Ibghy and Lemmens. That they are revolutionary may be too strong a suggestion, but in part I want to direct attention to a moment in history when artists could be genuinely described as *revolutionary*, the 1917 Russian Revolution and the art practices which were generated in the revolutionary spirit of those now distant foreign times. Their art gave emphasis to design, and particularly clean graphic design and the graphic qualities of an image; to the construction, rather than the creation, of an object; to minimalist, undecorated forms; to language as a visual object/image in and of itself as well as language with image or object; to functionality and a spirit of utility; and to a communicable social message. The artists had new purposes for their art and found new ways to create new forms for new content. In attempting to see what we are looking at in *Virtuous Circle I* and *II* or in *Economic Sciences (as a branch of psychology)*, it is worth looking back to the then revolutionary art of a Rodchenko (1891-1956), El Lissitzky (1890-1941), Malevitch (1878-1935) or Tatlin (1885-1953).

What we might today take as revolutionary in Ibghy and Lemmens’ art is not so much their formal means as their putting the minimalist forms and graphic qualities, the functionality and design aesthetic to the subject *economic science*, a perhaps least likely subject matter for fine art. Of economics the 19th Century historian Thomas Carlyle said

a dreary, desolate and, indeed, quite abject and distressing one; what we might call, by way of eminence, the dismal science.³

But I want to come back to subject matter, to economic sciences, in a moment. I am still wanting to think about the form of the art, formal issues, if you will, although therein, I think, always lies the crux of the art matter. With Ibhgy and Lemmens it means coming to terms with their embodiment of language, their making words visible. In *Panic Attack* the linguistic was circumscribed with a speaking voice viewed, seen, and heard in a human body.

In *Sesame Street Economics* there remains a speaking voice in all of its complexity but it is a disembodied voice intoning words which appear on the screen as they are enunciated. The words are transcribed in a sans-serif font, a clean prototypically modern style of typeface which in fact has become the *de facto* standard today for texts seen on screen. The text for *Sesame Street Economics* is a series of word, “economic” words, such as *Dividend*, *Trade Balance*, *Dumping*, and *Cartel* which are displayed on a monochromatic background although, significantly in our age of HD television, the perky pastel colour subtly changes. The graphic sans-serif font and the monochromatic painting were pioneered by Russian artists working with revolutionary intent. Although El Lissizky and Malevitch might not recognize the 21st Century fonts and colours which Ibhgy and Lemmens use, they would, I think, recognize the revolutionary spirit behind *Sesame Street Economics* and the other works in *Horse and Sparrow*. It seems to me possible the Russians would not, however, appreciate the tactical humour which permeates Ibhgy and Lemmens’ work and which makes it so much more difficult to see what we think.

From my first look at the works in *Horse and Sparrow* I was aware in my own mind of artists such as Rodchenko and the other Russians and their revolutionary aesthetics. Ibhgy and Lemmens’ *Titanic* (86 of 126 diagrams representing the relationship between price and quantity with values ranging from 0 to 4) made sense to me in the almost 100 year old light of that revolutionary social aesthetic. And no art of any cogency no matter how vanguard comes out of a visual and intellectual vacuum. Yet the Russians did not seem to suggest the entire perspective through which to see what I thought about their art. I came to realize, and it is crucial I think to truly

seeing their art, that their focus on language arises out of a poetic accommodation of reality, and I thought of the Scottish gardener, artist and poet Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925 - 2006). His art was profoundly idiosyncratic and, whatever its varied manifestations, based on his poetic recognition of the world he wished to alter.

Like Ibghy and Lemmens, Finlay never worked alone but always with collaborators. His work gave emphasis to graphic quality, his subject matter was usually political and culturally demanding, his art developed outside the mainstreams of modern practices and, if revolutionary in some sense, was so toward a conservative end. Finlay came to mind because of his abiding concern to embody language as a visual object and a visual image. A work of his from 1981 is printed on a small card in Times Roman, a decidedly serif font, and chosen with deliberate care:

‘In the back of every dying civilisation
sticks a bloody Doric column.’

Herbert Read, quoted by Charles Jencks

‘In the foreground of every revolution,
invisible, it seems, to the academics,
stands a perfect classical column.’

Claude Chimérique, quoted by Ian Hamilton Finlay⁴

Materially speaking, Finlay’s art could not be more different from Ibghy and Lemmens’ art. But the three artists share a very distinctive concern - for language as poetic discourse, which with philosophic discourse is the most elusive form that words can take. In every day talking the words we use are more than simple utterances, they are never only what they may seem at face value. The simple greeting “Hi” can have as many nuanced meanings as the Inuit civilization has words for “snow.” Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens are fascinated with words as words, with language, as a poet is or a philosopher. If I am right, when I stop and look at *Virtuous Circle I* and *Virtuous Circle II*, and when I stop and think about what I am looking at, I have to start thinking in the same ways that I would if I were reading a book of poems or of philosophy.

I do not know exactly what those ways are. I do know that they demand my careful attention.

Let the old ways die. And if art and artists are not to disappear with them, they had better be prepared to commit piracy on any technique that will float and carry content.⁵

John Murchie

Upper Sackville, New Brunswick

Text from *Horse and Sparrow*. Exhibition Catalogue, Vernon: Vernon Art Gallery, 2010.

¹ Unpublished email correspondence, November 29, 2009.

² Judith Shulevitz, "Hans Haacke: Art or Punditry?", *Slate* (March 16, 2000) <http://www.slate.com>

³ Thomas Carlyle, *Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question* (London, 1949).

⁴ See Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay, A visual primer* (Edinburgh, 1985), 188.

⁵ Brian Fawcett *Cambodia: a book for people who find television too slow* (New York, 1986), p.61.