

**David Miles: Tales of modern life.**  
by Denis Lessard

In the autumn of 2008, British artist David Miles came to Montreal to set the first phase of his articule project in motion: he placed ads in the *Voir* and the *Mirror*, and posted illustrated flyers door to door in Mile End and the Plateau, inviting residents to tell him their personal stories. Using these tales as a point of departure, as well as his impressions of the city, Miles then set about producing a series of drawings, posters, murals, and mobiles.

David Miles' mobiles, made from cardboard cut-outs, show off his great dexterity: his delicate treatment of such modest material lends a buoyancy to them that contrasts with the seriousness of events to which they allude. Stylistically speaking, Miles uses line drawing and photographic framing for impact; at times his images resemble the stencilled aerosol images found on city walls<sup>1</sup>. Shadows projected from the cut-outs extend and animate the suspended works. Told in the form of a mobile, the narrative is necessarily fragmented and recalls the rebus; individual components blown this way and that by a sudden gust of air cause images to overlap and stories to become superimposed on each other. There is a play between presence and absence, fiction and reality, and silence and speech (the tales being told with images). The works' titles give certain clues, but in a sense the tales have been muted, as if they wait to be recounted verbally.

Miles' cut-outs call to mind 18th century silhouettes, or the more recent, politically motivated silhouettes made by African-American artist Kara Walker. The first mobiles were created by Alexander Calder in the 1930s, whose constructions suspended colourful, abstract forms. Says Rosalind Krauss on the subject of the mobile,

“In that it is a description of aspects of the body, in that its motion is intermittent rather than mechanically continuous, in that one feels impelled to set it in motion in order for it to ‘perform’ the role of filling out and inhabiting its own spatiality, the mobile locates its sculptural meaning as a kind of actor.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1982, Raymonde April made cut-outs of her own photographs and worked with shadows and silhouettes to create the series, *Personnages au Lac Bleu* (Characters at Blue Lake). According to Josée Bélisle, “Altered by visual cassation, the (re)working on paper of certain images (i.e. drawing, cutting-out, and bricolage) feeds the metaphor with the play of light and its absence.”<sup>3</sup>

As for content and mood, there is an overarching sense of melancholia and the accidental in Miles' images. This is perhaps due in part to the flyers that he distributed last autumn; he often casts his imagery in an atmosphere reminiscent of the film noir genre. Such dark imagery can also be seen in the artist's book, *Forest* (2007), in which ambiguous dramas are played out under sombre tree arches. The forest, populated with both real and mythical animals, is the uneasy setting for a series of unsettling images: a broken bottle, a viper, a dismembered hand... Here we see a body studded with arrows... over there, a man leaning on a shovel next to a woman and a mound of earth – is he digging a grave? Is that Hansel languishing in the witch's cage? And what about this crowd of hooded silhouettes? The imagination takes its own course...

It is always interesting to see what a visitor from another country will take away from all that he has experienced and perceived in a foreign culture. Following his initial visit to Montreal, Miles produced a series of pen and ink drawings and watercolours, interpretations of the lost cat notices that can be seen plastered to boards and lamp posts all over town. In fact, the artist was struck by these notices because they reminded him of an area of Brighton where he used to live. They speak of loss, and straddle the line between art and reality: the information remains unchanged, and we can still hold out hope of finding those beloved felines...

In 2007, Miles completed a commissioned work for the art gallery at the Lowry Centre, in Salford, Manchester, UK. Inspired by an artwork by the painter Laurence Stephen Lowry entitled *An Accident* (1926), he created a mobile representing a crowd of around 300 people made from cardboard cut-outs.<sup>4</sup> He also collected the stories of a group of local women, integrating their words into his artwork. This practise brings us to the subject of the use and celebration of anonymous speech by visual artists. Notable among such artists is Caroline Boileau, for her work in *Mémoire vive* (2002) and other projects carried out during her residency at Granby's 3<sup>e</sup> impérial in 2006, in which she integrated accounts of passers-by and the elderly into her videos, drawings, and cardboard cut-outs of words.<sup>5</sup>

Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim talks of the importance of fairy tales in stimulating the imaginations of children and in preparing them for adulthood. In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* he writes,

“Whatever an experience may be, it always affects all the aspects of the personality at the same time. And the total personality, in order to be able to deal with the tasks of living, needs to be backed up by a rich fantasy combined with a firm consciousness and a clear grasp of reality.... This rich and variegated fantasy life is provided to the child by fairy stories, which can help prevent his imagination from getting stuck within the narrow confines of a few anxious or wish-fulfilling daydreams circling around a few narrow preoccupations.”<sup>6</sup>

David Miles is motivated by the idea of bringing non-gallery goers into art galleries through their stories because, while the stories thus shared may trigger a feeling of vulnerability in the people who have shared them (despite the fact that they remain anonymous), these stories are transformed by the artist and thus distanced from the original, and so have the important effect of subtly stimulating the spectator's imagination, like fairy tales for a child.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Manon Tourigny for our conversation on the art of David Miles.
2. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1981, p. 216-18.
3. Original quotation: « Modulé en cassation visuelle, le travail sur papier de certaines images (dessin, découpage, bricolage) alimente la métaphore sur la lumière et sur son absence<sup>3</sup>. »  
Josée Bélisle, *Raymonde April. Voyage dans le monde des choses*, Montréal, Musée d'art contemporain, 1986, p. 8.
4. To see a diaporama on this project go to: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOX5-LPacug](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOX5-LPacug)
5. See Laurent-Michel Vacher et al., *Mémoire vive + L'Algèbre d'Ariane*, Montréal, DARE-DARE, 2004, p. 113. See also Denis Lessard and Martin Dufrasne, "Shake Well," *Champs d'intérêt : infiltrer, habiter, spéculer [I]*, Granby, Québec: 3<sup>e</sup> impérial, 2008, p. 36-38 and 47-48.
6. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, p. 118-19. This reference was given to me by David Miles.

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Translation by Sarah Knight

This text is part of a writing series by members of the gallery, reflecting on the works presented during articule's 2008-2009 programming season. Denis Lessard's text has been produced for David Miles' exhibition *Souvenir*, presented from May 22 to June 21, 2009, and is also available as a pdf on the gallery's website.

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