

LUANNE MARTINEAU: ART HISTORY AS GRIST FOR HER MILL

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Aidan's Fiddle, 2009 – Photo courtesy Rodman Hall

In her repulsively tactile, creepily cozy fabric sculptures, Luanne Martineau offers a thorough disemboweling of recent art history and shows a palpable joy at the evisceration.

In her current show at the Rodman Arts Centre at Brock University, Martineau's works pull the viewer every which way. All is grist for her mill; various body parts — a deflated breast here, greying fingers there, a foot, lengths of intestine, ventricles, aorta — protrude from fuzzy felt tableaux that ape the structural purity of high Modern movements: rigid geometric grids favoured by some Minimalists, or ordered proportional stripes of Abstract Expressionism, to name a couple.

There's a lot going on here, but let's start with the basics. Martineau's work is a blunt, visceral and often hilarious rejoinder to a high-art world still drunk on the fumes of high Modernism. Here in Toronto, we've joined the rush to further canonize the Abstract Expressionists — as if that were possible — with the importation of a definitive, if abbreviated, exhibition from MoMA at the AGO. Beyond that, it's no stretch to say the heady chill of conceptualism, with its premium on the austerity of gesture and materiality, still reigns supreme. Martineau offers an unapologetically sensual riposte on every level. Working in fabric (mostly felt, but with intricate wool and thread woven in and through it), a homely medium if there ever was one, Martineau bucks the high-art rejection of such work as earnestly artisanal craft. If craft was ever a radical endeavour (and in some circles, neo-feminist in particular, it is), Martineau, with her thoroughly worked-over swatches of ambiguous gore, is its poster child. Then there's that feminist part: Fabric work, traditionally, is women's work, and so it remains in Martineau's hands, but not in any way previously imagined. Martineau provokes a tension between all these things that demands to be reconsidered, and to truly appreciate this, you have to see it in person. Why not leaven a weekend trip to wine country, then, with a little art history

gore? Rodman might just be its ideal venue. I first saw this show at the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art last year, and while it was larger there, it also seemed a little too spare, too clean for the artist's intentions.

Here, Martineau's work is installed in the gallery's ornate Victorian mansion, and its luxurious domesticity is a near-perfect setting for her gutsy subversions. Either dangling from the ceiling near ridiculously baroque crown mouldings or splayed on the floor in front of the many marble hearths, Martineau's point-counterpoint comes into fuller focus. This is an environment built for polite conversations and proper, ladylike decorum, and Martineau will have none of it.

On the wall in the salon, "Aidan's Fiddle," a 2009 piece, is tacked to the wall. On a broad grid of origami-like hexagons on brown felt, Martineau has stitched a tableaux of homespun gore: Thick, protruding layers of coloured tissue suggest rotting meat; a rigid finger, grey but splattered with colour, appears for all intents to be flipping the bird to the entire affair.

Look closely and you'll see the knobby digit that was a signature of Philip Guston, who took apart bodies, among other things, in a decidedly messy late practice that effectively flipped the bird at his old chums in Abstract Expressionism.

Guston, in fact, with his own rejection of Modernism's false purities, is a kindred soul on Martineau's journey, and references to him crop up again and again here. His embrace of a visceral, semi-figurative grotesque speaks to Martineau, I guess, and in his maverick's retort to the fashion of his own day, it's not hard to see why.

But Martineau's target is broader and less specific. With "Sweetie," from 2004, a profoundly disturbing piece of cartoon savagery in which a deflated breast, rendered sickly orange, is fused to a blood-red organ (a heart?) with various viscera protruding.

There are reads here both easy, and not: The pedantic view is one that suggests a frank critique of art history's regard for women, both as subjects (one critic singles out her target as Henri Matisse's "Blue Nude," a full-figured icon of subjectified, erotic male fantasy if there ever was one) and as artists.

With apologies to Joan Mitchell, Lee Krasner and too many others to mention, modern art — like everything that came before, and much of what's come since — has been a notable boys' club. The brooding machismo of Abstract Expressionist artists at the top of the marquee, like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, is not lost on Martineau, who often includes in her work a littering of woven half-smoked cigarettes — a potent cliché for the dark angst of male creativity, Pollock seemed never to be shot without one.

With her raw patchwork of viscera, Martineau also challenges the Modernist edict toward a spiritual purity, dragging it back down to the realm of the sensual. In "Form Fantasy," from 2009, a white disc of felt is carefully creased into a circular fan. On its own, the piece is both a crafty feat and homage to Modernist pure form; so of course, Martineau violates it with a crude knot of coloured yarn that tumbles from its centre like chunky vomit.

If you can read the references, Martineau's work comes across as a cagey evisceration and vital challenge to conventional wisdom, but you don't have to:

Hers is a captivating revulsion, all sensual texture, colour and provocative form. It is gross and sublime, wry and blunt, complex and homespun.

Most important, it is a practice all her own. At 40, Martineau has already established herself both as one of her generation's elite — a Sobey prize finalist who has shown in museums across the country — and as a gleeful contrarian welcomed into the fold. A wolf in sheep's clothing? So it would seem. Just look for the blood.

Luanne Martineau continues at the Rodman Hall Arts Centre, St. Catharines, until Aug. 28.