



## Balcaen shows at Warehouse Gallery

By Nancy Keefe Rhodes

You can only rejoice at such fortuitous intermeshing of events. Part of "Come On," the new group show at the Warehouse Gallery, is a 30-minute-long video by Brooklyn-based Rachel Rampleman. Outlandish, troubling, sometimes hilarious, "Poison" stars the artist's sister, regaling us with an intimate, graphic account of getting what she spent her youth thinking she wanted: a weekend with Bret Michaels of the punk band Poison. Performing at the State Fair the same week the Warehouse show opened, none other than — the band Poison.

Artists depend on such synchronicity, which often seems to bless what director/curator Astria Suparak brings to the Warehouse. "Come On: Desire Under the Female Gaze" presents three young women artists responding to mainstream culture's persistent double standards about gender and sexuality. Besides that video, there's Brooklyn-based Juliet Jacobson's large pencil drawings of male bodies and Montréal artist Jo-Anne Balcaen's black balloon wall sculpture, "Blow," and her text-based pieces. The opening reception on Sept. 20 — the next citywide visual arts night, Th3 — follows artists' talks that afternoon.

Balcaen, whose work *Suparak* first saw last fall at Montréal's Parisian Laundry gallery, can't be here on the 20th, but she spoke one Sunday in August after installing her own pieces. From Winnipeg, Manitoba, part of Canada's great central prairie, Balcaen has an MFA from Concordia University. She's been showing for 12 years, teaches, curates, and writes about art. She works in Montréal's Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery.

**Jo-Anne Balcaen:** The first "Blow" was multi-colored. I was doing work with instantaneous symbols of celebration — ribbons, flowers, things like that. The point of the piece is it will be begin to disintegrate as time goes on and the balloons lose their air and droop.

**Do you feel better working with another gallery director/curator who's also an artist herself, like Astria?**

I do consider curating an artistic practice. I think an artist-curator brings certain sensibilities — perhaps be less singular in their vision, more flexible. But yeah, there is something about knowing both sides. I've curated a couple exhibi-

tions and I actually find it very difficult, to want to be as sensitive as I can to the artist and also know the very practical limitations of very limited budgets.

**This is the Warehouse's second year. We've seen a series of shows that bring Canadian artists together with US artists, and it makes this part of the landscape truly a crossroads. What's your response to the rest of this show?**

I watched Rachel's video earlier. I haven't seen Juliet's drawings in the flesh but I will after this interview. I was amazed at the links with Rachel's work — the similar interest in popular culture and obsessive fan-dom, this intense emotional build-up that reaches this zenith — it's completely one-sided — just to crash. You know — hope, failure, hope, failure. I think people will go from one work to the next and make their own links, of course. That's what's exciting about living with a show over a month, is you hear those

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comments.

**You've said the "elusiveness of happiness is the core" of your art. And you talk about the tension between wanting to be critical of how sexuality gets commercialized and still wanting to be "swept away."**

I guess the need to critique comes with being exposed to ideas like feminism, going to art school, learning to look at things critically, also to be self-critical. At the same time I live with all this popular culture around me. It's boring to be critical all the time, to make work that just – points. I'm more interested in admitting there's this tension within me – I can't help myself. I know it's wrong to have obsessive feelings about some rock star, but it's just something that you grow up doing.

**Besides "Blow" you've got the "Aw, C'mon" piece.**

"Aw, C'mon" is clear plexi-glass with a mirror backing. I was interested in commercial signage, fonts with immediate cultural reference. This one is based on the Metallica logo – it's like a sign for aggressive male behavior. I'm also interested in immediate associations you make when you pair that with an incongruous element. "Aw, C'mon" can be pleading, encouragement, absolute disbelief – I'm wanting to undercut aggressiveness with that confusion. Also the mirror – you see yourself reflected in that phrase.

**Can you talk about the text-based pieces?**

These are scans from an old dictionary. I found passages where words that followed each other created a little narrative. Of course I'm projecting that. For instance, "yearning, a deep and anxious longing," followed by "year-round, open, in use, operating throughout the year." So it's this state of constant desire. Then "Prince of Darkness, an epithet for Satan," "Prince of Peace, an epithet for Jesus Christ," and "Prince of Wales." [laughs] I have no particular interest in Charles – it was just the irony of it. The last one is "Blurt/Blush." It's about what we know about words and how we make associations.

**Do you associate this project with coming from English-speaking Winnipeg and living in French-speaking Montréal?**

Actually I grew up speaking French in Manitoba, as a minority. I'm now in a primarily French-speaking province, but living in Montreal, that tension is still present. People ask why I don't make work in French. I sort of consider French my intuitive language, whereas I did all of my post-secondary studies in English. I learned about art in English, most of my jobs have been in English. It's like a different part of the brain. I guess making work in French hasn't come to me yet.

**I wanted to ask about other work – the 2003 installation "El Dorado," where the ceiling is the art?**

"El Dorado" was installed

at SAW Gallery in Ottawa. My friend Stephan Kurr, who's a brilliant artist, was in Montreal for a few weeks and we went to Ottawa to tour the galleries. SAW's in the basement of the former law courts building. The ceiling is quite low with exposed duct-work and pipes. What we found interesting was how ominous and distracting that ceiling was. They painted it matte black to erase it. But the opposite happened – it was this heavy ceiling hanging over you. We thought, why don't we just blow the roof off? Also making this link with Baroque architecture – celebrating every inch of space, including the ceiling, beautiful paintings of open skies and angels and saints. We bought seven gallons of Ralph Lauren Ballroom-gold latex paint, we rented a sprayer and covered all the walls and had these suits and just sprayed gold paint over all these pipes and ducts. We bounced the light off the white walls so it sparkled better. We had this big opening. People from the German Embassy were walking around, going, "Where's the art?" Someone told me it's still up.

**What do you worry about most as an artist, or hope for most?**

What I hope for: I think that changes as you grow older. As a young artist, it's important to have role models who act as markers so you can imagine yourself having this kind of career. As you grow older, your expectations about your life as an artist shift. People you went to school with suddenly have careers – or not. You're very aware of that. I would

love to be more solicited for exhibitions. I'm very thankful that Canada has this fantastic artist-run center system, set up so that artists are paid to show their work. That kind of respect toward creative production is fantastic. It's perhaps easier in Canada to show your work consistently without having the pressure to sell. My ultimate goal is to make a living off my work. Conversely, Canada doesn't have the same kind of commercial scene that exists in the States – a different kind of pressure. Enough good stuff happens that you keep doing it.

**This year's Toronto International Film Festival is highlighting Quebec filmmaker Michel Brault – only one of whose films, "Paper Wedding," I've seen – the only one on netflix. Will highlighting his work help the arts scene in French-speaking Canada?**

There's so much good cinema coming out of Quebec right now, it's fantastic they're profiling someone like that. There's always been this divide between the two Canadas. Quebec cinema is so strong within Quebec and in Europe, in France. The sensibilities are different and you see that within the visual arts. It's more, maybe, philosophical or poetic or romantic, coming out of some incredible self-reliant will. I think Quebec doesn't look to the US the way art in the rest of Canada does. You see that in younger artists – for instance, students at Concordia, who are largely from elsewhere. There are successful Quebec artists – the art collec-

tive BGL, or Mathieu Beau-séjour – whose work is very critical, looking at the broader society. They are very well-met by the local audience.

**Is there something you like to be asked?**

The last time I did an interview I was asked who my favorite artists are. You hear so much from other artists how everything they see is garbage. So I like hearing what artists like, who they get excited by. I mentioned BGL, who do these incredibly involved installations with this irreverent humor. Their work just fires me up! This humor is lacking in a lot of work today.

**Some younger women artists feel a disconnect from older feminists because they perceive a lack of humor.**

I would agree that humor – you perceive it differently either as you grow older or as you kind of adjust your defenses. Someone like Barbara Kruger or Jennie Holzer, you find very trenchant humor and real wit to their work, very powerful because it kind of cuts underneath.

See more of Balcaen's installations, video, sculpture and audio on-line at [www.joannebalcaen.ca](http://www.joannebalcaen.ca). "Come On" runs through Oct. 27 at the Warehouse Gallery, 350W. Genesee St., 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Tues.-Fri., noon to 6 p.m. on Saturday. 443.6450. Extended audio of this interview at [www.thewarehousegallery.org](http://www.thewarehousegallery.org), along with details about the exhibit, related events, the Reception on Sept. 20, and artists' talks that day.