



Teacher's Guide: Mélanie Rocan, *Souvenir Involontaire*

Lesson Plan:

Objective

Contemporary artist Mélanie Rocan describes her creative process using the terms 'intuition' and 'memory' (artist's website). The title of Rocan's exhibition at Plug In ICA also references memory – the concept of 'souvenir involontaire' was developed by the French author Marcel Proust in reference to those 'ephemeral moments that arouse personal memories without deliberate or conscious effort' (Plug In ICA website). Through contemplation and discussion of the exhibition in relation to concepts of memory, nostalgia, the subconscious and creativity, students will explore the interaction between emotion and rational thought in creative expression.

Context

Mélanie Rocan's exhibition *Souvenir involontaire* at Plug In ICA

Prescribed Learning Outcomes

Students will:

1. Read and interpret visual materials.
2. Communicate their ideas, experiences and feelings visually.
3. Create an artistic statement that explains their personal creative process.

Assessment:

The teacher will decide on the appropriate assessment of this activity and communicate it to the class.

Sources :

- Glossary of important terms (pp. 6-7)
- Artist statement from Mélanie Rocan's website (pp. 8-9)
- Sigrid Dahle, 'The Gothic Unconscious,' excerpt from *My Winnipeg: Guide of the Artistic Scene* (Plug In Editions/La maison rouge: Paris and Winnipeg, 2011) (p. 10)
- Curatorial statement by Anne MacDonald (please see accompanying PDF)
- Interview with Mélanie Rocan by Janique Vigier, originally published in *Inform*, Volume 4, Issue 2, pp. 16-27 (please see accompanying PDF)

Web Resources :

- Series of audio-guided prepared by partner institution Doris McCarthy Gallery, University of Toronto Scarborough:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gz0djbZtZpw&list=PLf2StKEv9ITUJebIcrGbCxKMuSNcABI2>

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- Plug In ICA website for further information about the gallery and future programming:
www.plugin.org

Classroom preparation (before coming to Plug In ICA):

1. As a class, read and/or listen to a selection of the provided sources as well as the terms covered in the glossary.
2. In smaller groups discuss some of the themes you think will be important in the exhibition based on what you have read about the artist and the exhibition. Discuss your expectations and thoughts on what the exhibition and gallery will look and feel like.
3. Individually answer worksheet questions.

Activity (at Plug In ICA):

1. Tour of Mélanie Rocan exhibition with Plug In ICA staff.
2. Break into smaller groups and have each group select one painting. Have each student discuss one memory that they associate with the visual experience of the painting.
3. Create a collage-based artwork based on a memory. Share and discuss with the class (this activity will take place at Studio 393, Portage Place Mall).

Reflection (after coming to Plug In ICA):

1. Prepare an artistic statement about the artwork you created after your visit to Plug In ICA. For inspiration think about the artist statement you read by Mélanie Rocan and how it related to the exhibition.
2. Send the artist statements to Plug In ICA. These statements along with photographic documentation of the individual artworks will be reproduced and published by Plug In ICA as a small publication for the participants to keep.

Worksheet

Respond to each of the following questions with *at least* three sentences.

1. How does the medium of painting work to express the concept of “souvenir involontaire,” or memory more generally? In what ways would the exhibition differ if produced in an entirely different medium, for example photography?

2. The artist suggests that her paintings are created using intuition and memory. How do you think this could affect her style of painting? Discuss for example the use of colour, the style of brushstroke or the different sizes of the individual canvases.

3. The artist has talked about the theme of water in her paintings; she states that she believes water to be both a pleasure and a danger – simultaneously a life-giving source and a component of many natural disasters. Discuss how you think the interplay of these opposing expressions of the role of water in our lives could be represented in an artwork.

4. In her artist statement, Mélanie Rocan talks about the opposing roles of reason and emotion in the process of making artwork. How do you think this influences what subjects or images could be portrayed?

5. Local curator Sigrid Dahle has written about what she calls the 'gothic unconscious,' in relation to contemporary art produced in Winnipeg. Dahle defines this trend in local contemporary art towards the expression of dark or fantastic themes as an expression of the subconscious experience of the city's history. Mélanie Rocan uses the local prairie landscape as the backdrop to several of her paintings and has also discussed her work as an expression of the subconscious. What kind of stories or memories does this type of prairie landscape bring to mind? How does it differ from other kinds of landscape paintings you may have seen or your own visual experience of the local landscape?

Glossary:

Souvenir involontaire (mémoire involontaire):

In English, involuntary memory or remembrance, a concept developed by French author Marcel Proust (1871-1922). For Proust, in his literary works, the concept represents a moment, often triggered by a smell, taste or other ephemeral experience in which a personal memory suddenly comes to mind, often from childhood.

The subconscious:

The part of the mind or consciousness not part of conscious perception, that is, the part of the mind of which we are not actively aware of, the source of both intuition and dreams. The term comes from a French term first coined by the psychologist and philosopher Pierre Janet (1859-1947) and later popularized by psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) as 'the unconscious.'

Symbolism [art movement]:

Originally developed as a French literary movement in the 1890s, the ideas expressed by the poets associated with Symbolism – including Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) – came to influence a group of painters also concerned with the expression of subjective emotion. The movement focused on the expression and visualization of ideas and concepts through the experience of colour, line and form as opposed to realistic representation, moving away from the naturalistic representation of earlier artistic movements. Well known symbolist artists include Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) and Odilon Redon (1840-1916).

Expressionism:

An international art movement active between 1900-1920 in Germany ranging across the arts from painting and dance to theatre and literature. Across all mediums, the movement was primarily concerned with the expression of deep psychological truths and subjective emotion through their work, departing from the stricter figural and realist representation of their predecessors. Well known expressionist artists include Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) and Paul Klee (1879-1940).

Surrealism:

Originally a French literary movement devoted to the practice of 'automatic writing', a spontaneous practice which sought to liberate the subconscious mind in poetry and literary form. Developed in the late 1910s and early 1920s by poets André Breton (1896-1966) and Louis Aragon (1897-1982) among others, the movement began to influence and gain support

from visual artists including Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Francis Picabia (1879-1953). The movement covers a range of visual styles, including abstract and figurative works, the artists associated with the movement sought to express the unconscious mind through their work. Prominent surrealist artists include Joan Miró (1893-1983), René Magritte (1898-1967) and Salvador Dalí (1904-1989),

Intuition:

Knowledge or perception gained without the use of rational thought, often associated with creativity.

Memory:

The subject of centuries of philosophical and artistic inquiry, memory is the process by which humans store and retrieve information relating to past experience.

Nostalgia:

A state of sentimental or wistful thinking about the past.

Mélanie Rocan Artist Statement

My recent paintings speak of the fragility of human beings and the reality of the subconscious state. I want to capture a distressed beauty, which suggests an inner emotional condition of highs and lows and psychological unease. There is a dichotomy between the difficulty of comprehending the reality of the internal world and a reaction to the outside world's fragility and the present state of the earth. I rely on an intuitive process to create my paintings, which gives me freedom to explore and make discoveries. I find the struggle of creating work by intuition and memory produces a constant search to re-invent and build the work within the internal domain of my subconscious. This process also allows room for balance between my hand and the medium itself to communicate. Relying on an intuitive process to make paintings brings forth thoughts that are weighing upon me, because of a constant bombardment and awareness of the reality of the state of the earth and the world. In some of my work I attempt to show unity between humanity and nature, working together, existing as one without overpowering the other. Two worlds intertwined working collectively, agreeing and abiding by a natural contract.

I am interested in illustrating opposing forces in my work, and by unifying and combining these dualities, they can exist together as one entity, one cannot exist without the other. I want to evoke an inconsistency of emotions, making the work linger in-between a darkness and a playfulness, with the ability to affect and give sensations. For example in Caught In Hula-Hoops, there is a conflict in deciphering what is happening to the figures. They could be seen as either vulnerable beings who are caught by the mass of evocations that whirl around them or are playing in this maze of disparate objects. The contrast between the loss of control in the debris and turmoil, with a rather quiet and serene figures and setting, creates tension between calm and chaos and targets dimensions of the unconsciousness. The mass or fragments floating around them, reveal the inside and outside state of the figures, like a mirror, window or multiplication of mirrors. It explores external and personal sources and the dichotomy between symbols of the self and the environment, divided by psychological turmoil.

I often focus on gothic elements of familiar places, in finding horror or feelings of foreboding in our existence, in our memory and in living. I also merge autobiographical themes, dreams and reality. In combining nostalgic elements or familiars within the paintings, I want to convey a sense of security, which brings balance to the work. I am interested in creating a unity by combining dualities existing within the difficulties of life and nostalgic elements, which are evidence of our humanity. Nostalgia represents an uncanny timelessness, an anchor that provides us with a sense of stability, bringing us to another moment in our lives and allowing us to lose ourselves in the innocence.

I have recently found inspiration in my earlier works, combining large abstract painting with a miniaturization and an attention to detail. By bringing these techniques together on one surface, I am not only concerned with the process of painting but the balance between paint and content, and want to leave room for interpretation and suggestion. By combining these two ways of working, abstract planes and particular details, I want to create two opposing

forces in the work, an indeterminacy and an over-determination of space. I often use prairie landscapes as backdrops or fields for composition in creating a painting. The environment is often overcrowded with information, not only in the elements in the painting but in the psychoanalytic sense, by emphasizing the dichotomy between reality and inner life and the psychological borders that are evoked.

The Ferris wheel is often present in my work, as is the repetition of the circle in the representations and composition of the work, which represents a structure of life. This circular composition also refers to the way our eyes and our mind sees the world. Fragments and isolation are the raw material furnished by memory, allowing the painting to be assembled and organized into larger and more substantial dramatic structures. By excluding certain elements of the outer world, such as space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, I bring attention to memory, imagination and emotion. I want to focus on the complex interaction between the real and the fantastic by blurring the distinction between these elements.

Source: <http://www.melanierocan.com/statement.html>

Sigrid Dahle, 'The Gothic Unconscious'

The Gothic Unconscious, a theory conceptualized by curator Sigrid Dahle, wildly speculates that Winnipeg is a city haunted by the ghosts of its traumatic social history. This history includes (but is certainly not limited to) the genocide of indigenous peoples, the dispossession of the Métis, the hardships endured by Icelandic immigrants founding a new republic at Gimli (just north of Winnipeg), the arrivals of Russian Mennonites fleeing persecution and Jewish holocaust survivors in search of a safe haven, the exploitation of impoverished European and Asian immigrants (culminating in the spectacular 1919 Winnipeg General Strike) and the monumental struggles of women to attain full citizenship.

The Gothic Unconscious proposes that this aura of tragedy and impoverishment manifests itself in the abject, uncanny and surreal quality of much contemporary Winnipeg art, even when this work doesn't explicitly address the city's troubled histories.

Source: *My Winnipeg: Guide of the Artistic Scene* (Plug In Editions/La maison rouge: Paris and Winnipeg, 2011), p. 45.