

Fiona Annis. *Correspondences*

March 14–May 19, 2024

The recent photographic work of artist Fiona Annis resonates within the walls of the Foundation, bringing to life conversations about art that are part of the identity of this singular and luminous place. Her approach is rooted in an in-depth knowledge of analog photographic processes and is characterized by a keen attention for the unexpected images that materiality can reveal. As part of a research-creation project carried out during a residency at the Foundation, the artist revisited the epistolary archives between Molinari and his contemporaries to express networks of affinity and relationships of complicity in a new way. The photographer's natural inclination to create dialogues arising from the affective charge and history of a site, thus took shape in accordance with her sensitivity and the fluidity of the photographic techniques she deploys.

As the custodian of a collection consisting of fifteen linear metres of documentary archives, the Foundation preserves significant material that reveals the history of art in Quebec, including several epistolary files containing handwritten letters spanning over more than five decades. Paul-Émile Borduas, Dorothy Cameron, Danielle Corbeil, Claude Gauvreau, Cerj Lalonde, Rita Letendre, Robert Holland Murray, Barnett Newman, Rodolphe de Repentigny, Jean Paul Riopelle and Fernande Saint-Martin are among those who corresponded with Molinari; the painter, poet, teacher, theorist, polemicist, critic, husband and friend.

These letters have taken on a new material life under Fiona Annis' attentive gaze. The discursive accounts and various rhetorical arguments laid down in the letters, as well as the personality traits that emerge

from the calligraphy of the protagonists, revive meaningful historical conversations. However, it is in the transgressive force of the illegibility of the written word that Fiona Annis' research takes root. Her formal grammar transmits neither the structure of the written language, nor the subjects to which the archives bear witness. Instead, the artist's photographs aim to reveal the affective structures of non-verbal language, reversing the hegemony of the conversational over the visual.

We humans were quick to realize that the objects we see take on a completely different appearance if we use instruments to reduce or augment the perceptive power of our senses: the telescope and the microscope have enabled us to see very distant and very small things more clearly. We now know that the stars aren't tiny sparks above us, that the table we're leaning on isn't static, but made up of billions of molecules in constant motion, and that the tiniest atom of matter is a world of extraordinary phenomena.

— Fernande Saint-Martin
La littérature et le non-verbal, 1958, p. 43.
[Our translation]

For the series of images entitled *Correspondences I–XI*, Fiona Annis selected 11 letters, which she treated as non-figurative surfaces of inscription and photographed on a light table using a macroscopic lens. Placed before her materials, the photographer observes the evasion of words and the transformation deriving from the shift in scale. Fiona's images emanate from intuitive processes, spontaneous decisions, unconscious desires and bodily gestures. During the shoot, very few images were taken. The artist seeks a key moment when thought is detached from articulated language, so that affective materiality can transport the manuscripts beyond their original

meaning. As she aptly describes, these photographs allow us to reimagine the topology of time by way of a medium that is traditionally known to capture it.

This meticulous reframing led to eleven photographs that expose the great work of time on paper letters, illuminate the suggestions of the material and magnify the poetry of its imperfections. Between this material exploration and the agency of the correspondents in Molinari's life, the photographer carefully underlines certain analogies, notably a formal dialogue between Rita Letendre's assertive signature and the place she should assert in the arts community; a delicate use of colour to reflect the epistolary affection that arose between Molinari and his colleague Robert Holland Murray; a bright, sensual, fragile materiality with torn edges is reframed in the letters from Fernande Saint-Martin.

The second series produced as part of her residency, simply entitled *Letters*, is the result of an approach that abandons the camera body entirely. Without revealing the written content, the artist creates masks made from envelopes and postage labels. Echoing Molinari's painting techniques, Fiona Annis develops a system of pre-composition in which stamps and postage labels are used in

the manner of masking tape. As the paint seeps under the painter's masking tape, the chemistry penetrates the spaces set aside by the photographer. Realized by means of a liquid process and skillful darkroom techniques that result in colours that are never uniform, the photographs in the *Letters* series explore photographic abstraction by paying homage to epistolary forms and the practice of correspondence.

Fernande Saint-Martin has frequently asserted that words, like the objects that surround us in the world, have no fixed meaning or identity, but rather that these arise from networks of association, since they depend as much on the affective value that our experience bestows on them as on any objective property whatsoever. Reality, and I would add history, is too complex to be described in a single image, and needs to be grasped in another way that includes the human being as "a particular organism that is constantly modifying itself and entering into ever-new relationships within an ever-changing environment." The finesse of Fiona Annis' approach resides in her ability to capture and resonate the behaviour or structure of the movement of reality's past lives.

— Marie-Eve Beaupré