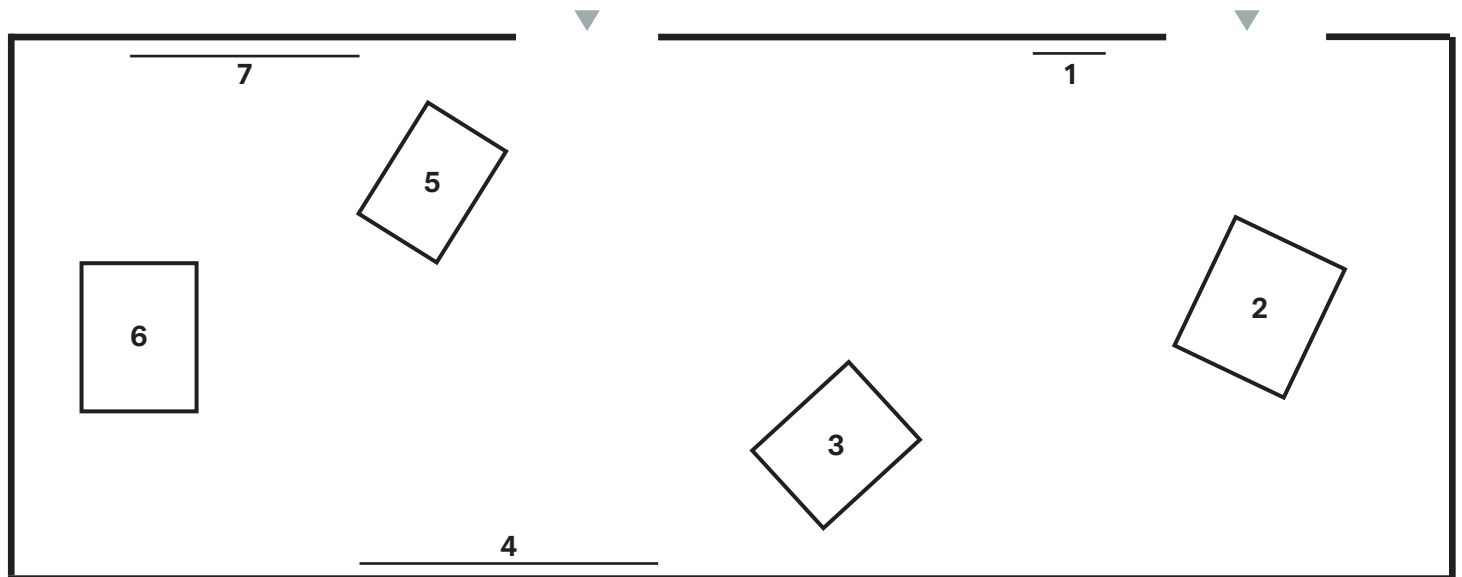




# Vikky Alexander

## Nordic Rock

Curator: Caroline Andrieux  
Main Hall



1. *The Ice House*, 1988, Original postcards, 30x30"
2. *Dichroic Bed*, 2020, Dichroic glass, 28 x 48 x 60"
3. *Glass Chaises Longues*, 2020, Dichroic Glass, 32 x 18 x 48" each
4. *Nordic Rock*, 2020, Vinyl, 18' 4" x 16' 1"
5. *Dichroic Chair & Table*, 2020, Dichroic glass, 36 x 16 x 16" and 14 x 14 x 14"
6. *Dichroic Benches*, 2020, Dichroic glass, 36 x 36 x 16" each
7. *Frozen Wall*, 2020, Vinyl, 10' 9" x 11' x 5"

# Vikky Alexander

## *Nordic Rock*

Curator: Caroline Andrieux

Main Hall



After a retrospective in 2019 at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vikky Alexander presents *Nordic Rock*, a precious, fantasy-rich installation that contrasts the brutalist and imposing architecture of the Fonderie Darling's hall.

The industrial setting harbours fragile sculptures representing highly stylized elements of design furniture, such as a bed, a chair, a night table. Made of dichroic glass, an iridescent material that reflects light in a spectrum of colour, these minimal and extremely delicate sculptures are presented on pedestals arranged like islands in the space so as to reinforce their inaccessibility. Akin to jewels or precious stones capturing and reflecting light, these non-functional objects aim to captivate and create desire as they attract viewers and hold their gaze. Their shimmering, transparent surface subtly plays with the patina and architecture of the heritage building. The height of luxury, these works reveal the tremendous tension between the former working-class neighbourhood and the current, massive real estate development intended for a wealthy population.

Staggered with the sculptures and structuring the exhibition, two imposing vinyl murals of photo collages stand opposite each other, covering the full height of two wall sections. Composed of images gleaned from magazines, the murals use collage to associate views of dramatic or sublime landscapes with close-ups of textures, simulations of organic or vegetal matter.

Through these immense windows that open onto fantastical horizons, through the distortion of scale and the games of make-believe, the artist highlights the marketing strategies of appropriating and substituting nature used by the real estate and interior design markets. She also raises the question of authorship by reappropriating and recontextualizing images.

Alexander is a conceptual artist whose work explores the culture of consumerism and fantasy. Her work is distinctive in its ability to examine the world of illusion and material desire by using the language of architecture and design, borrowing from the imagery of high fashion and design magazines to address the themes of desire and commodification and the ways in which society projects us into these unreal environments. Playing with reflective materials and optical illusions and using strategies that trigger unconscious motives, the artist creates minimalist interventions in photography and sculpture.

Caroline Andrieux  
(translated by Oana Avasilichioaei)

This exhibition was made possible thanks to a major contribution by Numérart.

# Vikky Alexander

## Nordic Rock

Curator: Caroline Andrieux

Main Hall



### NORDIC ROCK

Vincent Bonin

During a trip to Chamonix, France, in the mid-1980s, Vikky Alexander found two postcards depicting the ice grotto in the Mer de Glace glacier of Mont Blanc. The first depicts an utterly banal winter landscape. The other shows an incongruous scene: a room with sofas, coffee table, and fireplace sculpted in ice. Every year, the village residents dig a tunnel allowing tourists to penetrate within this body of water that has been frozen for several centuries, while at the same time carving again an architecture of comfort at the core of the glacier's indifferent matter. Alexander has joked that after she discovered these images, she wanted to make this furniture herself again, in ice. In the end, inspired by the generic forms of the furniture inside the grotto, she made axonometric drawings keeping only the bare shapes of these odd elements to conceive sculptures that she would later produce by assembling glass panels. When the objects were first exhibited in 1988, entitled *Glass Bed with Tables*, they were installed on *ad hoc* pedestals or against backgrounds that were theatrically lit. As they were presented among works by other artists, these similar elements emphasized, through their limited variation, the arbitrary co-existence of objects in group exhibitions. Paradoxically, their near invisibility echoed the motif of the empty gallery that so many conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s took up as a radical refusal of an expressivity whose articulation had become a motif over time nonetheless, finding residual forms of pathos and added value—a degree zero of

anthropomorphism—against the screen of nothing to see. When documented against neutral backgrounds without any references to the exhibition space, as was the case in 1988, the sculptures lose some of their veneer as art objects and in their literality, they come closer to the iconography of furniture sale catalogues. Yet they also make present—through its absence—the fetish of the commodity itself, as the surfaces of the chairs, tables, and beds indicate the “uninhabitable,” the impossibility of sitting down or to find one’s place, rather than the functionality of design.

The appearance of these three-dimensional forms in the late 1980s marked the end of Alexander’s investigation of media representation of the body, which she had been pursuing since the beginning of that decade. The transition towards quasi-abstraction led the artist to delve into a series of case studies in the 1990s—and still ongoing—that focused on heterotopic places or entertainment enclosures (the West Edmonton Mall, Disneyland, Las Vegas, Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte, and Versailles, among other sites). Before this shift, Alexander mainly rephotographed pages from fashion magazines with a 35-mm camera, fitted with a macro lens and set on an adjustable copy stand. The process, which involved reframing the images by removing the captions and brand logos, allowed her to undo the essentialism of the models’ poses, mostly female subjects absorbed in feigned pleasure offered solely to the male gaze.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Alexander did not wish to impose an understanding of her work through the hermeneutics of the then current theoretical discourse

(feminism influenced by psychoanalysis and semiotics). Therefore, she created an open interpretative framework, expanding the possibility of ambivalent readings of the media fragments once removed from their original contexts, accentuating the fact that viewers should take responsibility over their unconscious. Although the 1988 sculptures dispense with the human figure, the permutation of their components nonetheless metonymically give shape to a “couple form” *in absentia* by sketching the outline of a bourgeois interior. As such, the residual presence of the subject in these sculptures brings us back to previous “appropriation” work, specifically the series titled *Between Living and Dreaming* (1985). Alexander superimposed 35 mm slides of stereotypical but nonetheless moving scenes of men and women embracing onto those of idyllic landscapes. To unify the surface of the representation, she mounted the prints under coloured panes of Plexiglas. It could be argued that the 1988 glass objects became a kind of holographic extension of the screens placed over these photographs, emphasizing transparency instead of opacity.

It should also be noted that Alexander manifested her interest in subverting the category of the decorative well before this shift to more spatial concerns. In the late 1970s, she began attempting to blur the divide between functionality in design, integrated into the principle of supply and demand, and the supposed intellectual autonomy of conceptualism. Between 1979 and 1980, she collaborated with Kim Gordon in New York to create Design Office, a firm that offered services to peers, often without them having expressed an explicit need. The work undertaken by Alexander and Gordon (mending clothes, illegally painting a facade, designing business cards) humorously referred to the phantom value of the invisible labour of certain protagonists of the art field. In *Lake in the Woods* (1986), Alexander pursued the strategy of making hybrid objects and producing floating

signifiers by covering one wall of the Cash/Newhouse Gallery in New York with wallpaper bought in a hardware store, depicting an exotic landscape similar to those found in medical waiting rooms or banks. On the opposite wall, she placed strips of imitation wood with small inlaid mirrors. This generated situation of making the viewer aware of his own looking which brakes the fascinating power of spectacle through the use of adjacent reflective surfaces, had already appeared in certain works in the series of rephotographed magazine pages of the early 1980s. The repeated or reframed images often included dark areas reiterating the institutional space as well as the bodies. This time, in *Lake in the Woods*, viewers could single out a section of the landscape and eliminate all contextual cues, as though transported elsewhere. Along with shifting the logic of design to the field of art, the artist also contributed to a conversation of the period about space and the commodity by critically exploiting the stylistic characteristics of generic commercial architecture that Modernism had purged and replaced with a fetishism for the building’s support structure.<sup>2</sup> Alexander did not valorize and ennoble these so-called vernacular attributes by integrating them into already established vocabularies after they became neutralized. Instead, she showed how the corporate language of managing spaces and bodies—under the guise of providing access to a fantasmatic realm—controls how we conceptualize the purpose of these transit or entertainment sites and defines the social ties, especially transactional ones, that we weave there.<sup>3</sup>

Over the last decade, Alexander has been reviving past works. For example, she has produced new series of her photographs of magazine pages from the 1980s. Yet beyond this fairly common practice of reprinting, she is also interested in the possibility of adding meaning to the afterlives of earlier work. In some instances, she has chosen to modify their appearance or scale.

The sculptures presented at the Fonderie Darling results from a slight shift of the first configuration created between 1988 and 1990, which bears the fact that it is still located in in the art discourse of that era.<sup>4</sup> The act of rephotographing pages of magazines was contemporaneous with the images' availability in the media (in contrast to Barbara Kruger and other peer artists, Alexander never used dated iconography). By strategically waning affects, the sculptures also constituted a critical counterexample to the reactionary reinvestment of masculinist subjectivity in Neo-Expressionist painting. When the works reappear today, we perceive the gap between their revival under the present neoliberal regime and the postmodern condition of yesterday. The recent instantiation of this cycle, at the Fonderie Darling, reiterates the first version's entire sequence of permuted elements with the addition of dichroic glass, which makes the ambient light filtering through the immense windows of the Main Hall all the more visible. The amalgam of multiple layers of coloured metal oxides also creates the illusion that the object's appearance changes according to the viewer's movements. Dichroic glass is a relatively new material that appears strange when first encountered. Furthermore, the re-emergence of these sculptures at an interval of many years from their inaugural presentation responds to the possibilities and constraints of the foundry's actual site, as well as the economic context of real estate speculation and urban gentrification of Montreal.

Here, the sculptures also might make us think of the parachuting of Donald Judd's modular "specific objects" in the vast exhibition rooms of Dia Beacon, a former Nabisco box printing factory. Alexander has added other elements to the configuration of the furniture pieces, which further distorts the sublime aspect of converted industrial architecture. All the details integrated into the walls, floor, and

ceiling of the exhibition space that indicate the site's initial function have the same intensity despite their varied dimensions. For example, the immense furnace merges into the rough surface of the bricks. These details are ghosts of a past that has been superficially recovered yet this history remains inaccessible in terms of class struggle. By making rudimentary collages, enlarged on vinyl so as to completely cover the drywall sections of the Main Hall of the Fonderie Darling, Alexander wishes to alter the phenomenology of a readymade virtual reality, itself determined by a simulation of the authentic. Generally, the modulation of cybernetic grids behind the helmet produces a continuous perspective, without any interruption. Here, instead of an immersion, we find composite non-sites where nothing seems to be in the right place. One oversized mural depicts an abstract strip, like a closed curtain or a dizzying lightning flash, while a seascape deceptively carves an escape. A second intervention juxtaposes samples of artificial textures of rock and wood with a fragment of an ocean scene similar to the first one. The transition from these trompe l'œils to the surface area of the architectural enclosure introduces the possibility that the patina of heritage sites can also be a matter of fabrication. It now becomes easy to recreate "the truth to materials" in a precise way. Although highly photogenic, Alexander's glass furniture sticks out in this warm environment by bringing cold and untouchable surfaces into the foreground. Emanating from the translucent windows, the sunlight offers added value as it falls against these iridescent swaths of colour, already ruined yet bearing no signs of wear and tear as though frozen in an eternal present. They stand between our bodies, the foundry, and the outside, creating an imaginary site of speculative complicity.

In a 1970 work, artist Robert Barry installed a quotation by Herbert Marcuse in vinyl lettering on gallery walls: "Some place to which we can come, and for a while 'be

free to think about what we are going to do’.” The statement might seem naive today. Like others of his generation, Barry believed that these places could become a parenthesis of reflexivity and agency. Yet as of the 1980s, it became clear that to believe in such a discourse was no longer tenable. Without being cynical, Alexander has tried to define the perversion of these escapist places that promise us emancipation, an idyll with ourselves, while casting our bodies outside after use. On the one hand, instead of offering us screens on which we could project something—a recovered utopia—she underlines the paradox of our everyday attempts to give up capitalism in architectural enclosures cut off from the social world. On the other hand, her works make us recognize that while living these fantasies, we are entangled with this system of accumulation that produces abstraction by swallowing up a real territory where collective life, rather than the individual dream, could have flourished.

(Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On Alexander’s rephotographing practice, see Leah Pires, “Double Takes,” in *Vikky Alexander: Extreme Beauty* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery and Figure.1), 51–64.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Wallis discusses this contribution and how it transcends the approach used by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour in their 1972 project, *Learning from Las Vegas*. See Brian Wallis, “Vikky Alexander,” in *Vikky Alexander* (Calgary: Stride Gallery, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> On Alexander’s work with space and architecture, see Vincent Bonin, “Vikky Alexander: Beyond the Seduction of Enclosures,” in *Vikky Alexander: Extreme Beauty*, 99–118.

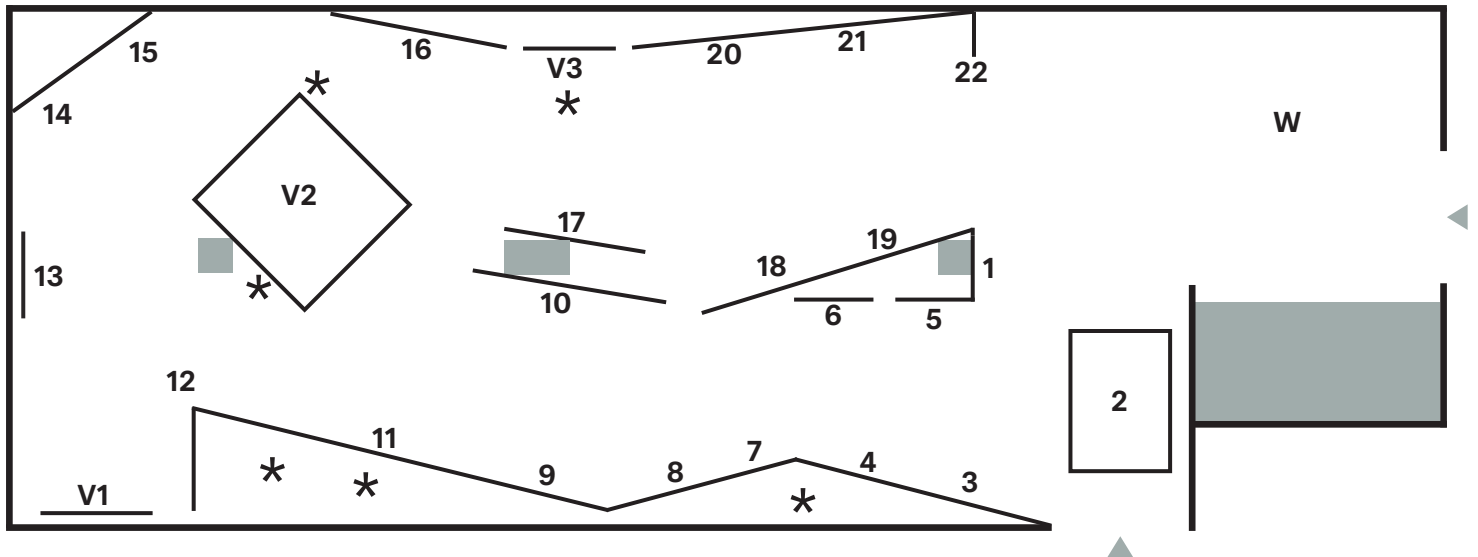
<sup>4</sup> Vikky Alexander produced *Mirror Chair* in 2000, as one element in the series that has been reactualized now in its entirety.



# Michael Eddy

## *Je suis*

Curator: Milly-Alexandra Dery  
Small Gallery



### **Styrofoam engravings Printed on Tyvek 2017 - 2020**

1. *Luther 3000*
2. *The Matrix*
3. *Beach*
4. *The Crossing*
5. *Wedding*
6. *Library*
7. *Hippies*
8. *Riot*
9. *Crowd*
10. *Je suis*
11. *Young George*
12. *Arms*
13. *On Strike, In force*
14. *University*
15. *Bar Mononcle*
16. *Tsarnaev dot biz*

17. *Vague Bleue*
18. *Steve Madden*
19. *Class Room*
20. *Missionnaires*
21. *Renaissance*
22. *The Last Word*

### **Videos**

- V1.** *Infinite cruelty, for nothing*, 2017, 33 minutes  
**V2.** *Extremities*, 2020, 10 minutes  
**V3.** *Coercion*, 2020, 11 minutes

### **Other**

- \* *Armchair Participants*, 2017 - 2020, Leather from discarded couches  
**W.** *Wendels Institution*, 2010 - 2016, Chapbook



# Michael Eddy

## *Je suis*

Curator: Milly-Alexandra Dery  
Small Gallery



For his first dedicated solo show in Canada, Montreal based artist Michael Eddy presents various aspects of his recent work, including prints of scenes of contemporary life, intimate videos, and humanoid characters. Titled *Je suis*,<sup>1</sup> the exhibition comes together as an eclectic and contrasting installation that defies any hasty or simplistic interpretation.

The exhibition title refers to the slogan of support, “Je suis Charlie,” expressed after the Charlie Hebdo newspaper attack, as well as its many subsequent iterations. By eliminating the direct reference to the event, *Je suis* invites viewers to imagine a new complement to this verbal state, this rallying cry indicative of self-expression in general. From one work to the next, a narrative unfolds that is both coherent and dissonant and that, with a bit of humour and provocation, criticizes the prevalent conservatism and pretention to universality. The images confront each other and encourage viewers to ask: what is permissible, or simply acceptable, to say, write, or show?

A series of prints on Tyvek paper, printed from matrices cut in found styrofoam, reproduces a visual language inspired by medieval woodcuts and contemporary political cartoons. Through the images shown, Eddy lays the groundwork for reflecting on the freedom of expression in democratic dialogue while also offering a critical reading of neoliberal values and North-American plutocracy. The iconography of the characters and the places illustrated convey various types of discourse: that of the “mononcle”<sup>2</sup>

sitting at the bar, that of people glued to their computers, surfing the web, those transmitted by the education system and dominant political and media voices, and that of the angry crowd whose dissidence meets police repression.

Two videos complement this body of work, punctuating the space already charged with double meaning. In a more sombre register, evoking snuff movies and the aesthetic of soft porn, *Infinite cruelty, for nothing* and *Extremities* show disturbing, even upsetting, interactions between various objects. The staging of visceral urges and the expression of the forbidden, of transgression and desire suggest aspects that remain undisclosed, censured, or repressed. A dialogue emerges between the still prints and the moving images, implying that speaking in public operates in parallel with constructing an individual’s identity, the individual developing in tension between that which is openly performed and that which is inhibited and kept out of sight.

Intentionally ambiguous and encouraging a second reading, *Je suis* incites non-conformist thought. How can we resist the discourse that paralyzes conversation by simplifying ideas to the extreme? Is it possible to make one’s own path through the mob? Addressing sensitive issues, such as academic freedom and the rise of hate speech, Eddy is sarcastic about the prefabricated aspect of certain public exhortations that ultimately boil down to false demonstrations, edifying or not. Also situated throughout the space are sculptures made from recycled chairs and

sofas—*armchair participants*, as the artist calls them—reminding of the omnipresent gaze of others, the presence of those who observe passively yet passionately.

Milly-Alexandra Dery  
(translated by Oana Avasilichioaei)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A statement that means both “I am” and “I follow.” – Trans.

<sup>2</sup> A Quebecism that can be used both as an affectionate nickname for one’s uncle or as a pejorative one for a man who is very traditional, or even backward, in his thinking and who likes lewd jokes.

**Michael Eddy** is a laureate of the 2019-2022 Fonderie Darling Montreal Studios program and receives the generous sponsorship of the Claudine and Stephen Bronfman Family Foundation.

The artist would like to thank the Canadian Centre for Architecture for their valued contribution.

# Michael Eddy

## *Je suis*

Curator: Milly-Alexandra Dery  
Small Gallery



### KING CHAIR'S CACHE

Jeanne Randolph

#### **The Throne, or thievery in the service of identity**

"You'd think these would sell, but no one tosses their credit card my way," said King Chair. *King Chair* was this man's sales persona on television and social media. King Chair had invited me into the basement where the unpopular furnishings were waiting. The basement was brightly lit, the walls well-sealed, temperature and air quality superb. The vast room was pale blue. Its eight tall pilasters were glossy Imperial Red.

"If this marble throne, for instance," King Chair mused, "was fabricated for Charlemagne, but nobody will pay even a penny for it, it's worthless, right?"

The throne looked just as Wikipedia describes it: "four simple cream-hued marble slabs joined by bronze straps." Its form was stark: a vertical slab on each side of the seat cube and a curved back slab. It looked like a chair, except that five wide, white marble steps led up to this throne, cold and poised atop four thick limestone pillars. The pillars formed a stodgy table, four feet high with right and left sides open.

"You could humiliate yourself by creeping under the throne on your hands and knees. Charlemagne relished visitors doing so. He would chortle like a delighted child."

Who had whispered this? To say it was even a whisper was not quite right. This voice, if it was a voice, wasn't as loud as a whisper. I perceived it more like a whirr, like mosquito wings close to the ear.

Charlemagne's throne was whirring a message to me.

"My left slab arm was once a marble table in a first-century Trastevere firehall. You see the lines scraped into the marble? To entertain themselves, bored firefighters had scratched the grid lines required for playing the Nine Man Morris game. In 326 CE, the slab was pilfered for construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The scratches hadn't been effaced in Jerusalem. They were mistaken for occult Christian graffiti. After five hundred years, this scratched marble slab was purloined from the ruins of The Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Dramatically linked to the time of Roman state worship, the defaced slab bestowed upon Charlemagne a kind of reverse, admittedly pagan, immortality. Instead of going forward to all eternity, his validation went backwards for all eternity."

The throne abruptly changed the subject, as if it was gagging on my love, not its love, of history.

"I had been protected from the bombs of World War II; I had been buried in sand and covered with tar paper. For eight decades now, the bits of tar sticking to my surface have inflamed an insufferable allergy."



## **The Rocking Chair, or myths of the Hawthorn tree**

A transparent Victorian crystal bell jar was placed over a rocking chair on a pedestal. The bell jar was somewhat larger than a coffee mug; the hawthorn wood rocking chair was no taller than a ballpoint pen. The minuscule chair had been meticulously carved. The seat was utterly charming: a tiny plank of wood had been whittled into a gentle S-curve to serve as a solid seat. It was nicely concave at the back, then flowing into convexity where the sitter's knees bend over the front. Eight dainty rods formed the back of the chair. The rods were stabilized at the top by a curving wood rectangle with rounded corners. Remarkably, the chair's understated beauty resided in its perfect proportions and the unblemished precision with which the various sections of chair had been fit together. The hawthorn wood surface was so clear it seemed somehow virtuous.

According to King Chair, this was an authentic piece, likely fifty years old. He described a wee inscribed copper label on the underside of the seat:  
FAIT AU QUÉBEC par A. Nadeau.

I leaned closer to appreciate the chair's detail. King Chair suddenly lifted the bell jar and set it on a nearby oak desk. To my dismay, I was so close I could hear the chair—or the hawthorn wood—groaning.

"Mr. King Chair!" I sputtered.  
"The chair! It's making a mournful sound. This is scary. It's upsetting!"

"Ha ha," King Chair responded.  
His eyes crinkled. His laughter was coarse.  
"Ha ha scared you did I?"

"The chair is suffering!" I whined.

"Do you know what day it is today?" King Chair asked me.

"Uh, it's a Friday I think."

"Think some more," King Chair said gruffly. "Not just any Friday, Good Friday. For millennia we have witnessed the hawthorn tree weeping and groaning on Good Friday. Hawthorn was the tree that supplied the crown of thorns slammed onto the head of Jesus. Ha ha!"

The chair was so tiny I dared not touch it to give it comfort.

King Chair continued his cruel jocularly. "And when you pluck a thorn from this tree, it screams! It might even bleed. Ha ha! How did Albert Nadeau put up with that kind of racket and mess while he worked on the hawthorn with his good ol' Buck Brothers knife?"

## **Seventeenth-Century Tapestry, or an example of misrecognition**

Responding to a phone call, King Chair had left the basement, but returning now, he bellowed from the top of the stairs: "Have you discovered my angel yet?" To be polite, I quickly checked the objects at a distance from the abraded cube of white limestone I was contemplating.

A tapestry pillow was barely discernible on a plain cherrywood bench two pilasters away. When I came closer I read the card beside the pillow:

17th-Century Tapestry Angel  
with Custom Trim on Rich Gold Silk  
with Sienna Silk Velvet Back  
\$ 3,000

An intricately ornate ribbon bordered the tapestry, attaching it with minuscule ultramarine thread to the silk front of the pillow. I marvelled at the luscious tapestry, parchment white, dabs of midnight green, russet with curling strands of Imperial yellow.

The colours coalesced into a free-falling putto at the moment he collides with an array of—swan eggs? dinner rolls? Were these tufts the undulations of meringue?

Was this a splashdown or crash landing?

“Do I look like Raphael’s putti in the Madonna di San Sisto painting?”

“Actually, no,” I answered without having heard anyone ask the question.

Cherubs in general have inspired many companies: Cherub Children’s Shoes, Cherub Flaorotherm, Cherub Availability Services (cybersecurity), Cherub Hair, Cherubs tomatoes, Cherub Software, on and on. The appeal is obvious, if *cherub* evokes those adorably harmless onlookers at the bottom of the Madonna di San Sisto’s cloud.

Raphael’s darling cherubs at the bottom of the San Sisto painting have been copied ad nauseam since 1512 CE. Copies can be seen on greeting cards, tee shirts and teacups, ash trays and polyester pajamas. Raphael’s sweet cherubs are plump and pink, their eyes bright with curiosity.

I stared into this pillow cherub’s eyes. They were dark. They were tense and narrow. His eyebrows looked like finely tattooed comets, and his mouth was set in a grim red line.

Don’t Christian cherubs flit merrily aloft, smiling at nearby saints? Christian cherubs don’t dive headlong to their doom. And this chubby fellow’s wings did not look like feathers. His wings looked gummy, like melting wax.

“*Vai a dormire!* Fall asleep...  
Fall asleep! Fall, little Icarus, fall!”

## **The Rekhmire Chair, or considerations of Essence**

A slender carved cedarwood chair had been placed upon twelve white-washed planks of acacia wood. The cedarwood chair had no arms. Its four skinny legs curved like cat hind limbs, its fat feline paws steady on the planks. The back of the chair delineated a triangle: a spindly cedar branch was snugly fixed into a hole at the back of each side of the seat frame. The gracefully bent branches were lashed together at the apex. This triangular chair back was more air than support.

A pink Post-It note was stuck on the side of the seat frame. Fastidious script clearly identified the chair as

ca. 1479–1400 B.C.E.  
reign of Thutmose III - Amenhotep II  
Upper Egypt, Thebes, Sheikh Abd el-  
Qurna, Tomb of Rekhmire.

The scent of the cedar was intense. It was almost palpable. Not only did it fill my nose and lungs, but it also filled my ears. It lay as a film on the surface of my corneas. It rang in my consciousness like a quivering cymbal.

I heard nothing, but I knew something was being imparted.

“The Egyptians of Thutmose III’s reign possessed a Ka, a personal occurrence of the life force. But they had not yet discovered Being. The Egyptians had not yet discovered philosophical propositions. Their ethos was limited to deeds and things. Magic incantations were not prayers. They were technologies for influencing deeds and things.”

The chair could have been communicating to me. (The scent of cedar might be a coincidence.)

The cedarwood itself may have been communicating to me. (The scent of cedar is a volatile organic compound, a universal medium of plant signalling.)

If the chair was teaching me, its message was: “In essence, to the Egyptians, I was nothing more than the status conferred by costly Syrian cedarwood.”

If the cedarwood itself was teaching me, its message was: “I tell you—the Being of this chair is nothing more than my Being, the Being of Syrian cedarwood. Neither physical form nor money determine Being.” This aromatic pronouncement seemed to be evidence that plants absorb Heideggerian philosophy, even when they are bent into furniture.

### **The Coconut Chair, or expressive posture and social change**

“Mr. King Chair,” I said in as shy and bewildered a voice as I could feign, “why is the George Nelson Coconut Chair here? Hasn’t it been a coveted modernist icon since 1955?”

“Business purposes,” was his reply.

It could have been named the cantaloupe chair, the scoop chair, even the concave chair, but as the impresario of design George Nelson had said, “Design is a response to social change.” Ten years after World War II, business execs found that the changes were super: drinking Barbados rum through the straw in a coconut, the windswept shapes of cars, tight skirts, open plan offices, the variety of Lacoste polo shirt colours, the Seagram building, basically New York City. I didn’t say any of this to King Chair. I knew perfectly well King Chair interpreted history as an endless supply of objects. If King Chair had been my father and I was still a rebellious teenager, I would have yelled: “You have no comprehension of context! You haven’t

the slightest idea what the word history means!” And then, with a flourish, I would swirl out of the room.

King Chair was ambling to a distant corner to take a phone call.

“You look lonely,” I said to the Coconut.

I was certain the Coconut’s reply would be: “I am.”

It’s a matter of posture. When a person settles into the Coconut chair, they immediately look languid. Arms relax when reaching easily for the sides of the chair, and this conveys confidence, especially because the spine is not stiff. An upright posture conveys orthodoxy. The mid-century exec would lounge in the Coconut; and he would look out into the room; he would be pleased by the sight of post-war social change.

“Pardon me if I am speaking for you,” I said to the Coconut, “but social change in late Capitalism is exemplified by the couch potato. The slouching spine, the head nodding forward, one hand on a TV remote or two thumbs on a cellphone—is it possible to believe this posture expresses participation in social change? Doesn’t it express submission to social change? In other words, I am afraid today’s man would not fit (I mean psychologically) into the Coconut.”

Of course, the Coconut agreed. The Coconut chair was built upon the relationship between a chair and the person sitting in the chair, the chair and the person united in their historical moment.

**Jeanne Randolph** is a cultural critic, author, performance artist and psychiatrist whose work explores the relationship between art and psychoanalytical theory.