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Art with heart: Toronto welcomes Condé and Beveridge back

Karl Beveridge and his partner Carole Condé with Fall of Water, one of their works on display at Toronto Free Gallery until Feb. 24.

Nick Kozak for the Toronto Star

By Murray White
Feb 4, 2012
http://www.toronto.com/print712420

In Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge's world, the war between heaven and hell, at least these days, looks something like this: Below, a chaotic swarm of pestilence and despair, peppered here and there with the corporate-produced refreshments one might reasonably expect to have signed sponsorship deals in the inferno — Pepsi-Cola, Nestlé, Dasani. Above, a swarming tower of humanity struggling to climb skyward from the chaos, its haunch defended by a sturdy-looking Bolivian woman beating back the corporate herds with a jagged scythe.

It's called Fall of Water, a recent digital photocollage the artist-couple made as an indictment of a rapidly corporatizing realm of global water rights. In the swim with the usual suspects, you can glean the names of such massive multinational mothercorp water giants as Bechtel and Thames Water, and a ragged banner from the World Bank; the avenging figure at its heart represents Bechtel's takeover of the public water system in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2000 that sparked a massive, and successful, popular uprising.

It's packed so full of topical references that a full reading would be near-impossible.

If you're going to try it though, check in with your art history. Fall of Water is a contemporary, highly subjective reimagining of Peter Bruegel the Elder's The Fall of The Rebel Angels, his 1562 masterwork that depicted the archangels, lead by Michael (his stand-in here is the Bolivian peasant woman, a symbol of the power of grassroots organizing), beating back Lucifer's hordes.

Bruegel's painting seethed with fantastical, gory detail. A vicious, swarming evil plague also seems at turns impish, ridiculous, absurd. Condé and Beveridge apply the same painterly eye to their deeply layered composition, with maybe a little more absurdity: another microcosm shows a sweet-eyed Indian woman clad in a sari preparing to smite a grey-suited executive holding on for dear life to a hydroelectric dam. Righteous though they may be, let it not be said they don't have a sense of humour. They know they're laying it on thick, and they're having a hell of a good time doing it.

Fall of Water, surprisingly, is making its Toronto debut this month, at the Toronto Free Gallery, where the first show of Condé and Beveridge's work here in eight years is taking place.
This in itself is remarkable. Since the late 70s, Condé, 71, and Beveridge, 66, have been the pater and mater familias for at least two generations of artist-activists here. They have worked tirelessly and ceaselessly, embedding themselves

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in the labour movement and generating, with the cooperation of dozens of workers, hundreds, if not thousands of works depicting the crumbling, often violent realities of a dying working middle class: deindustrialization, downsizing, health care, environmentalism — everything seems to have fallen under their purview at one time or another.

So finally, this month represents a mild corrective. In addition to the Toronto Free show, called Scene Otherwise, Condé and Beveridge are the subject of a feature documentary at the Reel Artists Film Festival on Feb. 26. Called Portrait of Resistance, it is, like them, frank, incisive, and more than a little funny. If you'd like to see for yourself, you can go to their lecture at the Ontario College of Art this Thursday, where they'll be delivering a talk on what can safely assume is one of their favourite subjects.

It's called "Art Creates Change." If it's not their motto, then it's surely their longest-held hope. Fall of Water, in its unvarnished accusations of environmental destruction, isn't their newest work — it was made in 2006 — but it draws a nice, even line from past to present. Thirty years beforehand, in 1976, Condé and Beveridge had their first Toronto homecoming, a major survey show at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

In the gallery's annals of infamy, it remains a feature chapter. The artists had been in New York since 1968, each developing independent sculptural practices alongside the major esthetic upheavals of the day, minimalism and conceptualism.

Quickly, though, Condé and Beveridge saw its initial, radical impulses co-opted by market forces. Courted by dealers and curators, a sickening sense of being packaged and sold for a rarefied coterie of moneyed buyers began to take hold. Art was wilfully obscure, oblique and exclusive. "That whole process was just gut-wrenching," Beveridge says. "When we'd have a show of our sculpture, so few people would actually come to the gallery to see it. After a while, we started wondering, 'What's the point?' "

Roald Nasgaard, then a young AGO curator looking to make a mark, commissioned the survey for the gallery as his very first show. When he went to see Condé and Beveridge in New York to check on their progress, he found a studio filled not with the sculptural pieces he expected, but placards and banners scrawled with political slogans. "It was a shock," Nasgaard said recently, laughing a little. "But not enough of a shock for me to not carry on with it."

When the show opened in 1976, it was their coming-out party as artist-activists: Gallerygoers were greeted with long banners in big blocky letters, declaring such things as "ART MUST BECOME RESPONSIBLE FOR ITS POLITICS" and CULTURE HAS REPLACED BRUTALITY AS A MEANS OF MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO." Condé and Beveridge titled the show ". . . It's Still Privileged Art" and used the gallery against itself as a critical reprisal of the insidery, market-driven game of art buying and museum display.

Nasgaard was surprised, but understood. "I think they were right not to do the show the way I had imagined they would do it," he says. "For their own purposes, that road was exhausted."

It had its impact; once the show was over, it went into the gallery's archives and hasn't been seen since. Within its walls, neither have Beveridge and Condé. "We stopped seeing them in the so-called high art world," Nasgaard says. "They seemed to just disappear."

This is what one might call a calculated risk. Back in New York, established conceptual stars such as Lawrence Weiner and William Wegman sat them down in a Soho bar and read them the riot act. "They made us feel like we were ratting them out," Beveridge says. Soon after, in 1978, they left New York for Toronto and set out on the path that defines them

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to this day. “We were rejecting that whole scene, and we knew we would be marginalized for it,” Beveridge says. “But we knew what we wanted to do was work with people, with the community.”

They targeted labour unions, for both their disconnect from the cultural elite and their central position in working-class society, which was rapidly unravelling. Unions needed help communicating, and badly. Condé and Beveridge began doing simple jobs, such as making posters and banners for various unions, to gain their trust.

Strikes were common; union-busting even more so. In 1980 their first opportunity to immerse themselves in the experience would define their mode of working for decades. A United Steelworkers effort to unionize a mostly female workforce at a Radio Shack warehouse in Barrie had sparked a conflict with the company. The women were too frightened to let Condé and Beveridge photograph them for the scenes they were planning to construct, so the artists turned to actors and made recreations.

It gave them unexpected licence: That series, Standing Up, became a collection of complex, highly constructed mise en scènes that mirrored the anxieties of women’s working life — they were late to be included in organized labour — with the stresses of maintaining a family and home. Like all of their work that followed, it presented a highly readable universal drama that any one of the artists’ working-class subjects would identify as simple, hard reality.

Crafting an artistic language that speaks to that audience is no mean feat. It’s not without its critics, either. “The quality of directness in their work has made some people nervous — they don’t know how to read it,” says Jan Allen, the chief curator of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ont.
Allen organized a major retrospective of Condé and Beveridge’s work, Working Culture, in 2008.

The show’s venues seems to bear her observation out; in Ontario, it showed in Kingston, Oshawa (at the local UAW hall as well as the Robert McLaughlin Gallery) and Windsor, but none of Toronto’s institutions stepped forward.

There’s a long-standing distaste for overt political content in, as Nasgaard put it, high art, and Toronto’s major museums are famously squeamish about such things. Though as Allen observes, this is a cyclical thing. “It’s a field that constantly renews itself,” she says. “Really vital art invites rereading and rereading through the generations,” she says. “In the long term, history will be their ultimate judge.”

Whatever history thinks, Condé and Beveridge learned long ago to take their satisfaction in the experience, not the aftermath. “The relationships we’ve made through the labour movements, the shared experiences — those are genuine and real,” Beveridge says.

Condé agrees. “We’re very much a part of the art world, just in a different way,” she says. “What we’re trying to say is that there are alternatives.”

Scene Otherwise continues at the Toronto Free Gallery, 1277 Bloor St. W., to Feb. 24. A documentary about Condé and Beveridge, will be a highlight of the upcoming Reel Artists Film Festival,

Portrait of Resistance: The Art & Activism of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge: (is) A clear-eyed, comprehensive look at the career of seminal Canadian artist couple Condé and Beveridge, who sacrificed promising conventional careers decades ago to ally themselves with labour movements in hopes of giving voice to the disenfranchised. Essential viewing for any Canadian art lover.
Screens Fri Feb. 24, 5PM, at TIFF Bell Lightbox.

(Murray White’s film review was published in the Feb 22 edition of the Star.
http://www.toronto.com/article/714398--marina-abromovic-the-artist-is-present-makes-canadian-premiere