

CANADIAN

art

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TATE MODERN
The World
as a Stage

RAYMONDE
APRIL
Quebec's
Photographic
Treasure

TREE MUSEUM
Ten Years
and Counting

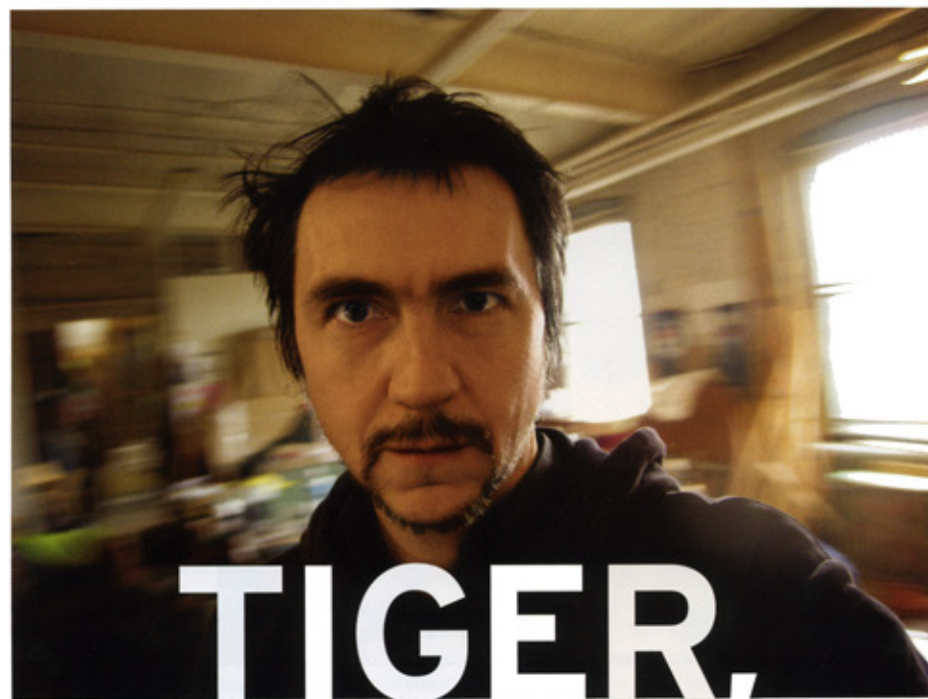
HANSON +
SONNENBERG
SERIOUS PLAY
From Halifax
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SYLVAIN
BOUTHILLETTE
A BUDDHIST
BURNING BRIGHT

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**PAINTING
IN TONGUES**
The brush-stroke language of
BEN REEVES



TIGER, TIGER

The ferocious compassion of Sylvain Bouthillette

by JAMES D. CAMPBELL

Amid the arresting clutter of Sylvain Bouthillette's glorious *bordel* of a studio on rue de Bellechasse in Montreal's Little Italy district, a bestiary of tigers, horses, squirrels and teddy bears pops out of the canvases, chalkboards and tattered papers that either lean against or are pinned to the walls or propped up on windowsills and jammed helter-skelter into corners. Their faces materialize from nooks and crannies to transfix the unsuspecting viewer's eye. They seem right at home. One gets the impression that Bouthillette is an animal lover and his studio a sort of Buddhist-sponsored SPCA.

Winged, feral, wide-jawed skulls and other hungry ghosts flutter and zoom across his paintings like emissaries from fearsome nether regions, hell-bent on mischief. The words "Santo Subito"—like a tarnished edict, holy rant or inflammatory writ—are written on both Bouthillette's studio walls and the surfaces of his huge horse portraits. The phrase served as the title of an exhibition of Bouthillette's painting and photography at Clint Roenisch Gallery in 2006, and references the banners displayed in the streets of Rome in the wake of Pope John

ABOVE:
Sylvain Bouthillette, 2008

RIGHT:
Alléluia (detail) 2004-05
Oil, spray paint and
graphite on canvas and
cement. Series of 4 works,
1.87 x 1.26 m each
COLLECTION MUSÉE NATIONAL
DES BEAUX-ARTS DU QUÉBEC

FOLOWING PAGES:
Sylvain Bouthillette's studio
in Montreal

The presence of Buddhist iconography and legend in Bouthillette's art is not to be taken lightly



Paul II's death in 2005, calling for his immediate sanctification.

Bouthillette's work is a joyous and subversive mélange of anarchist thought, Buddhist iconography, art history and his own being—caught up in a rowdy whirligig of hectic flux on the gangplank to Noah's ark. He is at once altruist, Buddhist sage, tough-love spiritual counsellor and quasi-Marxist activist. His art is synonymous with his spiritual practice; it's impossible to know where one leaves off and the other begins. His art is intended as a catalyst; if his avowed goal is to get us to know our own true selves better, his paintings are templates for deconstructing who we think we are. The textual component of his work—like the ubiquitous FUCK YOU!—functions as a thumb in the viewer's eye. It's his way of giving us the finger—not the obscene hand gesture, necessarily, but a finger pointing to a need for action, for a militant stance against the myopic condition of being here—a finger for freedom. His work has a decidedly punk edge that effectively inoculates it against any high-art pretensions, yet it is a tonic, a homeopathic remedy for the spirit and mind.

Bouthillette was born in Montreal in 1963 and obtained his MFA from Concordia University in 1991. In addition to his multi-disciplinary visual-art practice, he has toured intermittently with

the post-hardcore group BLISS over the years. He has shown his work widely since 1983 and is currently represented by Clint Roenisch Gallery in Toronto and Galerie Trois Points in Montreal. Over the past two decades, his work has veered wildly between sculpture, prints, drawings, painting, audio installation and photography. In each medium, he works with a lively family of referents uniquely his own, migrating restlessly between low culture and high art, the sacred and the profane and the ultra-mundane, punk rock and so-called American-style "Bad Painting," Tibetan Buddhism and the distillation of creative high fever.

His work recently toured Canada in a show curated by Bernard Lamarche, the former art critic of *Le Devoir* and now a curator at the Musée régional de Rimouski. Aptly titled "Dharma Bum" (in reference to the 1958 novel by the American beat-generation writer Jack Kerouac), the exhibition is a long-overdue mid-career survey that includes more than 30 major works from a 16-year period. According to Lamarche, the works in the show demonstrate "an almost base materiality" in their "trash" aesthetic and use of pop-culture imagery.

The presence of Buddhism in Bouthillette's art, however, is not to be taken lightly: Buddhism is for him not just an aesthetic strategy or passing interest, but a daily practice and the source of the deeply felt iconographic reservoir he draws upon in his art-making. He has long acknowledged Tibetan Buddhist meditation as a crucial influence on his art: the titles of works such as *Milarepa*, *Song Khapa*, *Mahakala bombardant le conditionnement mental* and *Hail to the Almighty Green Tara* directly reference this tradition. The animal farm that populates his corpus is inhabited by a legion of expressive spirits that have wandered in from Buddhist legend, and deities such as Milarepa, the Tibetan saint, and Tara, who is known as the "mother of all the Buddhas" and embodies the female wisdom-activity of the mind, count among his devotional favourites.

The painting *A Love Supreme* is named after a work by the jazz legend John Coltrane, whose oeuvre Bouthillette also reveres. As he explains,

One of the true blessings of my creative life has been John Coltrane. His music is aggressive, but the aggression is really a form of fierce compassion. His message is one of unconditional love. He shakes you up and inspires you. Similarly, I try to throw viewers off balance, to make them really look and question both my work and the inside of their own heads.

All of Bouthillette's work has this edgy and interrogatory ethos, like a protest song or improvisational music. This is what he seeks—for his artwork to convey to the viewer all the rawness, immediacy, virtuosity and brio that the best free jazz communicates to listeners.

Bouthillette currently teaches drawing at Concordia University

OPPOSITE:
Untitled 2008 Mixed media
on paper 1.14 m x 83.8 cm
COURTESY CLINT ROENISCH GALLERY

RIGHT:
Dharma Tram Stop 1997
Wood, steel, concrete
(sculpture); acrylic, latex,
chalk and varnish on wood
(panel) Sculpture: 3.6 x
1.32 m; panel: 3.22 x 2.44 m
COLLECTION MUSÉE D'ART
CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL



and in 2006 appeared in the filmmaker Sophie Deraspe's wonderful *Rechercher Victor Pellerin*, which appeared in Paris cinemas and was recently issued on DVD. The so-called "mockumentary" film looks back at the life, work and disappearance of an *enfant terrible* of the Montreal art scene, Victor Pellerin, who allegedly destroyed all his work before vanishing in 1990. In the film Bouthillette plays himself and portrays an old friend of Victor Pellerin. You also see him doing plastering work at the gallery Parisian Laundry ("to pay the rent") in preparation for a show meant as an homage to Pellerin; out of necessity, however, all the "Pellerin artworks" are his, not Pellerin's. In the film, Bouthillette is no less charismatic than his old friend is made out to be.

It might seem paradoxical that the artist who stars as himself in the Deraspe film should hold up the Tibetan saint Milarepa as a worthy model for emulation. In the 11th century, Milarepa transcended the unmitigated misery of his early life and went on to

embrace the practice of meditation, thereby achieving enlightenment. While Bouthillette would never admit that he has reached anything like enlightenment, there is no question that he possesses a certain hard-won, adamant street wisdom.

Bouthillette wants to share the fruits of that difficult journey with others. His altruism is as unfeigned as his anarchism. He sees his art as tantamount to a spiritual discipline: he wants to cut through all the many impediments that stand in the way of our achieving freedom, self-knowledge and enlightenment. His fierce opposition to the misgivings that congest every human heart—myopia, rage, fear, hatred, greed—is clearly felt in his work. The fierce skulls, fanged tigers and black crows of his art serve as his agents in a war against mediocrity and complacency.

In a world wreathed in post-9/11 darkness, Bouthillette seeks the light. The rough aggressiveness of his work is a beacon on a path toward sanity. ■