

REVIEW: The Absurdity and Gravity of Milutin Gubash

BY JOSEPH HENRY | MAY 03, 2013



(Milutin Gubash)

If curating is the discriminatory process of selecting some, but not all, works for the sake of a cohering thematic, aesthetic, or sensibility, the **Fonderie Darling**'s mid-career survey of the Serbian-Canadian artist **Milutin Gubash** has done away with it. "Milutin Gubash: In Union" (until May 12) foregoes any sense of order, instead positioning the collected output of Gubash's career on the gallery floor, and offering step ladders for more advantageous viewing.

The exhibition is presented as "several coincidental events in the artist's professional life" dovetail: Gubash's departure from his Darling Foundry studio (which he had kept since 2009); the end of an exhibition cycle presented in 5 different locations across Canada, in a less than 2-year interval; the production of a first mid-career monographic catalogue.

Gubash's all-or-nothing curatorial approach to his own work, then, seeks to create a daunting excess of information, a purge. Amidst a seemingly arbitrary placement of his photographic, painterly, and sculptural work (including mundanely self-promotional gallery pamphlets from the artist's recent series of touring shows), the exhibition's layout obscures vision. The only way to get a clear sense of Gubash's work is to risk the absurdity of sitting atop a ladder to nowhere in particular.

This kind of tragicomic self-deprecation speaks to Gubash's longstanding artistic interests in identity, belonging, and history - and the tenuous narratives that may or may not sustain them. Born in the

former Yugoslavia, Gubash immigrated to Canada with his family in an effort to escape the increasing political pressures of the nation's ruling communist party. The resulting sense of cultural displacement motivates the better part of Gubash's oeuvre.

Intentionally bad acting is a staple of Gubash's aesthetic: in the 2011 video "King of the Gypsies," Gubash blares on a trumpet in a crowded Montreal shopping center, embodying a vaguely "ethnic" performance, but not quite pulling it off. In 2008's "Born Rich, Getting Poorer," Gubash stages a decidedly low-budget sitcom that depicts him and his family navigating the foibles of domestic Canadian living. "Hotel Tito," from 2010, re-enacts a tense confrontation between the artist's parents and communist soldiers, but self-consciously undermines itself with bad camera work and worse production values. Gubash's art speaks to what art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty has described as "parafiction," where, "with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, [...] fictions are experienced as fact."

Yet Gubash is capable of a more transparent form of gravitas, too. The work "In Union" sees him successfully navigate the affective border between self-aware chicanery and melancholic detachment. His "Lots" photography series (shown in 2007 at [Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal](#)) portrays Gubash and his family alone and confused amidst a mass of generic skyscrapers (the photographic medium frames Gubash's more lyrical approaches). In a large 2010 digital print hidden away in the very center of the installation, Gubash frames a luminous river scene, the artist's naked body just visible at the riverbank. The work's title describes the liminal condition underwriting the Fonderie Darling show: "Drinking From a River in Quebec that I am Pretending is the Tomis, Where it Flows Into the Danube Near Belgrade." Gubash's thematic focus on apocryphal origins speaks to the bracing work undertaken by fiction, the way it constitutes and supports identities at odds with certain cultural environments. The curatorial approach at Fonderie Darling dramatizes this contraction, with its incongruous staircases offering an approach at once absurdist, mystifying, and holistic. Delineations between fiction and reality become obscured, even if all the facts are there before you.



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