Papier 12: Good on Paper
QUARTIER DES SPECTACLES, MONTREAL APR 12 TO 15 2012
by DAVID BALZER

Papier, the annual works-on-paper fair in Montreal hosted by the Association des galeries d’art contemporain (AGAC) in a tent in the city’s new Quartier des Spectacles, is at once unique among Canadian art fairs and the most fair-like among them. On one hand, fairs devoted exclusively to works on paper are still rather rare, with the notable exception of the New York Art Book Fair—even more unique in its field due to its exclusive focus on publications.

But Papier’s devotion to works on paper also means that—in theory at least, and for the right gallery—it can provide more accessible prices to those looking to buy and collect art: the audience, of course, for art fairs. Papier thus provides an amusing chance to enumerate what has been counted as a work on paper. Usually and predictably, the definition runs the gamut, from photographic prints to sculpture.

Papier is only five years old, so its status is still ascending; it remains populated with galleries from Montreal, with a smattering of players from Ottawa and Toronto, and the occasional outlier, such as Halifax’s Page and Strange. Paul Petro of Toronto’s Paul Petro Contemporary Art is one of these, and has been going to Papier for a few years now, as the fair’s mandate is well-suited to Petro’s roster.

"It’s an even playing field, more democratic," Petro told me at Thursday’s VIP reception, "because everyone at Papier gets the same size booth"—something often not the case at other, bigger fairs. Petro chose to
focus primarily on one artist, Sadko Hadzhasanovic, whose mixed-media portraiture is strong in pastels and flesh-tones, and made for an impressive salon-style hang.

One wonders what Papier would look like if more non-Quebec exhibitors like Petro participated. (Given the increasing numbers at the fair, changes look likely.) To be sure, Quebec's commercial galleries are diverse, but there was an abundance of Automatiste-influenced abstraction at Papier: from Guido Molinari's small, elegant monochromes shown by Galerie Valentin near the fair tent's main entrance to Galerie Éric Devlin's "Blanc dominant noir" exhibition on the other side, which, complementarily, showcased the gallery's impressive roster of Quebec abstractionists, like Ode Bertrand. Under such weighty modernism (however reduced in price, on paper), other Montreal exhibitors such as the Belgo Building's Maison Kasini, whose holdings are more populist and design-oriented, and Espace Robert Poulin, who hosted New-York-by-way-of-Toronto-and-Budapest watercolourist Balint Zsako, seemed anomalous.

A few large-scale works gave the fair a dash of spectacle. Toronto's KWT Contemporary showed Sean Martindale's bigger-than-life-size recycled-cardboard sculpture of Ai Weiwei, which, in 2011, sat in the window of another Toronto gallery, Whippersnapper, just after the famous artist's release from a long detainment. Galerie Trois Points showed the work of Elmyna Bouchard, who uses ink stamps to make big, captivating geometric forms; Beaux-Arts des Amériques showed Jennifer Meanley's Blue Speakeasy, a fringy paper tapestry that resembled cut metal.

Hartington, Ontario, artist Shayne Dark provided bright blue and red sculptures outside the Papier tent, augmented by Élise Legrand and Simon Durocher-Gosselin's in situ dance performance, which brought Dark's sculptures to life. Whatever the growing circumstances of Papier at this, its fifth anniversary, Durocher-Gosselin and Legrand's androgynous, playful, Cirque du Soleil–like dancers reminded us that the event remains unmistakably rooted in the cultural life of the city that birthed it.
One of the dancers in Élise Legrand and Simon Durocher-Gosselin's piece Les Créatures de Shayne Dark at Papier 12 / photo David Balzer

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