



Geneviève Thauvette, *La Dernière*, 2012, digital C-print, all paints, 40 x 50 inches. All images courtesy the artist.

Geneviève Thauvette

By Sarah Beck

I met Geneviève Thauvette in Beirut in 2009. We were there to compete as Canada's artist representatives in a competition (that mainly involved sports) against other French speaking countries. Context is everything. The fingers of colonial reach stretched clear across the countries represented. The paternal treatment of the participants, by our own government and our host country, worked to shield so much from view. As Canadians we were asked to keep our wealth or possible Judaism understated, while the host country worked to divert our eyes from massive camps of refugees and damage caused in a recent skirmish with Israel. What we endeavor to hide often reveals what should not be ignored.

Thauvette was there to present a photo series she had created specifically for the event, "Les Quintuplées Dionne," 2009. The





Previous page: *Ombres*, 2009, digital e-print, oil paints, 20 x 30 inches. Above: *Orpheus*, 2012, digital e-print, oil paints, 40 x 50 inches. Below: *Olympia*, 2010, Duratran, lightbox, 22 x 28 inches.



30 BlackFlash / 31.2 / Feature

series examines the lives of the young women known in the English speaking world as the Dionne Quints. The quints in question were born in 1934 to impoverished French parents. The Ontario government, acting seemingly in the interest of the children, assumed legal custody of all five. A marvel at the time, the government put the young girls on display for the eyes of the curious, creating a tourist attraction and generating profits from the popularity.

I decided it was no accident that Thauvette's subject matter was so cleverly chosen for the context. What was evident at first glance was that she herself had assumed the role of the quintuplets. After ancillary inspection I became aware she had also posed as all other characters appearing in the tableaux. The five works in the series are black & white photos, which have been hand painted. While the painting introduces a retro feel, establishing time and place for the narrative, the painting also serves to further the staging and manufacture of the image.

Staging and the heavy hand of the artist is unapologetically everywhere in Thauvette's work. This would be evidenced at our next encounter in Vancouver where we were both in residence as guests of the winter Olympic Games. Like the Dionne Quints, but to a lesser degree, we were to work under glass for the pleasure of tourists eager to witness artists in their studio environments. While I could be tamed and contained, presented for consumption in the creation of a new work, the nudity involved in what Thauvette had planned produced a private performance for me as her roommate.

Thauvette had chosen to rework Édouard Manet's *Olympia*, 1863, itself a reworking of Titian's *The Venus of Urbino*, 1538. This choice in this context was again more clever than the name alone. As the city prepared to host the Olympics, they also worked to hide the unsightly—prostitutes and drug addicts who previously roamed the tourist district of Vancouver unencumbered were shuffled further east to make way for visitors. The downtown eastside has birthed plenty of tragedy, but none capitalized so successfully on an unwillingness to look as the one spawned by the prolific serial killer Robert Pickton.

Using Manet's *Olympia* as a basis to address the Pickton tragedy was a deft choice. The painting, so famous for the unapologetic, unflinching and unacceptable eye contact of its prostitute model, raised hackles in its day—so much that policemen were hired to protect the canvas from harm. This irony stands out to me when I think of Pickton's victims, so ill-served by those tasked to protect them.

Thauvette's upcycling of the painting struck me for its proximity to my work in sculpture, a three dimensional medium. I watched her source, research, cast then build a complete tableau, much like an installation or even a performance. Using her own body to again portray the character, she pre-photographed herself, then created a life-sized replica to take her place with the actors and props. Now free to photograph and direct she spent hours composing, adding and subtracting until the narrative worked. The resulting image fearlessly borrows from art history to make unwavering eye contact with viewers complicit in overlooking denizens of the downtown eastside. The image's materiality, presented as a Duratran in a light box, echoes the advertising that comprises the urban landscape—more images we have trained our eyes to ignore in the already noisy streets.

The cacophony of images that fill our lives are no longer new, nor is the resulting lack of attention and time dedicated to their contemplation. I would come to live with Thauvette, which also meant living with her work. Staring into her worlds wrapped in frames I found things I hadn't noticed at first glance. I would ask where things were shot and marvel at the mix of Photoshop and props. Aware of the great big effort and attention Thauvette brings to each image, the discovery of stands and what could be viewed as errors seemed pointed—like clues for the careful viewer. These moments seemed to me a message. They told me to question the veracity of the story she was telling. *Ombres*, 2009, part of the Dionne series, seems to speak about photography itself. The playful

shadows, created by paper dolls are in fact more real than what has produced them. Trapped in Plato's cave, as Susan Sontag so eloquently stated thirty-eight years ago, we continue to use photos as evidence to collect, to display and worst of all to understand experience, despite their lurid life-long affair with the unreal.

The series "Les Filles du Roi," shifted her practice even further from "the real" allowing figures to float in spaces that prevent the viewer from grounding them in a world. The women explored in Thauvette's newest series were those who were rounded up and shipped to Canada to bear offspring that would fill our country. Their commodified bodies were the vessels that produced a large percentage of the existing Francophone population of Canada today. "Les Filles du Roi" performs the constructed-ness of the Canadian colonial condition, enacting the history of populating the "New World."

I was there at the genesis of "Les Filles du Roi." I watched Thauvette delve deep into research, and listened as she shared her new knowledge of heraldry—the overarching symbolic language. Family and royal history play large in this work, hence the use of heraldry as signifier. I listened as she debated using models this time, instead using her own body once more in service of her practice. It's just that much easier for her to embody the characters she needs—to perform them. This playfulness is inherent in Thauvette's contemplation of femininity and history, unlike the 90s where Post-modernism often resulted in abjection or disorientation toward the body. She is part of a newer generation of feminist artists willing to embrace without opposition identity as performed and enacted.

Women, characterized by Thauvette, appear in multiples, fruitfully and dutifully passing through the stages of their lives. They frolic suggestively among signifiers of contemporary French-Canadian culture—signifiers that can leave English Canadians feeling like outsiders. Context was critical for her insight, and I had to ask why cans of Pepsi danced with widows. Pepsi, I learned, is a regional and derogatory description of the French-Canadians. The Urban Dictionary claims that this is because Pepsi is a cheap imitation, a substitute for the real. Pepsi, a token embodied in *La jeune veuve*, 2012, stands in for the signified much like Thauvette stands in for the women in question.

By exposing the assembly of one's own back story, the reorganized, the blended, Thauvette reminds us of the condition of history itself. Her willingness to engage with historical subjects and drop in a mixed bag of contemporary reference is both modern and vintage all at once—much like the medium in which she works.

Photography, long fighting for a legitimate place in art, has seen technology trouble the waters. A quick survey of photography's history reveals a legacy of trickery and construction of worlds that did not exist, yet the limitless options made available by the digital remain largely misconstrued as recent and potentially dangerous. This is what I love about Thauvette's work—her ability to straddle the plastic and the ephemeral state of the medium, then twist it together and leave the viewer unsure of what is indeed material. She will spend twenty minutes explaining to me the process she used to conjure a wall that didn't exist in an image in which she has not hidden from view the seams of a paper doll. Thauvette is the magician, she is the magician's assistant, and thankfully she is also the one exposing the trickery to the audience.

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