

Diane Landry and The Poetics of Harpers Ferry

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When I first saw Diane Landry's *Les sédentaires clandestins* at Quebec's Museum of Fine Arts in 2001, I had the same reaction as most viewers — I was entranced by the sensory flood of its movements, imagery, and sounds. Returning to the work three years later for this essay, I find myself attracted to something beyond this. It is the turntables, the machines and the die-cast toys that now catch my attention, as symbols of mass consumption, and of the possibility of escaping from its script. Landry's transformation of mass-manufactured objects into the organic and unpredictable challenges us to think beyond the gallery, to question the prescribed material culture in which we all live. In this respect, her work can be seen as a reverse-engineering of the mass-produced object, a poetic proposal for rejuvenating the possibilities of material culture that were lost through mass manufacture. *Les sédentaires clandestins* presents itself as an alternative to the status quo of the technological world, saying, in effect, that we should look at how divergent and personal the material world we live in *could* be.

To understand the origin of the objects Landry uses in her work, some very brief backtracking will be necessary. The consumer-culture objects that make up much of *Les Sedentaires Clandestins* come indirectly from something that happened a thousand kilometers southwest of Quebec city, almost two-hundred years ago, in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. It was there, in the early 19th century, that the American government funded an armory with the goal of producing standardized, interchangeable muskets.¹ Over the course of about thirty years, culminating in the 1840s, John Hall's Rifle Works at Harpers Ferry perfected the necessary

¹ For an excellent description of the American System of Manufacture, and of John Hall's breech-loading rifles, see Merrit Smith Roe, *Harpers Ferry Armory and the New Technology*, London: Cornell University Press, 1977.

processes for mass-producing these weapons through a repeatable, precise procedure, now known as the American System of Manufacture.

Almost two hundred years of development and refinement later, the American System provides us with an unlimited landscape of billions upon billions of identical mass-produced objects, be they Gameboys, plastic forks, running shoes, or the electronics and turntables Landry employs. Along with this mass of consumable objects comes a metanarrative of global culture and communication that we cannot avoid, with all its complications and life-altering properties. It is with some certainty that we can say there are no free zones remaining that mass manufacture has failed to touch. The media, war, health care, communications technologies, day-to-day life, and everything we consume are all influenced to some degree by the machinery and output of the manufacturing empire begun in Harpers Ferry.

One of the most significant side effects of the American system was the decline of the artisan's ability to control the process of his or her work. The highly individualized work of the craftsman was phased out, replaced gradually by machine operators who were paid to realize a simple capitalist narrative: production, efficiency, profit. Centuries later and a scant thousand kilometers from Harpers Ferry, it is this lost volition of the craftsman and the artist— with its divergent, rather than convergent goals — that reappears so strongly in Diane Landry's sculptures. This is the great irony of *Les sédentaires clandestins*: it appropriates the products of the American system while challenging the origin and purpose of that system. It is an irony meant to suggest new and divergent possibilities for material culture, separate from the omnipresent dictates of the world of mass production.

Landry herself is keenly aware of the nature of these objects, and of the possibility that a

material culture can be created outside the confining objectives of industry. Speaking of the objects she uses in her work, she says:

“I try to recycle their meanings, functions, and values. Often, they are picked up straight from our surroundings, having no market value. They say much about us and our physical and social geography. I introduce them into my works as materials rich in meaning, without concealing their origin. Nothing is really hidden; we are instead thrown into confusion by the new direction these things take. The ready-made artifacts that I integrate into my installations and performances are semantically and temporally altered.”²

The “confusion” Landry creates comes from her rejection of the established script of consumerism. Deftly removing our expectations of utility and purpose, Landry creates a negative space, promptly filling it with the possibilities of new visual and aural interpretations—sculptural theories of how the material world might be put together, had the makers of objects retained their volition. In doing so, she seems to say that the material world might not have ended up in its current form; there are other ways we might go about constructing our surroundings and our culture, beginning with the way we understand material objects. Watching, listening, and experiencing *Les Sedentaires*, it is as if time is turning back to show us another way history might have gone, to a place where making objects means the creation of something expansive, divergent, personal-- and of course, highly unpredictable.

In the movements, shadow projections, and soundtrack of *Les sédentaires clandestins*, we have a multitude of suggestions for renewing the personal, the human and the accidental. It is a spectacle of open-ended connections, of chance encounters made possible by the inversion of the precise technologies of the American system. If Harpers Ferry was the seed of a global movement that led ultimately to the homogenization of our material culture, Landry’s work is the opposite. It is a fertile terrain of possibilities, asking us to think of alternatives to our current material culture and its flood of impersonal and irrelevant objects.

² Diane Landry, artist statement, October 2002.