

# BORDERCROSSINGS

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## VISUAL ART

## John Devlin

by Alex Turgeon

1. Erin Shirreff, *Eyelit (glass)*, 2021, dye sublimation prints on aluminium, latex paint, 140.3 × 135.3 × 14.6 centimetres, edition of 4 + 2AP. Photo courtesy the artist and Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal.

2. Installation view, "Midday dilemma," Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal, 2022. Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal.

3. John Devlin, *Untitled (Cosmic Series 2)*, 2017, mixed media and gold leaf on paper, 27.94 × 21.6 centimetres. Photo: LF Documentation. Courtesy Erin Stump Projects, Toronto.

materiality, is a recurring motif in the exhibition. Whether in the various glass vitrines, the smaller historical images or the two bronze sculptures from a body of work Shirreff began in 2019, there is a sense of buoyancy to the work, which is paradoxically grounded in earthly materials and industrial transformation. The two sculptures, *Maquette* (A.P. no. 10), 2019, and *Maquette (double curve)*, 2022, both embody a delicate and fine quality more reminiscent of an ethereal presence or spectre rather than one of fixity or permanence. *Maquette* (A.P. no. 10) is especially inspiring with its bisecting triangular surfaces, which, depending on the viewer's positioning in the gallery, change the perspectives it engenders. It is in these slight but well-calculated shifts in sightlines, composition and structure that Shirreff's "Midday dilemma" produces its most incisive interactions with traditions of mid-century architecture, design and sculpture, through a varied and considerate representation of archives and images. ■

"Midday dilemma" was exhibited at Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal, from June 8, 2022, to July 27, 2022.

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“Out of a Heart of Quiet” is the first solo exhibition in Canada by artist John Devlin outside of his home province of Nova Scotia. The exhibition was curated by Kate Whiteway and presented at Erin Stump Projects, Toronto. Devlin’s work has long been contextualized by his biography. Avoiding the pejorative moniker of “outsider” as applied to artistic output not tethered to normative modes of production and dissemination (the artist refers to his own work as a form of Art Brut), Devlin’s practice often reflects notions of the isolation he experienced in his lifetime. Through an abridged interpretation of formative experiences, the sites and methodologies presented in the artist’s immense and exquisite body

of artistic output become frames for windows into his quiet world.

At 25 years old John Devlin converted to Catholicism and moved from his family home in Halifax to study theology at the University of Cambridge. While a student, the exhibition’s press release outlines, Devlin fell in love with a priest. Perhaps contextualized within a time of heightened prejudice towards the anti-normative, underscored by Thatcherism and compounded within an arena that defined homosexuality as a sin, Devlin endured multiple breakdowns. This resulted in his return to Nova Scotia, undergoing periods of convalescence, never to continue his studies at the college. Devlin’s love might have been unrequited, but it was not fleeting. The artist has stated that “if you are going to have a mental

breakdown, the best place to have it is in the Spring and in Cambridge." The romance of the campus would have a lasting impact, eventually leading to "Nova Cantabrigiensis," a body of work that has been most widely exhibited and for which he is most known. Produced between 1984 and 1989, the works reference gothic and collegiate architecture found at his beloved Cambridge. However, Devlin envisioned a composite city constructed on a fictional utopian island within the Minas Basin of Nova Scotia. The series, amassing 365 drawings, provides whimsically complex plans and elevations for his fantastical city, all composed to dwarf any figures that exist within his world of ornate buildings, underscoring the power and majesty of the institution as a figure of knowledge, dominance and authority.

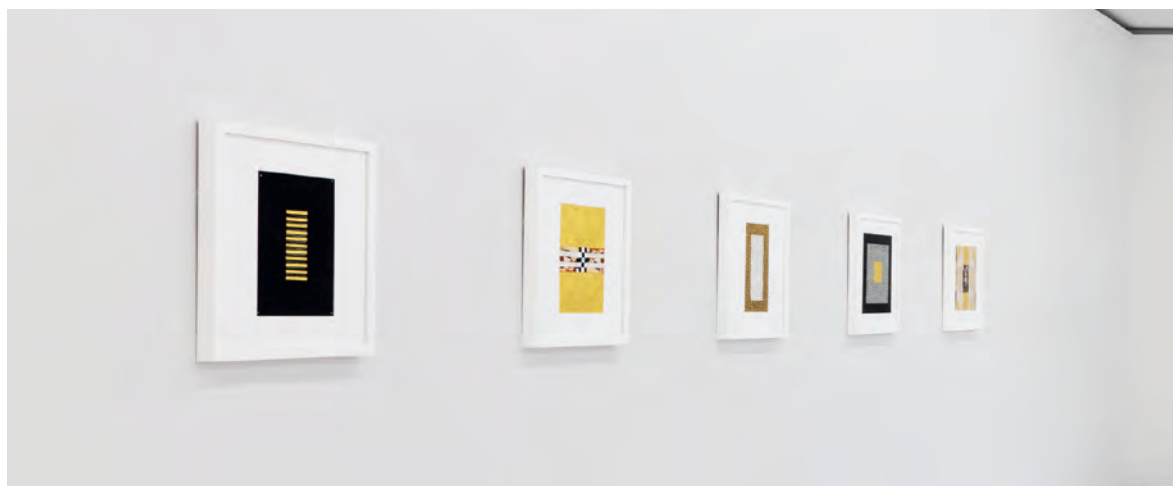
"Out of a Heart of Quiet" shifts away from heavily embellished façades to a much more reduced, if at all fully articulated, relationship to architecture as corresponding subject. Turning inward, the artist explores more ephemeral compositions of the cosmos, where the page becomes a vantage point onto an expanse of floating planets, constellations and esoteric symbols. "Untitled (Cosmic series 1–5)," a series ranging between 2016 and 2018, articulates a sparseness that dusts away the worlds of stuffy baroque empire, allowing for a free flow of movement between disparate objects, spirits and space-faring devices. Devlin's cosmos is traversed using seemingly rudimentary combinations of lines and dots. *Design for a Spaceship to Neptune* and *Design for a Spaceship to Venus*, both 2014, indicate his continued exploration of design principles founded in architecture, with these compositions evoking blueprints for church colonnades. Devlin will often scan his drawings and invert the colours

in Photoshop, turning the stark white ground into an infinite black, placing the elements of the composition into an expansive night sky—a nod to his adolescent curiosities in photographing stars through his telescope. Counting systems, such as number sequences and dots, are utilized throughout Devlin's oeuvre, their divine ratios incurring a relationship between his art and his spirality. *Out of a Heart of Quiet*, 2014, the exhibition's namesake, employs a similar system of loose formal marks but here indicating a torso. The abstracted figure levitates over a crude geometric altar, conflating the body and building into a unified sacrament.

Precious metals of gold and silver appear in the artist's collage works. At times painstakingly tiled into dense patterns, their use calls up a history of icon painting where gold has played a crucial role in bridging the physical realm with that of the divine. Devlin's ongoing relationship to spirituality comes through here as a history of trauma, the erotic and the techniques used in the manufacture of belief. In several gilded works the artist combines collaged images of the male phallus in various states of arousal, placed within a formal cross-like geometry of the composition. *Untitled (I have a*

*psychosexual disorder)*, 2016, repeats the title phrase in 22 mirrored lines. This repetition connotes a kind of discipline, or penance—emphasizing Devlin's powerful connection of spirituality with desire, and the crucifix as a long-standing substrate for the artist's interpretation of both.

A recurring motif of a densely outlined figure, liberated from its head and limbs, appears in numerous works on exhibit. Three share a context of horizontality that shifts with each drawing, through the organization of the interior space in which the figure resides. *Untitled (Crucifix)*, 2015, renders the figure crucified, with single turquoise dots indicating the location of nails where the hands and feet would affix. Sequentially, *Untitled (Crucifix about the bed)*, 2015, shows the figure lying on a bare mattress, with a cross secured to the wall above where a head would rest. *Untitled (Bacchus reclining)*, 2015, shifts further by adding the comforts of a blanket, pillow and a wineglass while removing any remnants of religious iconography. Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and pleasure, has been depicted perhaps most famously by Caravaggio, with one version described as "a body dedicated to sensuality rather than a soul infected with Christianity." This delicately sparse trio infers a



John Devlin, installation view, "Out of a Heart of Quiet," Gallery Erin Stump Projects, Toronto, 2022. Photo: LF Documentation. Courtesy Erin Stump Projects, Toronto.

## VISUAL ART

## Carol Wainio

by Nancy Tousley

constellation of Father, Son and Holy Ghost—yet Devlin’s universe is tethered to the corporeal form, a fulcrum between scales of the heavenly body and temptations of its earthly delights.

“Out of a Heart of Quiet” might be considered inchoate or to reside exterior to traditional margins, but that would be a misconception. Devlin is an impeccable draughtsperson, utilizing a very precise set of ratios, sequences and reference points that create an expanded cosmology and transcend that artist’s own periods and subjects, all articulated by his sensitive line work. This art offers an opportunity to explore the complexities of one’s own interior universe, one not limited to the confines of canonization. As Gaston Bachelard describes in his *Poetics of Space*, the “outside and inside are both intimate—they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility.” This inversion is where isolation becomes a tool in the creative act to navigate the hostility of being both inside and out, human and divine, simultaneously. Here is the site of Devlin’s art, exposed but not vulnerable. When he is working at his grandmother’s writing desk, his heart is as a desiring vessel, a vessel the artist has designed to transcend the hostile landscapes of interiority and exteriority, the realms of human and divine, to travel deeper into the quiet expanse of his infinite universe and its imaginative unknowns. ■

*“Out of a Heart of Quiet” was exhibited at Erin Stump Projects, Toronto, from July 30, 2022, to August 27, 2022.*

*Alex Turgeon is an artist from Canada. His artwork, research and teaching centre on how poetry and architecture inform definitions of the queer experience as a built environment.*

While they are vastly different mediums, like writing, painting gives a visual and material presence to thought. Carol Wainio describes her work as “a discursive, visceral wondering.” And wondering and thinking go hand in hand: Wainio thinks in pictures as she wonders about “history, representation, narrative, experience, and the current climate (in all its meanings).” Her methodology—fragmentation, quotation, dialectical image, allegory—recalls Walter Benjamin, whose ideas she filters through the mind and sensibility of a painter. Like the German philosopher and literary critic, Wainio believes that ideas can be expressed sensuously.

This inimitable painter works in series, having developed a train of thought and imagery across a span of years. After working with fairy tales from 2000 to now, she has grown interested in the animal fable. Traced back to the legendary Greek slave Aesop in the 6th century BC, and based on even more ancient oral traditions, animal fables are short tales in which animals speak and act like humans. Unlike the magical fictions of the fairy tale, which cling to myth, the more down-to-earth fable dispenses life lessons about the downside of such things as hubris, deceit and narcissism or the rewards of stick-to-it-ness and moral rectitude.

Both fairy tale and fable were represented visually in Wainio’s exhibition “Vers L’Incertitude” at TrépanierBaer in Calgary. The show contained paintings from three series. Paintings of hands casting shadow silhouettes of fable animals evoked the storyteller, the ancient oral traditions of storytelling and the mechanisms of illusion-making. Two paintings of the eponymous

protagonist of “Le Petit Poucet,” one of eight fairy tales published by Charles Perrault in 1697, continued a series inspired by this fairy tale about children abandoned in the forest by parents who couldn’t support them. In the painting *Vers L’Incertitude*, 2021, the boy, aka Little Thumb, stands in the bow of a folded-paper boat, peering through an opening in the thick, atmospheric turbulence that surrounds him. He is detached from time and place and looks out as if trying to sight what’s ahead in the uncertain future.

In the third and most recent series, Wainio sets characters from animal fables into landscapes that quote Dutch landscape and genre painting of the 17th century, the period in which Jean de La Fontaine published his Aesop-based *Fables*, 1668, and the form reached its peak in Western culture. The animal fable itself is an allegory of human behaviour, and the historical background of Wainio’s paintings lays the ground for an allegory of Then and Now. The rise of urbanization and the merchant class, the emergence of capitalism and the beginnings of the art market, all of which occurred Then, are the backstory of our Now. Painting, especially the popular landscape genre, was a commodity that offered escapism into God’s nature and the simple, honest ways of idealized peasant life. The interactions of the fable characters show that human nature is not much changed, though much else has. This could account for the fable’s recurring significance.

Wainio’s fable paintings might be her most conceptually complex work. The paintings portray a world in the process of dissolving in which things that seem barely affixed to their grounds are brimming with implied movement. In her contemporary versions, the general source of