

133 TECUMSETH STREET
TORONTO ONTARIO M6J 2H2 CANADA 416 554 4112

CANADIANART

Blue Republic: The Order of Disorder
Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto Jul 9 to Aug 14 2010
by Bryne McLaughlin



Blue Republic, *Water Drawings: 12:02*, 2009. Courtesy the artists and **Georgia Scherman Projects**.

Artists **Anna Passakas** and **Radoslaw Kudlinski**, better known as **Blue Republic**, have a knack for drawing perennial truths out of everyday absurdities. A case in point is "**Weather Report**," their latest exhibition of photography, sculpture and drawing, which closes this weekend at **Georgia Scherman Projects** in Toronto. *Canadian Art's* Bryne McLaughlin recently caught up with the pair at the gallery to discuss their new work and the power of boredom, chess and 24-karat gold in revealing the order of disorder.

Bryne McLaughlin: "**Weather Report**" opens with the photo series ***Water Drawings***, which documents temporary interventions produced by painting with water on the shorelines of the Canadian Shield. Is this contrast between the fleeting instant of your mark-making and the deep history of an idyllic landscape purely existential, or is there more to consider here?

Anna Passakas: The ***Water Drawings*** are in some ways related to the climate and the history of natural resources, but most of all they are about creating reality out of scratch. It's like you are on a deserted island and there is nothing, you just have to conceptualize things to yourself.

Radoslaw Kudlinski: It's as if you are in this empty space that is unpolluted by human concepts, so the work is pretty much born out of boredom, but a joyful type of boredom. You feel that you are creating something *ex nihilo*. These works were done in the cottage environment of Georgian Bay but we have also done water drawings in abandoned parking lots, on sidewalks and in other urban settings, which offer another existential paradigm. So, yes, if you think about the millions of years that it took to develop these rock formations against the tiny frame of existence in which human culture has been able to produce objects, there is an obvious paradox between these momentary gestures by us as artists and the duration of this massive natural geological environment.

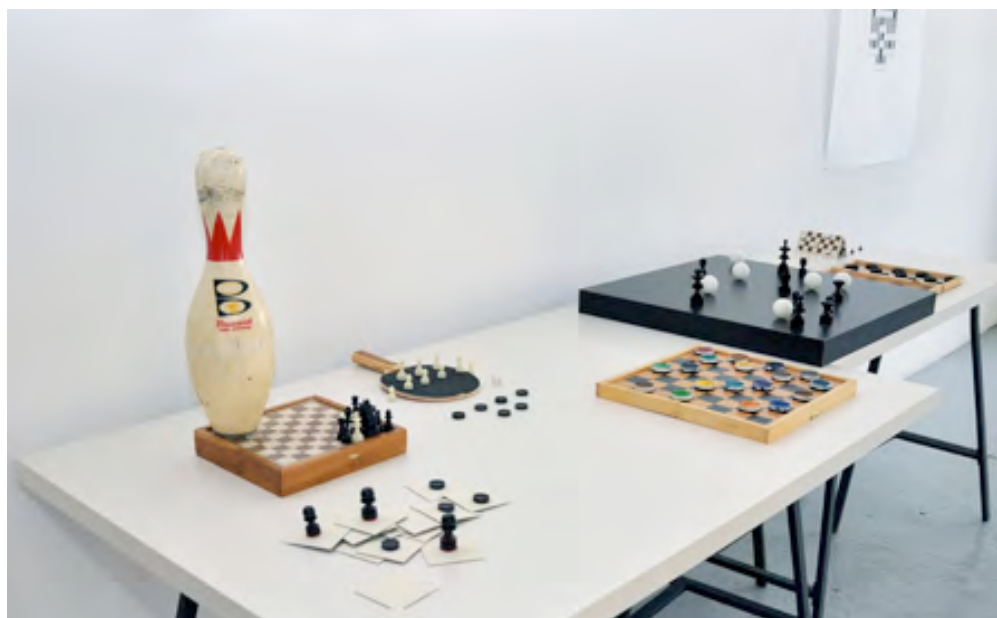
AP: As always, we like to play with patterns and surfaces. These drawings are like water graffiti that exists for a few minutes and then is gone. That sense of materiality and the absurd is important to our work. Otherwise things can become too serious and I don't think that interests us.

BM: Which leads to another set of works in the exhibition, *Untitled in Black and White*. Here you've taken recognizable game boards and pieces but have mixed and rearranged them without rules or the expected game-playing reference points.

AP: This is about changing the rules of the game. You often see this in politics. So we've used a lot of different strategies, for instance setting up watercolour paints as chess pieces, or turning a playing board upside down, making it impossible for any game to actually take place.

RK: I think that because there is a complete removal of the rules, it leaves this kind of residue that looks familiar but has no purpose. If you want to be inside of this game structure you have to rethink it from the beginning. It's pretty much the same for these as sculptural objects; they look familiar but because of shifting paradigms you have to be more creatively involved.

AP: Also, things in the world are changing very fast. All over, you see attempts to predict the future and to write new rules. But it's not easy to do. To play this game you have to improvise at every moment.



Blue Republic, *Untitled in Black and White*, 2010 installation view. Courtesy the artists and Georgia Scherman Projects.



Blue Republic, *Low Resolution Manifold* (from the series *Beautiful Infections*), 2010. Installation view Courtesy the artists and Georgia Scherman Projects.

BM: Yet even in the absence of defined rules, the game pieces seem to have found a new structural order?

AP: Yes, there is always some kind of order and keeping a semblance of that in this work was intentional.

RK: I think this has something to do with the archetype of the game. When you are playing a game, you are always playing in some way with something. So there is symmetry, at least in the beginning. And in this process the power is constantly shifting, there is a tension: you are a winner and you are a loser at the same time in many points of the game. So maybe we should fundamentally change games? Maybe they shouldn't be black versus white, because I think the most interesting part is this grey area that is kind of merging the rules.

AP: Chess, for instance, is a very ancient game. It reflects a kind of order in society. It is a strategic game, so it's about power. As artists, we always think it's more interesting to think about losing.

RK: This is an interesting concept: the winner will be the loser. So when you're playing a game you have to do everything to lose. Can you imagine players sitting and trying to lose a game? It would probably be the same level of difficulty as winning a game. You have to have a strategy to lose. I think this work has a much more serious undertone when you apply it to how we are doing with the environment, how we are doing with political power—realities in the cycle of cultural and social climates that were not so long ago considered big successes. Then power shifts and these great successes suddenly become the biggest failures because perception has been reordered. These situations are changing so quickly that we have to be constantly altering the rules of the game to have a "winner."

BM: What does a game mean without rules? You have a set of chess pieces, but without the defined playing ground, what happens? It seems to pose an unsolvable conundrum.

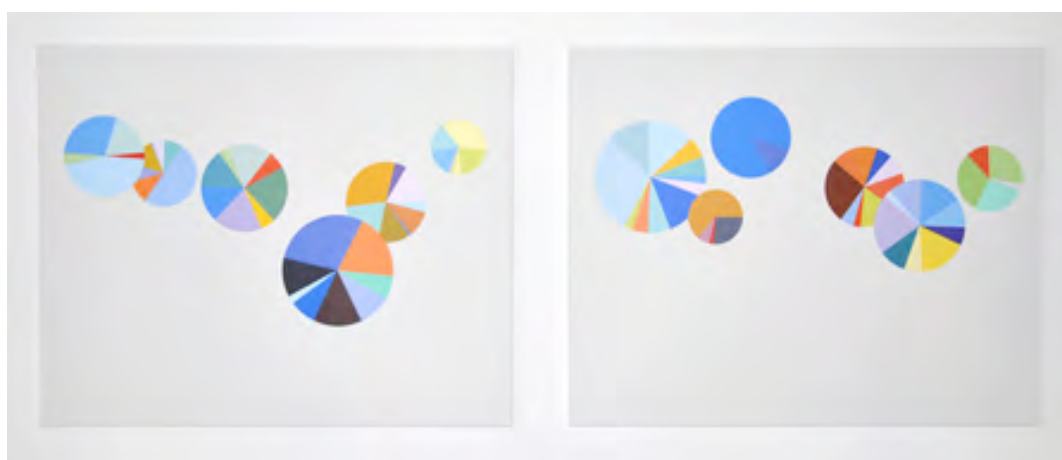
RK: And the funny thing is when you have a game and rules but there's no longer anyone willing to play. That's the final stage, when we have nothing to else to propose. It becomes an abandoned field.

AP: It becomes a question mark. Who's making the rules of the game?

BM: The centrepiece of the exhibition is a sculptural installation from the ongoing *Beautiful Infections* series titled *Low Resolution Manifold*. It's a sprawling construction where the discarded materials of everyday life—cardboard, tin cans, plastic containers and the like—are built up into an urban microcosm that has been "contaminated" by a viral mapping of lines. In his essay for your touring exhibition "Nostalgia for the Present," Mark Kingwell called these works "cities of desire"—desire being an unobtainable paradox. It's as if the recycled excess on display signifies a social sickness: the more we want something, the less able we are to actually have it.

AP: This is the paradox of unlimited growth. We challenge this idea, we feel there is no such thing and if there is, it's not desirable. Everything comes to an end.

RK: Yes, I would say that this piece is about unlimited growth. But there is a very strong experience behind it that for me is constantly going back to my childhood in communist Poland when there was a shortage of everything. In that industrial environment everybody was so bloody inventive and creative. If you had three bikes, one fridge and an old TV you could make one working scooter. There was a constant recycling of materials and ideas. It's really amazing how smart these people were in finding order in this unorganized world to make life work. This is an example of the fundamental human need to organize our environment and to use anything and everything that is available to impose that order.



Blue Republic, *The Last Supper (after Leonardo da Vinci)*, 2010. Courtesy the artists and **Georgia Scherman Projects**.

BM: Yes, you realize that out of necessity people can be very inventive, but you can also realize how lazy people are when things are so readily available. Not just lazy consumers, but lazy thinkers as well. I'm curious about a couple of pieces in the back gallery that also seem to reflect on these notions of growth, value and the role of the individual—*The Last Supper (after Leonardo da Vinci)*, which is a minimalist reprisal of the iconic da Vinci painting with pie charts in place of the figures' heads, and *The Truth, The Whole Truth, And Nothing But The Truth*, a set of three mirrors with gold-covered concrete stones set onto the surfaces.

RK: When we started working on *The Last Supper* and began to dig into what these statistical pie charts represent, we realized that even though time is passing and economic realities are changing, our general attitude is not. As a society we are behaving like the party is not over and it will not be over for a long time. These pie chart images are not based on any real social or economic measurements. What we tried to do is imply this overwhelming statistical "joy" or collective epiphany from a colouristic point of view. It's like these are very short anecdotes for the corporate boardroom: Everybody knows we are in

trouble but still we are behaving and acting like it's all just so fantastic. In reality, of course, they represent things that are profoundly serious and troubling for everyone: overpopulation, crime rates, shortages of food and medication, and so on.

BM: So despite the fact that these images aren't based on specific measurements, you're reminding us that pie charts represent an abstract way of determining productivity or potential. It's interesting to note that statistics can be presented in any manner. Truth is totally arbitrary. They can be read and reproduced to any effect a person or organization might want, which is a great irony considering our general dependence on quantitative versus qualitative measurement. Given the art historical context, these pie charts are like beatific halos of progress.

RK: I remember someone asking, Why do you use Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, which depicts a religious subject? We didn't want to use any religious or spiritual undertone, but obviously it's there. I realized later on that to some degree this is a religious piece, because if you think about economy and unlimited growth, this concept becomes like a religion for Western society. As long as we can maintain unlimited growth, this Platonic absolute, everything will be fantastic. Let's grow and everything will be great. But that's the problem. You cannot have unlimited growth in this material reality, everything has an end or transforms itself into something else. So maybe this is the "last supper" for this model of perceiving how we are treating the outside environment as one big market store where the shelves are always full.

AP: For *The Truth, The Whole Truth, And Nothing But The Truth* we used pieces of concrete that are gilded with 24-karat gold, so it's again the question of material value combined with the paradox of the title statement. I mean it's either true or it's not true! This is a completely absurd statement that is very well accepted in law. But you also have a very physical experience when you look at these. The rocks seem to be floating in space. If you try to look at the rock you are actually disturbed by the reflection of yourself and the room. If you try to look in the mirror, you are interrupted by the rock. So it sets up this strange dynamic where the perfect surface is broken and perception is thrown into chaos. It follows our interest in that certain things are seen and certain things are not.

RK: You can think of it as an opening or a passage, but also as a trap.

BM: Whether in a comparison of material values or in the inconsistencies of theoretical frameworks, the truths revealed by paradoxes and the absurdities of ordinary life run through this exhibition. As a final word, can you explain how these principles of uncertainty have become such an integral part of your practice?

AP: Paradox and the absurd are very effective tools for making a point without being obvious or didactic. For us it's much more interesting to ask questions than to give answers. That's what paradox does. It gives you this moment when you have to wonder why. It creates a dynamic that is vital for new perceptions.

RK: I think paradox really does push you out of the predictable outcome of equations. Suddenly you have to wrestle with everything, with all the tools you have, because nothing is as expected. This moment of weakness when things are not working gives you this window of opportunity to experience disorder. You are expecting one plus one will equal two, but suddenly you discover that the answer is not two.

AP: It's a way to challenge conventional understanding and approaches, and also to break through the predictable experience. For us it's important to challenge ourselves, to not actually know what to do or how to do it.

www.georgiascherman.com