

CURATED

At the National Gallery: Black and white and everything light

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One of the inevitable pleasures of attending a biennale is cooking up your own mini-exhibition in your head. What are the themes that stand out? How to give shape to the assembled inventory? This year's Builders, a survey of recent acquisitions at the National Gallery of Canada, was curated by the NGC's Jonathan Shaughnessy to foreground careers of artists who have been critical to the country's cultural fabric – contemporary nation builders at work today. For me, however, the defining works in the show suggested another theme, one as old as art itself: light – the mystery of it, the meaning of it, the power of it.

My own lightbulb switched on while viewing Sarah Anne Johnson's 2011 suite *Arctic Wonderland*, a group of colour photographs of the High Arctic which she has doctored with her touch, at times incising her photographic surfaces with a sharp tool. Creating surreal effects, she brings us the sensation of so much sky, and the hallucinatory feeling of the brain flooded with arctic light reflecting off of snow and water, a sensation that has long bewitched Canadian artists. (Is that Lawren Harris we see, raising his hoary head from the grave to take a peek?) In one view, Johnson deploys a delicate spray of photo-retouching dye to bloom against the sky like fireworks, a gesture signalling a human presence strikingly out of place amid the pristine snows. In another, lines radiate outward from a solitary standing figure, emanating into infinite space and light like sonar waves, and anchoring the figure in the endlessness. A third image in the series presents an enigmatic black box, monumental in scale, which smoulders menacingly in the middle distance. Does it harbour some environmental doom or hold within it the record of calamity? Its stubborn dark geometry seems to symbolize all that might threaten this radiant world.

Likewise, light and dark battle as good and evil in Marcel Dzama's *A Game of Chess*, a 14-minute video projection in which white and black costumed dancers wage war in a highly stylized *mise en scene* worthy of the Cabaret Voltaire. And Simon Hughes pays homage to the northern lights in his watercolour series titled *Exurbia Borealis*, in which shards of coloured light dangle from the night sky, a phenomenon of intergalactic illumination played out above the synthetic glitter of prairie housing sprawl. Hughes thus honours light in both its most awe-inspiring and comfortingly banal manifestations, succinctly describing how it can inspire us but also comfort us against the terrors of the dark.

Michel de Broin provides the show with its dramatic centre-point: *Majestic*, a large outdoor sculpture in which salvaged street lamps uprooted in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina are redeployed as art.

(The work was first shown as part of the 2010 international biennial Prospect 2 in New Orleans, but it has come home to roost at last on a patch of green space beside the gallery.) Joined at their bases, de Broin's street lights radiate outward like a starburst, a beacon seeming to symbolize the possibility for hope in the aftermath of chaos. Yet de Broin is quick to point out that too much light can also limit perception. "I am not sure if you saw my video I did where I cut down a city street light with a chainsaw," he says, referring to his work *Cut Into the Dark*, made in the same year. "It's only when the street light goes out that you can see the stars," he adds. "There's a play between dark and light that's important. It is impossible to experience one without the other."