

Researchers at the University of Missouri have confirmed that plants “know” when they’re being eaten... and “they don’t like it!” Theories about the “secret life of plants”, proposed in the 1960s by ethno-botanists, beat-poets and mushroom-eating psychologists are shaking off their New Age roots and gaining scientific validity. Maude Bernier’s exhibition *Feast* (2015) recalls some of the stranger aspects of this and other histories of creaturely encounters, from the psychedelic to the colonial, and beyond to everyday moments of caring.

The centerpiece of the exhibition titled *Hors d’oeuvre* is a monstrous foam cast of a prize-winning 1650 lb. pumpkin from a farm in Chaudière-Appalaches (QC). The cast suspends the original pumpkin’s slow process of collapse under its own weight. As Sianne Ngai has noted, soft things are approached with a mixture of hostility and affection². The surface of *Hors d’oeuvre* is dotted with little scars. Registered in the casting process these marks were made initially by prodding and testing fingernails on a prize-winning pumpkin. In the atmosphere created by her works, and in these telling details, Bernier draws our attention to fine lines of major social consequence: between care and aggression, and between curiosity and possession.

Hors d’oeuvre and *Canapé* are death masks made from barely living giants, or body-snatchers whose bodies were snatched. A range of cultural histories – of French wax museums and American cold-war science fiction for example, intersect in the piece with Bernier’s work experience around farms. These haunted gourds shake us out of a utilitarian relationship with nature and remind us of the uncomfortable similarity between our criteria for evaluating commodities and our criteria for evaluating each other. The impressive physical labor involved in the production of the work is matched by the intellectual labor and lively curiosity that went into its conception. *Feast* traces a centuries-old history of ritual, spectacular and museological uses of wax: from Madame Tussaud’s horrific models of well-known political and literary figures, to the lesser known and equally horrific replicas of skin diseases in Paris’s medical museums. As Edward Said notes in his

research on French colonial museology, for all their oddity and sensationalism such displays were meant to establish (cultural, anatomical and racial) norms and police deviations from them, both within Europe and abroad³. Bernier’s creations challenge us to read this history of exhibition practices as our own, and think critically about the ways in which we continue to measure, fear and discipline bodies.

In its darker moments, *Feast* offers a reflection on embodiment as a kind of captivity. But Bernier’s works exceed the body’s limits as well. They are made into fearsome or gentle things through the viewer’s act of psychological projection upon them. As she notes, the objects seem to “sigh” and trigger an “empathetic response⁴.” We respond immediately to them, rushing past the social, political and institutional histories they engage. One feels as though the objects belong, or don’t, or want to. As Bernier puts it beautifully, they “embed a social mystery⁵”. We care for them as she has. Or we are reminded of the tentativeness of caring.

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1. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/23/the-intelligent-plant>

2. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012) p. 1.

3. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979/1994) p. 144

4. Interview with the artist, Dec. 21 2015.

5. Ibid.

MAUDE BERNIER
CHABOT

FEAST

February 20 - March 21, 2015
Sculptures, photographies



Blurring the limits between the natural and the artificial, the approach of Maude Bernier Chabot creates a dialogue between organic and synthetic, traditional techniques and modern materials, that questions the temporality of the object and the practice of body modification. With sculptures that play on the frontier between the living and the non-living, *Feast* deepens the reflection on the natural in a postmodern context.

Maude Bernier Chabot has lived and worked in Montreal since 2005. She is a former BFA student at the University of Quebec in Montreal and MFA student in Studio Arts (sculpture) at Concordia University. She has received the Prix Diagonale award (2009), a scholarship from the Office Québec-Amériques pour la jeunesse (2011), and grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (2011), from the Canada Council for the Arts (2014) and from the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (2012, 2015). Her work has been presented at the artist run centres Diagonale and Circa, at Art Mûr gallery, at Casa de la cultura de Holguin (Cuba), and at the maison de la culture du Plateau-Mont-Royal.

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