

Tandem exhibitions map painter's magical world

Arts Scene

by Heather Solomon

Benjamin Klein kept his magical world to himself until its characters grew clear in his mind.

Until Dec. 20 at the Visual Arts Centre's McClure Gallery, 350 Victoria Ave., Westmount and until Jan. 17 at the Joyce Yehouda Gallery, which represents him, at 372 Ste. Catherine St. W., room 516, the public is able to enter the realm of his double show *Generator*.

It has nothing to do with machines and everything to do with the generation of ideas, emotions and visual wonder.

The concurrent exhibitions are a benchmark in Klein's career. Adding to the cachet is the fact that McClure published a catalogue of his work co-funded by Yehouda, featuring essays by art critics John Bentley Mays and Ashley Johnson.

"I've been showing as a professional artist since 2005 but these are my first solos. It was worth waiting until I was truly ready," says the artist who was equally deliberate

when deciding on the course of his life.

Born in Chicago and growing up in NDG, he started his university career in literature, which continues to spark ideas for his paintings. "My first love was English, reading Blake, Wordsworth, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson," he says.

Art was his dream and he finally took the plunge at what he considers the late age of 25.

He emerged from Concordia University with a BFA with great distinction and the Guido Molinari Prize. In 2010, he was one of 15 semi-finalists in the RBC Canadian Painting Competition.

In 2013, he completed his master of fine arts at Guelph University.

"As soon as I started, I realized I should have done it years before," he says.

Now 39, he is wasting no time. "I was in quite a state all spring and summer, coming to my studio and working for 10 hours then going home and obsessing until I came back at 11 p.m. to paint again until the middle of the night," he says.

Out of his marathon art-making sessions came a post-apocalyptic world. Beautiful and sometimes menacing insects inhabit landscapes plunged into the half-light of buzzing molecules that renew it.



Benjamin Klein has created a mysterious world of insects in a post-apocalyptic context. HEATHER SOLOMON PHOTO

Dominating the grassy riverbanks and marshes are spotted ladybugs, painted in jewel-like reds, oranges and yellows, sometimes overseen by a spider and snails that seem to contemplate them, appreciate them or ignore them.

Orbs of light that Klein calls "fireflies or even departed souls" hover in the air.

The artist has had to battle some viewers' impressions that the subject of ladybugs is "childish" but the hard-shelled insects only invoke the memories of childhood.

Their surroundings and the mysteri-

ous way in which Klein places them in an adult atmosphere fraught with dangers and uncertainties give them a serious and even mystical edge.

"To me, each of the works has its own psychology and its own spirit," he says.

The idea of incorporating ladybugs into his work came about when one day in his studio he discovered a defunct nest of them, "basically a ladybug graveyard and the bugs had this weirdly uncanny pathos about them.

"They were beautiful and iridescent and I had an arresting feeling about it."

They inspired him to visual storytelling, in dusky fragments that he encourages viewers to interpret in different ways.

"I want people to be able to have consoling and confrontational experiences at once, something that discusses the violence and trauma of the world, yet some of my paintings are calmer, defanged of any violence," he says.

In other words, it's a world that reflects our own and Klein is grateful for the inspiration. "I think I'll continue exploring this world for some time more but there's a border where I will eventually leave it," he says. "I have other ideas that are beginning to gestate." ■

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