

L’imaginaire de Gisèle Villeneuve Imagined Journal: Following the Artists’ Works in Progress

Copyright © Gisèle Villeneuve



Setting the context of the project

The adventure begins in January 2022. I proposed to multidisciplinary francophone artists in Calgary to participate in a group exhibition based on my nonfiction book *Et tu seras happé par l’horizon*, published in November 2021. Seven women, all visual artists, accepted the challenge.

They are (in order of their involvement in the project): **Sabine Lecorre-Moore** (also the curator of the exhibition), **Patricia Lortie**, **Sylvie Pinard**, **Nicole Geoffrion**, **Andrée-Anne Paradis**, **Paule Poulin** and **Zoong Nguyen**.

In February, Sabine and I approached Alliance Française de Calgary (AFC), who agreed to host the exhibition. In addition, AFC covered the cost of renting the space in the beautiful cSPACE building where their offices are located. We will be able to exhibit throughout the month of September, Alberta Culture Days.

In March, Regroupement artistique francophone de l’Alberta (RAFA) offers each artist a copy of the book.

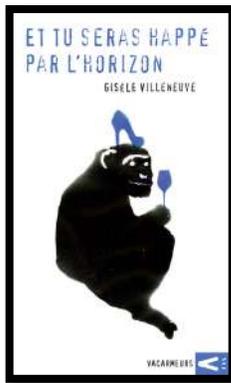
In April, with the invaluable help of Sabine, my curator, I applied for a grant from Calgary Arts Development (CADA).

In June, we learn that CADA received 311 applications and was able to fund 117. Our collective was among the successful applicants. I am delighted to be able to pay the artists a fee. In the meantime, subsidy or no subsidy, they had started to work.

While reading the book, each artist was inspired by the whole subject or by a fragment or simply by a sentence. The challenge was to translate these words into images, to decode the meaning for themselves and then to share their creations with the visitors of the exhibition.

As for me, who has always had a keen interest in contemporary art, it was a way of transforming my words by distilling them into the mystery of visual art and then discovering a new meaning.

A note on the book



Et tu seras happé par l'horizon (loosely translated as *And You Shall Be Snatched by the Horizon*) is a chronicle of humanity presented in 29 creative nonfiction essays, subtitled *Fragments biographiques d'Homo sapiens*. I dedicate the book to the children of the world, for they are our heirs for better or for worse.

My starting point is that of the writer and not that of the historian, but I still wanted to tell the story of the long human adventure. By drawing on a wide variety of subjects which, for me, illustrate the inexhaustible diversity of human behaviour from different angles, I have been able to observe, meditate, share and, above all, be astonished. So, this is us?

I quote a reader: “The astonishment at what is happening is the main thread and the narrative framework of the story: this is how things are; they are always problematic and they could have been different, better, but they were not! [...] A problem is that which awaits a solution. There’s no point in feeling sorry for yourself, you have to ‘work your ass off’ to find it.”

Yes, I marvel at the beautiful, the shaggy, the absurd, the creative, the brilliant, the inventive, the cruel and, above all, at the undying conviction of narrowly avoiding the magnificent traps we keep perfecting!

Will we get there or will we be caught up in this horizon, which is, after all, unattainable? As the English say: Stay tuned!

Et tu seras happé par l'horizon, Montréal, Lévesque éditeur, collection Vacarmeurs, edited by Robert Lalonde, 2021, 351 p. (includes bibliographical references).

The progress of the creations

Friday, May 13, sunny, mild

We all meet together for the first time. We are in the sunny library of Alliance Française at cSPACE.

The ideas flow! Each artist has a different practice, even though they are all basically painters. But they want to go beyond their usual practices. I'm happy about that, because art, whether visual or literary, requires embracing the unknown and taking risks.

Sabine has already chosen her short text, taken from "Landai. Quand la poésie devient peine de mort", three sentences that she will illustrate on canvases of different sizes.

Patricia knows that she will make a projected digital work.

Sylvie, a geologist by training and a colourist, is thinking of moving towards monochrome, mixed media and collage to illustrate, perhaps, "Child's play et le baiser aux statues", "Landai. Quand la poésie devient peine de mort" or "L'amour du bellum".

Nicole is attracted to everything related to childhood, such as "Child's play et le baiser aux statues" and « Coda : marmaille mèche courte », and to what man did at the beginning of his existence, such as "Au pas de course, Homo sapiens". As well, she considers mixed media and collage.

Andrée-Anne will venture into social media, touched by my ambivalence about Facebook, as expressed in "Défection".

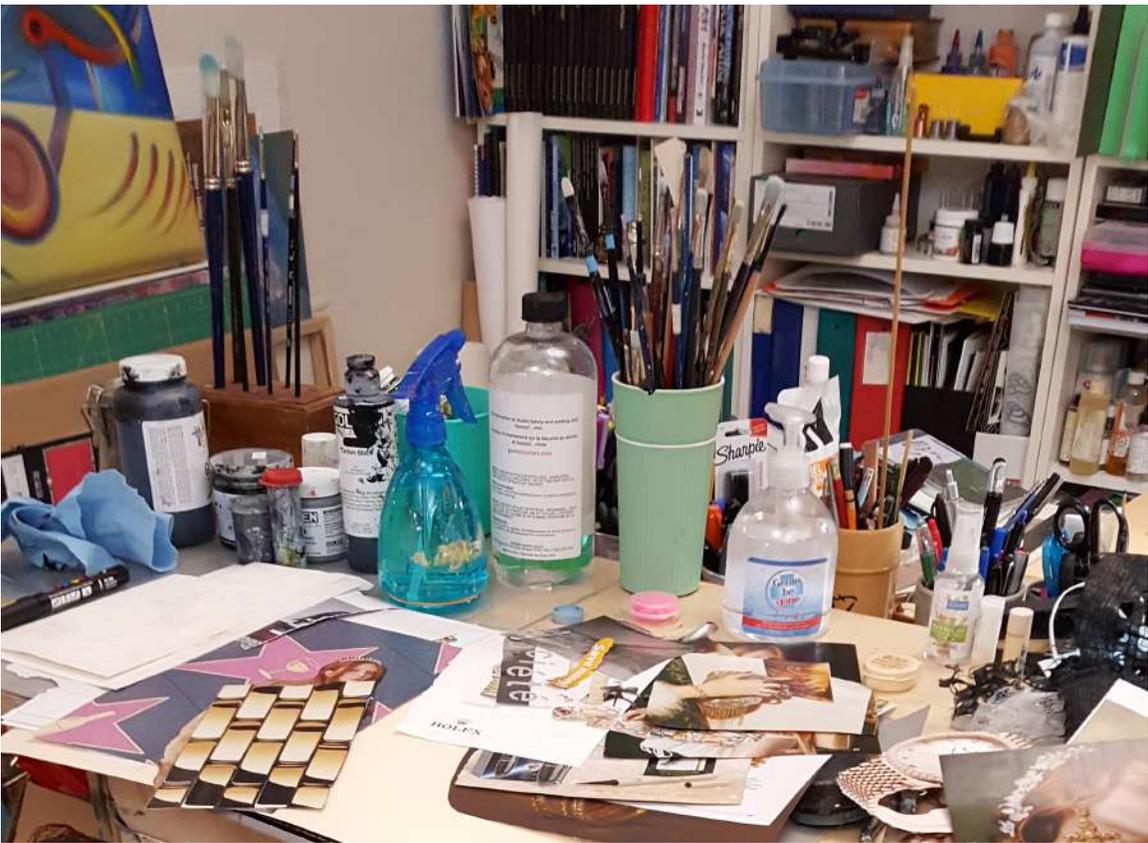
At this stage of her reading, **Paule** finds the book dark, though realistic, which is at odds with her colourful and joyful paintings. Yet with her background in neuroscience, she contemplates "Dialogue avec la science" and thinks of creating a painting that combines chemistry and literature in shades of blue, grey and black.

Zoong is considering a tapestry with embroidery, but she is so full of ideas that she doesn't know which one to stick to.

It's rolling and it's rolling, even if there's a slight reticence. Even if a few of them are a bit overwhelmed. It's a beginning, it's a start. They are committed.

As a catalogue for the exhibition, I will keep a journal to document the progress of the creations. During the summer, I will visit each artist in her studio, thus giving each one a voice in her own space. In this way, with the journal, I am fulfilling my goal of combining writing with art.

Studio visits
summer 2022



Friday, June 24, rainy and cool

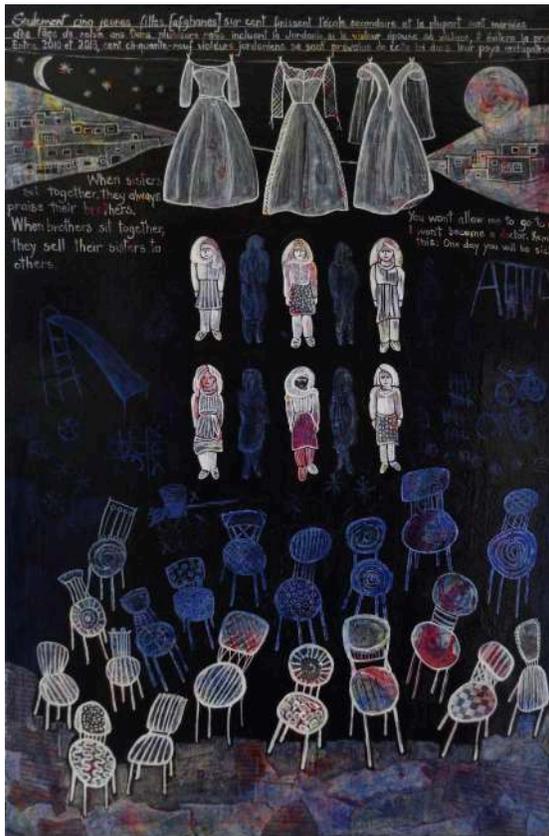
Nicole Geoffrion is inspired by “Landai. Quand la poésie devient peine de mort” and “Mariages illicites”. The fate of girls and women described in these chapters is of great concern to her.

She envisions a black background with white details and some colour. At the top of the picture, on a clothesline, she wants to hang wedding dresses. These dresses symbolize childhood stolen from girls who are forced to marry too early. Under the dresses, far from their playgrounds, little girls stand, subjected to a fate they are powerless to change. At the bottom of the picture, a jumble of empty chairs.

“We are there,” says Nicole. “But we don’t react. Or we should be there, but we are not invited to participate. Or we are called to show up, but we don’t.”

Around the edges of the canvas, Nicole will include text from the chapters and she will glue pages from the book and greeting cards. So, mixed media, including acrylic paint.

On July 13, Nicole finished her painting. “Destin sur corde à linge” is a dense work, filled with a clear cry that leaves no one indifferent, confronted with such a difficult situation.



Destin sur corde à linge

Colour and texture in the sheer fabric of the dresses:
blood, tears and human forms as if buried
in the fabric of lies.

Marriage, a joyous occasion that is not.
The Afghan girls and, next to them, their alter egos,
erased.

Their deserted playgrounds.

The empty chairs that say it all.

And at the bottom of the painting, pages from the book
and torn greeting cards
barely visible

under all the layers of acrylic paint.

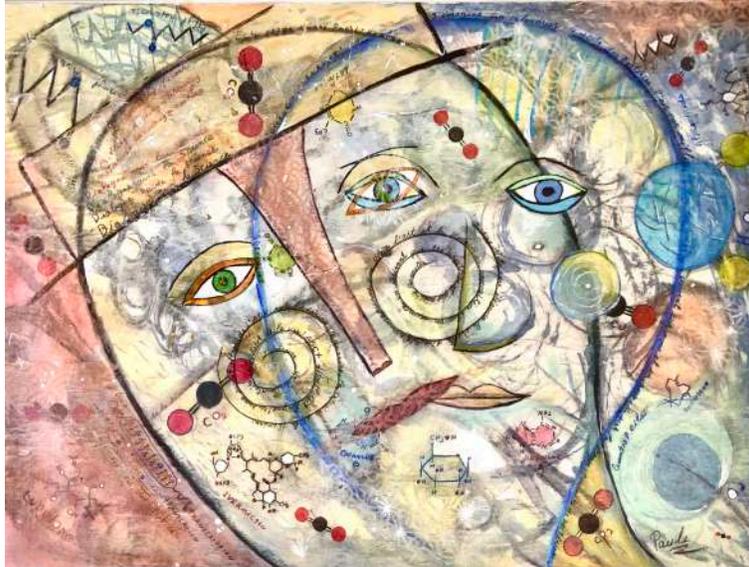
A kind of palimpsest of memory.

What we erase, what we hide.

Friday, June 24, rainy and cool

Paule Poulin tells me that her work is finished! There is electricity in the air.

Art et Science



Neuroscientist by training, Paule branched off into the chapter “Dialogue avec la science”, which had attracted her since she first read the book. In her painting, she wanted to merge chemistry and literature in shades of blue, grey and black. However in the course of the work, something else emerged. A colourful painting, dynamic in its forms, which is not without suggesting both the microscopic world and the vast universe.

She also wanted to integrate words from the book into the painting.

Repeated sentences, such as “Dialogue avec la science”, are intentionally difficult to read, as creativity and discovery require work.

Also, Paule integrated the basic components of DNA into the work and draws attention to our excess CO₂ in the atmosphere, among other chemical compounds.

In the abstract style, the two figures with intertwined faces come together – the artist and the writer in this case – to show the similarity between art and science. Art, literature and science require commitment and perseverance.

In addition to acrylic paint and coloured pencils, Paule has combined in her canvas a collage of rice paper with a pattern reminiscent of molecules. This type of intervention is unusual in her practice, she confides.

Now late afternoon and with the sun coming out, I leave the studio in a state of lightness. A wonderful moment of exchange on the path of creativity.

Wednesday, June 29, stormy weather, then sunny



Minimalist studio at **Andrée-Anne Paradis**. Recently installed in a new space bathed in light. A sense of calm. Very different from my notion of the artist's studio, this wonderful bric-à-brac of imagination! On the horizon, the Rockies, the great subject of Andrée-Anne's artistic practice. Not in the context of a landscape, but in its geometric forms, the mountain becomes a symbol. And from there, an important work on colour takes place.

The work in progress, titled **#follow**, is based on the chapter "Défection", which, she says, "made me want to leave social media, even though I use it for the positive. Humans follow social media to forget about reality". In this chapter, she was drawn to several things that reminded her of the psychology of advertising, which she had studied in her graphic design courses. And for her, "the behaviour of overconsumption" is akin to excessive tourism now well established in the Rockies.

Her intention is to create an installation in two sections of 2' x 4' each that replicates the Instagram feed, hence the title **#follow**. The artist explains her approach: "On the surface, the final effect seems happy and colourful. But if you look deeper, you see what is darker, more disturbing." Like the comments, which are often derogatory. And she continues: "Instagram! It's perfect, it's beautiful, but it's not real life." She may include words from "Défection" as comments in the work, which mimics the Instagram way.

#follow, work in progress



Andrée-Anne: "This 24" x 24" canvas is in monochrome blue, the favourite colour chosen by most people and often used in advertisements. It represents the scene seen far too often on Instagram."

In the second section of the installation, the artist will "make fifteen 8" x 8" printed reproductions by changing the colouring on Photoshop", which will form the small squares like on an Instagram search.

Thursday, June 30, sunny, mild

Landai. Quand la poésie devient peine de mort, work in progress, detail



Sabine Lecorre-Moore is artist in residence at the Kiyooka Ohe Arts Centre (KOAC), a beautiful setting between mountain and prairie west of Calgary. She is completing a major project, *Painting Alberta*. Somehow, she finds time to devote to our exhibition, as curator, and to work on her creation.

From the beginning of the project, Sabine knew which text she wanted to illustrate.

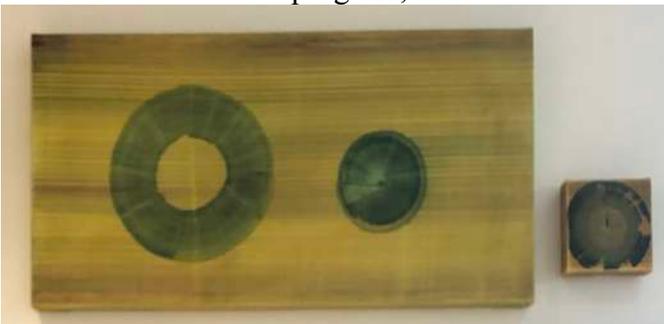
You won't allow me to go to school. I won't become a doctor. Remember this: one day you will be sick.

— English translation (as quoted in the book) of a poem by 15-year-old Afghan Lima Niazi, addressed to the Taliban.

Fifteen canvases of various sizes, each bearing a word, a group of words or punctuation. Tied together, the canvases will create an installation approximately eight feet long by three feet wide.

Sabine says it well: “I wanted to represent words in painting. Art can be written by using colour and certain shapes, large or small, to represent words.” Thus, some shapes are larger than other, to emphasize a cry or a warning.

work in progress, detail



In the chapter, I talk about Afghan girls in a desert region. Sabine has chosen these earthy colours to paint watercolour lines like rivers and circles of life, evoking her distinctive style. In this suite, the circles stand for the words of the poem. “The visitors,” she says, “will have to use their imagination” to decode the poem.

Thus, between words of protest and urgency and the peaceful background, Sabine wanted to create “something poignant”. I see in this composition the mosaic of Afghanistan, both in its architecture and in the complexity of its cultures.

Monday, July 18, rain, then sun and mild

Patricia Lortie tells me about the book in the context of what she wants to show.

“Throughout the book, I felt a conflict between the needs and desires of the individual and those of the species in general. The text forces us to question ourselves individually. If we as a species can’t find a way to manage individual needs, we won’t make it.”

Early on, she wanted to create a projected digital work. “Because,” she says, “of the writing in fragments, which recalls a series of imbrications.” Since projection will not be possible in the current exhibition space, Patricia will have three frames of her video printed out and mounted on a suitable support. She shows me what she has done, by scrolling on her tablet.

Crowded, work in progress



Yes! Right away, I recognize Patricia’s signature! Her human forms, all curves, carried along by life, wind or water. However, here, the usual impression of tranquillity is threatened. Some people still have room to move, but most of them have to negotiate their space. Patricia shows me the next image and immediately comes the crunch!



Thus, in the context of the animation, one character, larger than the others, takes up all the space and pushes the smaller individuals to the periphery. Patricia has drawn on a number of passages throughout the book, such as this one translated from “Triomphe (et périls) du triumvirat”:
We think we are making progress towards cooperation, understanding, peace, knowledge; -----

----- we constantly fall back into our primitive habits of selfishness, intolerance, belligerence and ignorance.

Friday, July 22, soleil et chaud



Sylvie Pinard is certainly not idle! Already in June, she had finished a painting on wood inspired by “Nos admirables dépotoirs”. She told me: “As I kept reading, I discovered your wry sense of humour in treating current topics that overshadow our best contributions throughout human history.” The title **plastiques et pollution** compels us to dive to the bottom of the ocean and take stock of our activities.

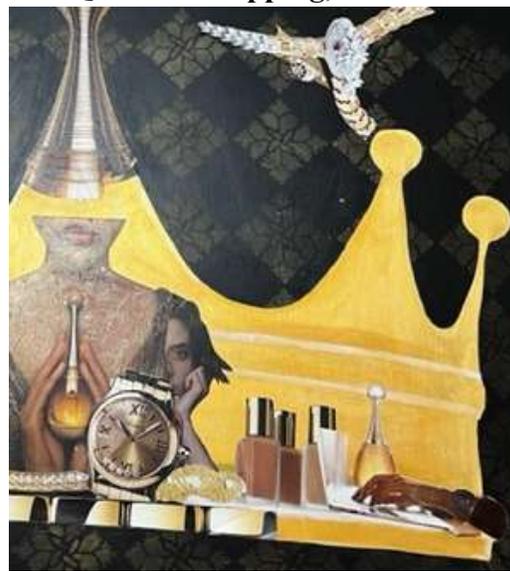
Today, Sylvie is working on a wooden installation consisting of two or three panels, a creation inspired by “Shoppingmania”.

Queen of shopping is the back of a gigantic black credit card (like the Elite card), topped with a golden crown that the queen of shopping adorns with her luxury purchases. The card shows the magnetic band Buy! Buy! The card number is made up of Canadian currency and the verification code is 911!

plastiques et pollution



Queen of shopping, detail



Acrylic and collage on wood. Large-scale creations! I hope time will allow Sylvie to complete her second work, as the two subjects, nos admirables dépotoirs and shoppingmania, go beautifully together.

Thursday, July 28, grand soleil et très chaud

My last studio visit has turned into a virtual visit. I am at home, in my writing space, reviewing **Zoong Nguyen**'s work.

In May at our group meeting, she had finished reading the book. She exclaimed: "The book is depressing and exciting. It's the first time I've interpreted a book through art!" And she was brimming with ideas! She will make a fabric tapestry, embroidered with a selection of words from the book. The tapestry will be linked to small canvases... Her head is buzzing with so many possibilities, she has trouble deciding what to do.

An ambitious undertaking that will take a long time to complete. However, I keep quiet. It is essential not to extinguish great ideas, even if, sometimes, they exceed the means at one's disposal. Avoid influencing the artist and hindering creativity! Back in the studio, the flow of ideas will be less abundant and she will settle on her choice.

Mid-July. Zoong works, it seems, in a kind of secrecy. What are you doing? I write to her that there is no hurry, but that I am curious to know where she stands. Also, could she tell me what excerpts from the book inspire her work?

She replies immediately: "I would say I interpret the whole book because all the chapters make me react."

The next day, she writes that she has set her sights on the moon, but confident that if she doesn't make it, "at least I'll get some little stars". And she adds: "We have plenty of space." Exhibition space, certainly! But...

At the end of July, time compresses. Sabine, our curator, needs the works by mid-August! I'm worried!

Zoong writes: "I've started work on my small canvases." And once she is satisfied with her tests, she will start her large 30" x 30" canvases and the 30" x 48" tapestry. She sends me a photo of the work in progress, from which I select a few details.



Anatomy of art(ist) in an installation. [...] This is where I welcome myself into an ambiguous, complex, narrative and symbolic universe, which reinvents reality in a new way.

— Translated from "L'artiste et le syndrome des cœurs brisés".
And patiently, I wait for Zoong.

L'Imaginaire de Gisèle Villeneuve Imagined



Art Exhibition — Une exposition d'art
Geoffrion, Lecorre-Moore, Lortie, Nguyen, Paradis, Pinard & Poulin.

presented by Alliance Française de Calgary

at cSPACE

September 1 – 30, 2022

Opening and artist's talk, Thursday, September 15 septembre at 6 p.m.

The original works of art are based on Gisèle Villeneuve's book
ET TU SERAS HAPPÉ PAR L'HORIZON

We gratefully acknowledge our generous sponsors.

