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Research Methods in Culture and Media
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FINAL PROJECT
CULTURAL EVENT VISIT AND RESEARCH REPORT

Presented to Mr. Saelan Twerdy

LaSalle College
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Problem Grid

Event: Janet Werner: Reinventing the Portrait.

Venue: Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal.

According to the advertising image (included in the Illustrations section of your assignment), what are the themes and messages that this event presents?

The advertisements for the exhibition are pretty direct and straightforward: an oil portrait of a woman, with her arms crossed, blonde, wearing a blue ivy dress whose skirt is composed by images of other women in what seems to be a tapestry of portraits, a *mise en abyme* in full effect.

At first glance it can be implied that the show will touch on topics related to gender, classicism, introspection, feminism and pop culture; abstraction, realism and the figurative are some of the keywords evoked regarding style and technique.

To what group of people is this event addressed? What type of people will be present at the event? Do you think there will be a lot of people?

There is this sense that contemporary art appeals mainly to a younger crowd—an idea reinforced by the placement of most of the exhibition's ads near college campuses and trendy coffee shops (as seen below).

The inclusion of fashion as an element in the portrait also gives a hint at the expected crowd. In comparison to other current exhibitions, the show's publicity spread all over the city —along with Werner being a household name— incites the MAC's high expectations.

What types and mediums of advertising and promotion do you think this event employs (including what you may have seen already)?

Traditional publicity such as muppies, guerilla marketing, as well as magazine and newspaper advertising are evidently part of the publicity strategy. Online banners and Google Ads can also be logical publicity options for the exhibition.

Do you think the reviews of this event will be positive or negative, and why?

Given the name Werner represents in the art community and how celebrated her work is, positive reviews are expected. As read in the museum's press release for the exhibition, "[Werner is] A major figure in Canadian painting who has played a prominent role in updating the portrait genre."

.....

The Museum of Contemporary Art of Montreal is almost like a pearl hidden inside the soft tissue of a shelled mollusc. Founded in 1964 by the Québec government, the museum was the response to artists and collectors instigations to establish an art institution that could amass a proper collection composed by the works of artists from Montreal, Québec, Canada and why not, all around the world.

The museum's first location (circa 1965) was at Place Ville-Marie. Then it was housed at Château Dufresne, in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood, from 1965 to '68. A year later, it moved once again this time to the Expo 67 Gallery of International Art at the Cité du Havre.

1983 was an important year in the museum's history since it was officially made a provincially-owned corporation. Ever since then, the MAC's clear mission has been "to make known, promote and preserve contemporary Québec art and to ensure a place for international contemporary art through acquisitions, exhibition and other cultural activities." (*macm.org*)

Today, the museum's home is aptly located on the 185 Saint-Catherine, cohabitating under Montreal's Place des Arts. Its current director —since 2013— is John Zeppetelli.

Montreal's Museum of Contemporary Art is considered the highest respected Canadian art institution dedicated exclusively to contemporary art. For more than fifty years, the museum has showcased both local and international artists within its walls. It also represents one of the city's most popular references when it comes to art, discovery and entertainment, offering the public experiences that are ever-changing, unexpected and stirring. An extensive program full of activities is also organized throughout the year to complement its exhibitions. The diversity of these activities allows a 360 integration with the community< there is always something for everyone, children and adults.

Throughout its history the museum has built an identity and language glued by the vast number of temporary exhibitions devoted to artists with acute and peculiar perspectives on life and society. It also

hosts shows mainly composed of pieces from the museum's extensive collection (under Marie-Eve Beaupré's curatorial responsibility).

The wide array of disciplines and artistic expressions held at the MAC is also a reason for its relevance in today's Montreal art landscape: digital, sound works, installations, paintings, sculptures, ephemeral pieces, and many more are often seen in the museum spaces.

The museum also organizes artistic performances and festive events.

On this occasion, we will focus on the MAC's latest blockbuster: *Janet Werner: Reinventing the Portrait*.



Werner next to *Lucy* (2011).

Born in Winnipeg in 1959, Werner studied at the Maryland Institute College of Art in 1985, where she earned a BFA — followed by an MFA from the Yale University School of Art and Architecture in 1987.

Parallel to her life as an artist, Werner's also taught at the University of Saskatchewan (1987-1999), and at Concordia University from 1999 up to today.

Werner's profile in Concordia's website reads: "[Werner] is a painter whose work has focused for many years on the fictional portrait. Her recent paintings are based on figures drawn from popular culture, including models, dolls, celebrities and figurines. In her current portrait series icons and archetypes of innocence and beauty are divorced from their original contexts and resituated in her paintings so that the 'portraits' become vehicles for an exploration of subjectivity, desire, seduction and transformation." (*Concordia.ca*)

Her body of work has a mysticism, a grotesque appeal to the sublime. Her portraiture oscillates between what is recognizable and what is not. Her figuratively abstract brush demeanor is complex and seemingly contradictory—from afar, her paintings look like acrylics but when inspected from up-close, oil's dense features flourish to attention. Her technique is highly graphic and *cadaver exquis*-like. Her images have a psychological weight to them, and most of her subjects—or characters as she likes to see them—appeal to be vulnerable and almost insidious. Ironically, humour also plays a big part in Werner's *oeuvre*.

Her work has been showcased widely throughout Canada at both public and private galleries, as well as in artist-run centres. Internationally, she has exhibited at the Prague Biennale. Werner has also received numerous awards, including the *Canada Council New York Studio and Paris Studio*.

According to the museum's website, "The current exhibition is a compact survey of the last decade of the artist's work, during which such references to humour and the carnivalesque have tended to recede somewhat, in favour of a more measured approach." (*macm.org*)



Studio (Miró), 2017.

The show was curated by François LeTourneux, an associated curator to the museum. Letourneux also collaborated with the MAC on the then highly-anticipated and widely-covered Julian Rosefeldt: Manifesto (2018) as well as in the same year MAC François Sullivan retrospective Scores, to name a few.

LeTourneux is also an associate professor at Université de Montréal. He also worked as part of the Québec Triennale in 2011.



LeTourneux (second from left) poses with the 2011 Québec Triennale team.

For Werner's show, LeTourneux works with one of art's most traditional mediums: oil painting. His admiration for Werner's work is evident, « Elle a un registre plastique très ouvert, ayant couvert tout au long de sa carrière un grand nombre de territoires stylistiques » (*Janet Werner au MAC...*)

With this exhibition in question, **the aim will be to explore a woman's artful ability to portray society's crude and vicious relationships with gender and feminism.**

Must have been a lucky night for the artist was amongst us.

Up the stairs and into one of the museum's white chambers, a couple of Werners welcome us next to the curatorial manifesto, neighbored waits a small room showcasing exclusively and solely small-scale oils. The few of us are like flies on the white, directly-lit walls. Wooden floors and high ceilings, every frame seems clinically put into place; they are all part of a larger narrative on women, weird women with bear heads and canes — daunting, preposterous, *adlocutio* and all.

A technician fixes some cables. The sound needs to be perfectly equalized and balanced for the moment —is this a museum space or an echo factory?

The stillness is especially remarkable though, conspicuous against the many splashes of colourful brushstrokes. By this point the crowd is more plural: a large group of Urban Outfitter frequent shoppers (the kind that is subscribed to their newsletter), middle-aged men come hand-in-hand with their middle-age spouses —and a couple of senior ladies that seem to play Bingo together. They have all arrived together following a character walking in the middle of the circle as if the nucleus of a cell.

Clad in a modest, sleek, black, tailored *costume*; hair done in a ponytail, class is in session. That night Janet Werner herself went along with us through every single eye, nose, alliteration and innuendo. Words like "cartoony", "elegance", "Picasso", "defragmentation" and "sensuality" are overheard during the colloquium.

To some extent, this is a modest exhibition. A recollection of iconographic portraits whose origins can easily be found in the closest deppaneur: Werner's process begins with fashion magazines that she roams looking for the media's usual misjudgment, misrepresentation and mistreatment of women.

Pictorially, Werner's work's extent is impressive. Abstraction and figuration, a painting whose movement is slow-paced, steady and at the same time courageous and bold. Goya is said to be a significant reference in *Bear* (2010), ideas of a Van Gaughian vanishing point; Picasso is also mentioned as a source of inspiration as well as Vermeer's "masterful way to create art from the generic", centuries of art history amalgamated in just one room.



This was also the museum's first guided tour with a Quebec Sign Language (LSQ) interpreter.

Reinventing the Portrait has this sense of continuity, this beautiful irony that's almost childlike. The paintings' creamy contrasts create these dense conversations around the idea of masking; the many and profusely-nuanced symbols and narratives open gates to this fantasy world where women are Frankenstein-like figures created by Dr Condé Nast or Mr Page Six.

It is almost impossible then to link Werner's last decade's efforts to the current panorama regarding issues of gender, political injustice and #MeToo. "There are a lot of references of witches and sorcery, I think that has a lot to do with the magic of creating," says Werner when asked of the vast presence of objects and icons, only to discover Werner's own position as a skilled sorcerer whose broad language on semiotics and iconographies has concocted a potion of sultry characters. "She is not gonna like if you do that," Werner directs to a man in the group who is referring to *Dreamer* (2012).

Another medium group of art or design students enters the room. The word "violence" also comes through. "Is painting a violent act?", mutters Werner when asked about her relationship with the brushes and the pigments. Her paintings are by themselves demonstration of violent *trompe l'oeil*, where brushstrokes as broad as logs lit by the fireplace mimic perfectly the appearance of an acrylic painting, when in reality they were made in the tradition of indeed Goya, Vermeer, Picasso and Van Gogh.

The series also discourses with fashion's diluting and fleeting motion/inherence. We reach the end of the exhibition where *Beast*, the show's most recent piece (2019), is waiting for us. A reference to Greek's mythology dog from the underworld, *Beast* is also one of the largest frames in the series. In the left-centre of the canvas a woman dressed in a flamboyant suit is observed, abruptly two other female heads surface from above, their stares disdainful and distant, "What is it they are seeing?", Werner asks the crowd to find no answer.

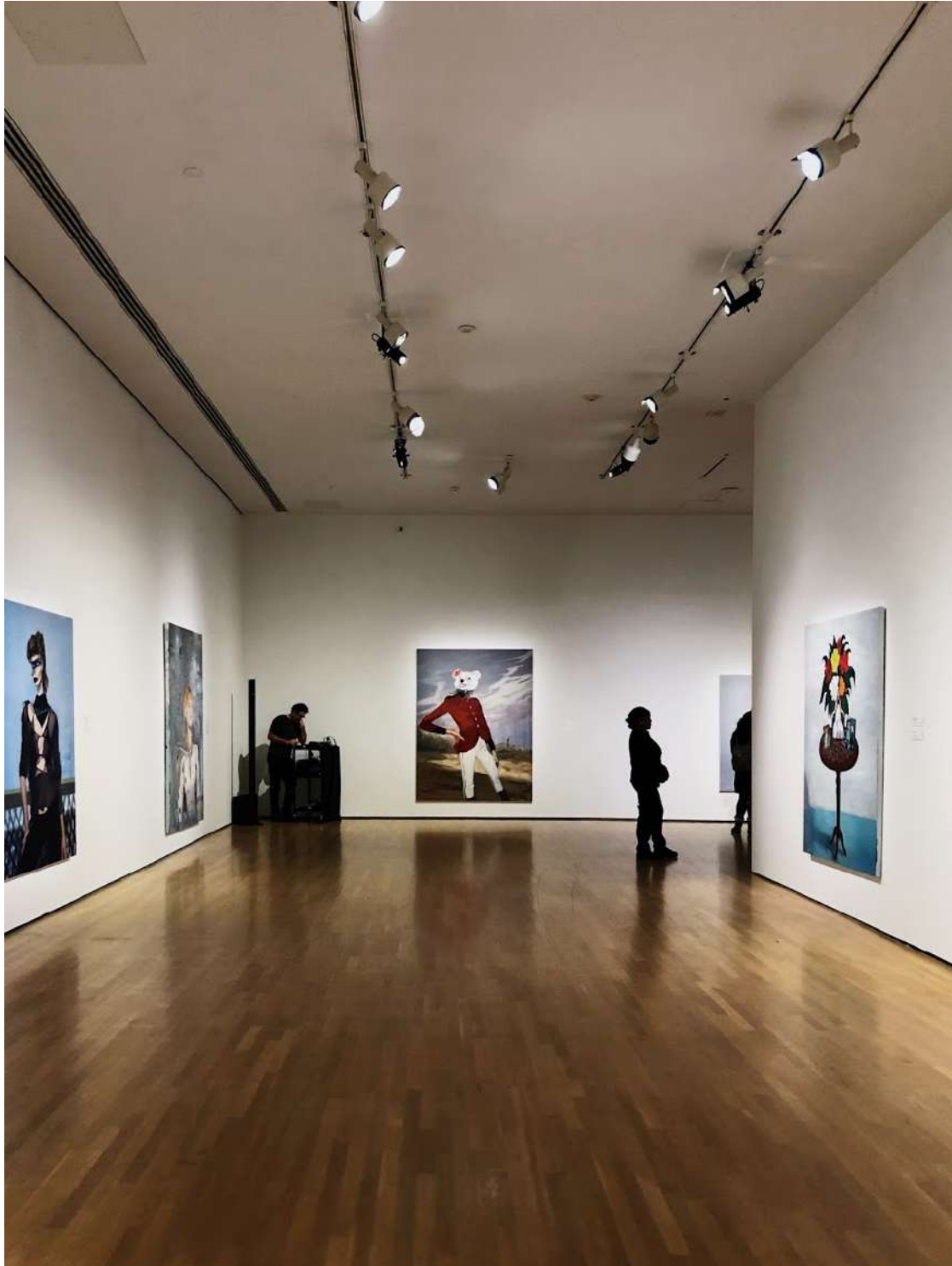
In the scheme of things, it is Werner's adaptability and flexibility the true *pièces de résistance* of this show. "There is a lot of stylistic range in this show. Us artists are always expected to evolve within our craft and within society but no one expands on the ironic pressure we also face to find a 'signature style', but what very few understand is that life is not like that. Life is diverse and ever-changing, and that at the end is what my art to evoke. To me, it is always important to create this sense of movement," concludes Werner with a smirk in her face.



"I'm a big fan of Picasso. In a certain way, I'm a bit envious of his freedom," says Werner during the colloquium.



“Pictorially, Werner's work extent is impressive. Abstraction and figuration.”



“Wooden floors and high ceilings, every frame seems clinically put into place; they are all part of a larger narrative on women, weird women with bear heads.”

Truth be told, the exhibition has not received the amount of press as I expected. Most of the coverage found online has been published by French local outlets and the majority of the mentions are just copy-paste versions of the museum's press release attached to close-to-insignificant cultural agendas.

Even though the few reviews published are greatly positive, the number of them goes more along the negative. Only seven publications were found—including the Concordia News article. Three of them being cultural calendars (*Newswire*, *Akimbo*, *Parisian Laundry*).

The most compelling article was published by La Presse. In it, writer Éric Clément ventures the reader in depth into Werner's origins, processes and thoughts: « Des sources d'inspiration marquantes au début et dont elle s'est distancée au fil des ans pour aborder d'autres thèmes comme le genre, la représentation et la liberté d'interprétation. » It also succeeds in painting a more vivid picture of the preparation of the show, at least in curatorial terms, « François LeTourneux a donc eu l'idée de scénariser au MAC un déploiement représentatif des 10 dernières années de création de Janet Werner. »

If seen from a narrow perspective, the museum publicity efforts were not grand. But again, doesn't art sell itself? Art exhibitions—and even more contemporary—are, by omission, sort of niche. Strategies regarding these are commonly based on annunciation at punctual locations.



An advertisement of the exhibit seen at the Atwater metro station, located the city's students epicenter.



Another poster for the Werner show seen at *La Graine Brûlée* (921 St Catherine), a coffee shop popular between students and alternative crowds.

Taking this in account and considering the visit, the exhibition room was completely full on a Tuesday night. Eighty five percent of the attendants were visible students who probably came to the museum straight after class, just like me. With this said, if the museum's attempt was to attract a younger crowd and create a healthy discussion around the themes present in Werner's work, success was achieved.



*Janet Werner: Reinventing the Portrait. Open to public until January 5.
Untitled (Gallery), 2017.*

The artwork selected for the advertisements is seen above. An interesting selection given the paleness of its color scheme, a very subdued choice for such a diversified show. It is only after a deeper analysis of the artwork that one understand its relevance to the show's vision and ethos.

A woman crossing her arms in a demanding and supervising manner. Her skirt is more a tapestry of women, or icons and canons. The displacement in the subjects gaze can be interpreted as society's indifference, the various portraits are reminiscent of... an Instagram feed? "The overwhelming stream of perspectives funnily wrapped in shiny devices as if a part of our body. A critique on the idea that we are always scrolling images looking for something we may never find," expresses Werner *sur la peinture*.

A sharp and insightful way of seeing art and advertisement converge as a whole.

Conclusions

Summing up all of the elements reviewed and analyzed, the *Janet Werner: Reinventing the Portrait* show is a bold take on feminist art, not only because it seeds the message little by little but also because the series by itself is a pictorial thesis on how a woman can change paradigms and notions through her art.

Just by glancing some of the frames hung on the walls you can sense the displacement of the subjects' stares, whether wearing an Alexander McQueen (*Bear* original composition was taken from a magazine's fashion editorial the same as *Beast*, this time showing a sartorial creation by Michael Kors) or a delicate see-through blouse (*Dreamer*, 2012; *Sheila*, 2011), women are complex and layered. And it is time for them to be painted —literally— under their own prerogatives and rules.

Art has been a man's world for too long.

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Janet Werner au MAC, peindre pour l'imaginaire



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Phagocyter, l'imagerie de la mode selon Janet Werner

[Accueil] / [Culture] / [Arts visuels]

Charron, Marie-Ève. "Phagocyter, l'Imagerie de la Mode Selon Janet Werner." *Le Devoir*, published November 9th 2019, accessed November 28th 2019, ledevoir.com/culture/arts-visuels/566575/phagocyter-l-imagerie-de-la-mode-selon-janet-werner

CHATELAINE

English Se connecter

≡ CUISINE SANTÉ MODE DÉCO CHRONIQUES VIE PRATIQUE GUIDES CADEAUX 2019

Accueil > Art de vivre > Culture > Janet Werner, une peintre montréalaise à découvrir

Janet Werner, une peintre montréalaise à découvrir

Elle est une figure majeure de la peinture contemporaine et est exposée dans des dizaines de galeries d'art partout au pays.

6 nov. 2019 Anne-Frédérique Hébert-Dolbec

Frédérique, Anne and Dolbec, Hébert. "Janet Werner, Une Peintre Montréalaise à Découvrir." *Chatelaine*, published November 6th 2019, accessed November 28th 2019, fr.chatelaine.com/art-de-vivre/culture-art-de-vivre/janet-werner-une-peintre-montrealaise-a-decouvrir/

SURVEY

Janet Werner

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL
Opens October 31

*A compact survey of 10 years of Werner's production,
this exhibition sees the seamlessness
of her portraiture loosen,
to show the labour behind the paintings.*

JANET WERNER: After painting faces for 20 years, it became more interesting for me to deface the image. I've always been looking for a way to undo the fiction of the portrait and to interrupt it. The bodies of the women are collages constructed from various source materials and, in the newer works, if there is a body with a head that doesn't belong to it you actually see the division. I pull inspiration from fashion magazines, and a characteristic of fashion models is that they have to be blank canvases for us to project upon. That's one of the reasons they have served me: I can give the figures a level of complexity and subjectivity that's not there in the original context. They have to embody some kind of contradiction or complication. Stains or drips or tears on the image have become interesting to me, in terms of mark-making and how they reveal the materiality of the paint. The relationship between photography and painting is a difficult one—if you're using photographs they can sort of hold a grip on you, and not let go. I've been wrestling against that, and this has become a new way to loosen the grip of the photograph. In some pieces, like *Hover (The Distance Between Here and There)*, I'm referencing the studio in the painting itself, which opens up the process, revealing the making. I used fragments of images as an anchor and I kept overpainting. It was built very differently; it's more abstract and improvisational.

Janet Werner *Hover (The Distance Between Here and There)* 2017
COURTESY NATIONAL BANK ART COLLECTION PHOTO GUY L'HEUREUX



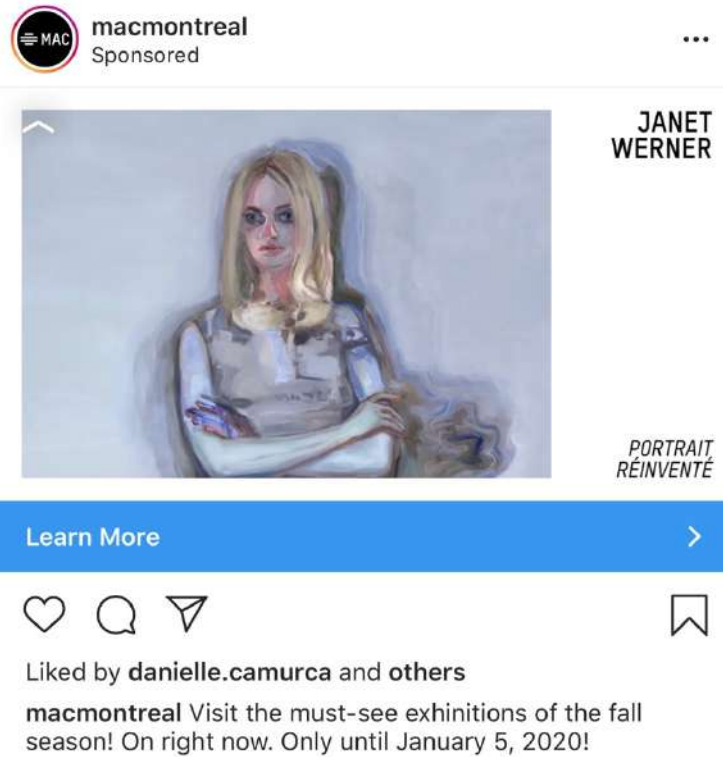
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Concordia professor holds a solo exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal

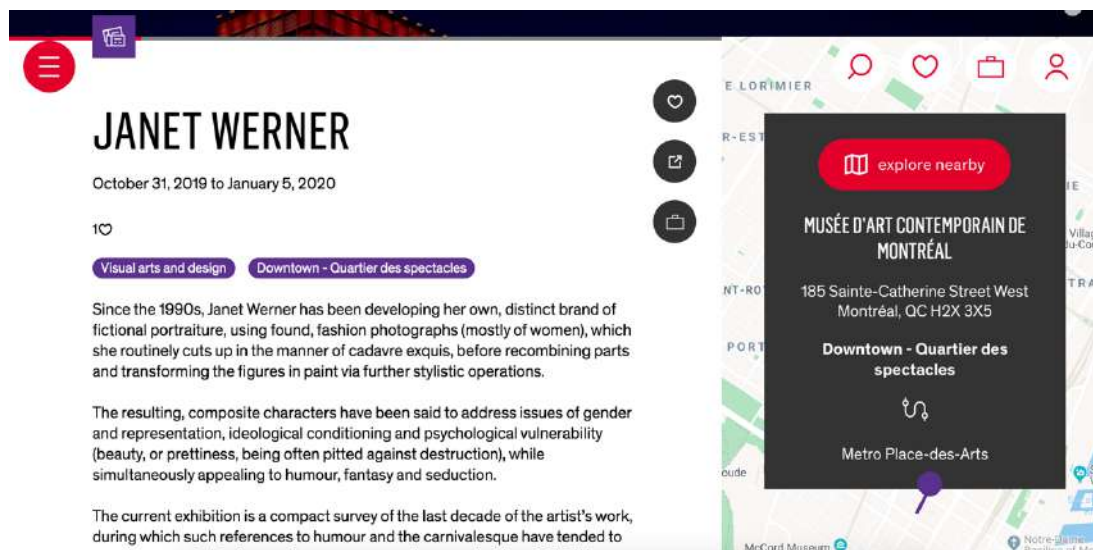
Janet Werner presents a partial snapshot of the last decade of her work

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Macmontreal. "Visit the must-see exhibitions..." Instagram, [instagram.com/macmontreal/](https://www.instagram.com/macmontreal/)



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Herrerabarría, Mauricio. *Janet Werner Advertisements*. 2019, JPG file.





Herrerabarría, Mauricio. *Inside Janet Werner's Exhibition*. 2019, JPG file.



Litherland, Paul. *Janet Werner*. Courtesy of the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montréal, 2019.



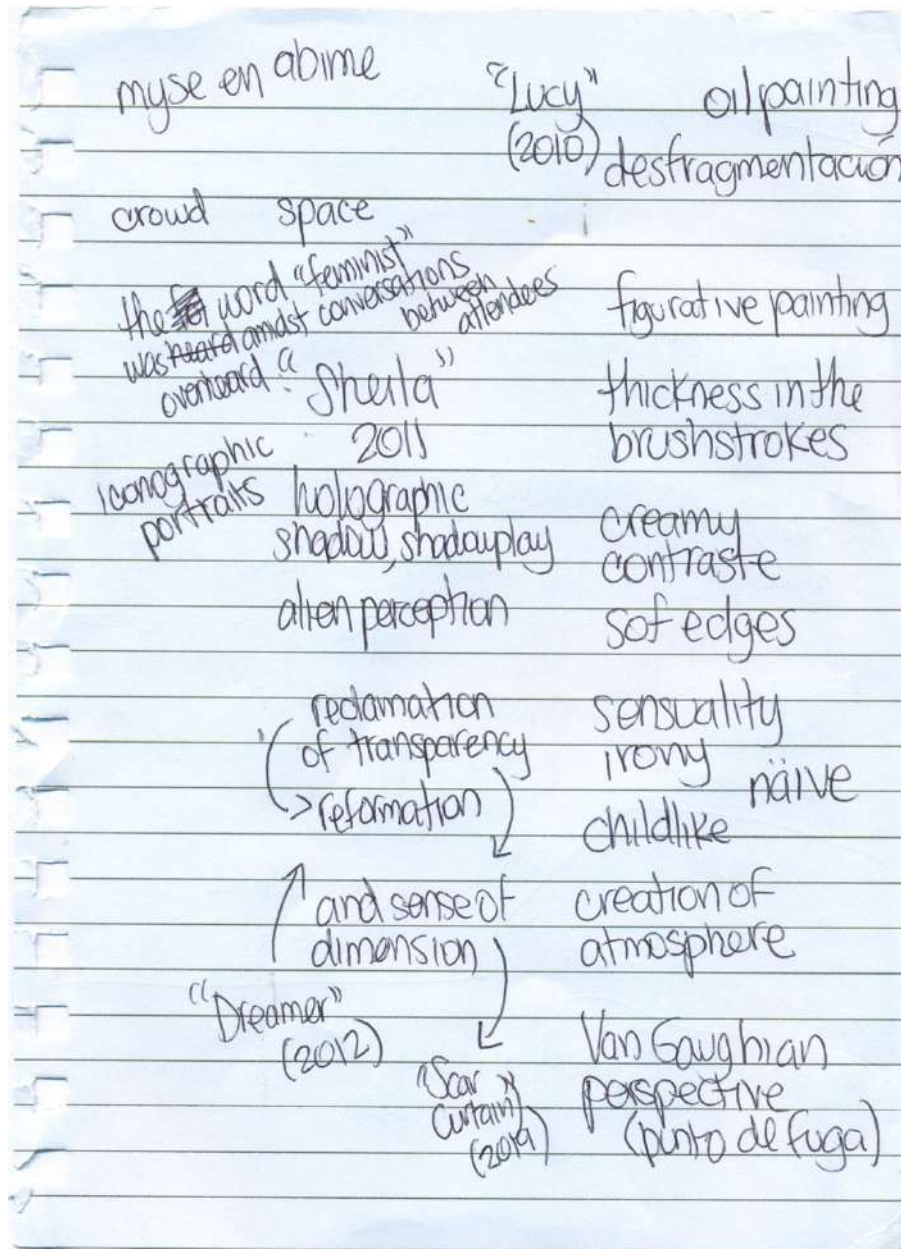
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ANNEXES

Attached in the Annexes you'll find scans of some of the notes I took while at the exhibition as well as the front page of the museum's press release, they are meant to clarify the research process behind this dossier.



crowd / younger crowd

- ~~students~~ (25+)

- older people (50+)

- students that probably
came to the museum
right after class

"is painting a
violent act?"

she even mentions
the presence of
violence

not in chronological
order, nonetheless
there is a sense of
continuity

New exhibitions at the MAC Janet Werner: reinventing the portrait



Montréal, October 30, 2019 – The Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal is thrilled to launch a new series of exhibitions today. Up to January 5, 2020, visitors will be treated to a vast array of art practices. Opening the series is a survey exhibition of the last ten years of work by major Canadian painter **Janet Werner**. The Montréal artist is known, among other things, for creating strange and intriguing portraits of fictional women. The MAC is also excited to present a new exhibition by Montréal artist **Gisele Amantea**, who takes inspiration from the MAC's very own Rotunda, as well as works from its collection in exhibitions ***Je vois ce que tu regardes: Luis Jacob and Serge Tousignant*** and ***Alain Païement: Bleu de bleu***. Rounding off the season are two video animations by South African artist **William Kentridge**, *Second-hand Reading*, 2013, and *Learning the Flute*, 2003 (which is also part of the MAC collection and will be presented starting November 6).

Several exhibitions tours with artists and curators are scheduled over the upcoming weeks. For the first time, the MAC is also offering tours of the Janet Werner exhibition with Quebec Sign Language (QSL) interpreters.