

# BORDER CROSSINGS



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## VISUAL ART

## Allison Schulnik

by James Campbell

It all begins with dentition—radiant, implacable and untoward. Those clenched sets of teeth obtrude upon our attention from the vast, pale, spectral ground like the tips of a very nasty menacing iceberg. I am speaking of the loopy panoply of clowns' faces and open mouths in LA-based Allison Schulnik's *Performance #3*, 2010.

These feverish visages upgrade to a whole new level of menace, that of Pennywise the Dancing Clown in Stephen King's *It*, whose hidden, feral teeth Schulnik's evil clowns quite involuntarily reminded me of. The sense of the clown faces as palpable malignancies awakens us to our own irrational fear of clowns (known as coulrophobia) precisely because their malevolence reeks powerfully of authenticity and unending hunger. Our frisson of being in harm's way confirms it. These clowns are definitely *meshugana*. Cultural critic Mark Dery brilliantly theorized the postmodern archetype of the evil clown in "Cotton Candy Autopsy: Deconstructing Psycho-Killer Clowns" (a chapter in his cultural critique *The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink*) in a way that brings us close to a truth of Schulnik's art: we really are living on top of a cultural landfill of buried, but by no means dead, *clownaphobia*.

Schulnik unearths the landfill with cheerful alacrity in copious oil paint. The binary reading of her faces as hostile and the paint matter as clotted blood or recycled fecal matter is troubling and abject and makes us reconsider what critics always say about her: she is the advocate of hobos, pathos and the grunge aesthetic—a poet of the wayside, champion of the down-trodden. Whereas clown-faced strangers lunging at you out of the

rain with straight razor in raised fists is far more to the point.

If you were to take the thick-coat *Performance #3* by its four edges and roll it into a cylinder, you would have something very similar in kind, I think (and not just architecturally), to the flattened cylinder in Samuel Beckett's magnificent prose work *The Lost Ones*, in which he describes a claustrophobic world consisting of a flattened cylinder, 50 metres in circumference and 16 high, with its pitiable inhabitants. Rife with social commentary, tragedy, humanity in *extremis*, it mirrors Schulnik's painting world with telling verisimilitude. However, if Beckett's pathetic subjects seem to be struggling to find a way out, Schulnik's subjects seem to be seeking a way in—inside painting, inside pigment itself. Both Schulnik's and Beckett's dubious protagonists, however much they want to leave the world of animals, are in fact morphing into a condition that has little or nothing in common with humans.

If Schulnik paints social misfits and their surrounds, she also knows how to haunt. There is a beauty in malevolence, after all, as the noted British author of ghost stories M R James knew well. I see Schulnik's subjects as spectral presences and restless atavisms that convulse our hearts and gonads with pleasing terrors. Such is alarmingly the case with *Man Holding Head*, 2010. In this splendid painting, two snarling faces offered in vertical depth are read finally as one subject holding another's decapitated head by the hair as the former strides through a wasteland with his bounty. Both pairs of eyes stare right into and through our own despite the difference in height. Both seem somehow alive.



Schulnik's paintings are viscous, somatic and coagulant. The paint is applied with gusto as she builds up the thick coat like a latter-day Eugene Leroy essaying her own version of History Painting or Milton Resnick's fabulously layered surfaces, intent upon reaching the threshold where the oil paint signals its own truth as morphological matter.

Her work has a weird, wired, historical vibe. Whether it is Napoleon's slanted hat at Waterloo or King Lear staring heavenwards in the rain, evil clowns or feral mangy wolves, Schulnik is an ardent champion of her subject matter. That's interesting in itself, since nowhere is there any hint of transcendence here. Earthbound, soiled, irremediably of the earth, her subjects simply are. In the eerily resplendent *Three Trees*, 2010, she seems to be building a

1. Allison Schulnik, *Night Wolf*, 2011, oil on linen, 121.92 x 152.4 cm. Photograph: Richard Wedemeyer. Courtesy Galerie Division, Montreal.

2. Installation photo of Allison Schulnik's "Performance" exhibition at Galerie Division, Montreal, 2011. Photograph: Richard-Max Tremblay. Courtesy Galerie Division, Montreal.

sanctuary for her motley crew, masterless Calibans far from the sea. In the bowels of the deep forest, openings in the trunks of trees suggest interior hidey-holes for a host of monsters and cast-offs, human and otherwise. This is Schulnik's seriously warped, if incandescent, vision of her very own marginalized home world.

Schulnik used to be a dancer, and that is no surprise as we sense how agile her command of the overall plane is and how she achieves remarkable parity between the small and large scale, the thick coat and the razor-clean shallow surface, the animal and human and the something in between.

Her show was a fitting inauguration of Division's impressive new digs in Montreal's Griffintown neighbourhood. It fits the new space hand-in-glove in terms of scale and ambition. The five occupants of the 41,000 square-foot L'Arsenal building are, and will be, Galerie René Blouin (who moves in this summer), Galerie Division (owned by Pierre and Anne Marie Trahan), Collection Majudia (the Trahan Collection), a studio for a guest artist (this funded by Trahan) and the 22,000 square-foot L'Arsenal "special project" room. The latter, curated by Jean-François Bélisle, former head of the Montreal art gallery association, is avowedly geared towards the promotion of the contemporary art scene in Montreal and beyond. ■

*"Performance" was exhibited at Galerie Division in Montreal from May 14 to June 18, 2011.*

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