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GUY L'HEUREUX MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN

# Hirschhorn's Jumbo Spoons dig deep into our psyche

Swiss artist's installation takes up an entire wing of the Musée d'art contemporain with layers, trappings

HENRY LEHMANN  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

It's nothing we might think of as chic or refined, nor does the encrusted splendour of Versailles exactly come to mind. Rather, the large, temporary room designed by the internationally known Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn, titled *Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake*, takes up one wing of the Musée d'art contemporain, after previous showings in Chicago and Paris. It seems, on first glance, to enshrine almost all that is cheap and gaudy – or, to put it in nicer terms, all that is tacky and clichéd, and richly punctuated with a coating of “serious” educational materialism.

But what a breathtaking environment it is – chock full of paper, cut-outs, trinkets, along with a load of items apparently right out of a hardware store. Covering much of this are cascades of streamers, not to mention the giant paper spoons and that humungous cake at the centre of it all.

There is no doubt that this phantasmagoric work is about meanings that only an archeologist expert in contemporary myth and ritual might discern while painstakingly picking through the layers of tinfoil. One of

these myths might be of the kind promulgated by high schools everywhere, the myth of triumph, us over them – in this case, some other varsity team.

Hirschhorn's space recalls a gym made over, as if for a high school prom. Only, at the MAC, it seems the “decoration committee” – in fact, Hirschhorn – has pushed school spirit to the edge. Giving further indications that this is the prom, an American rite of passage perhaps second only to marriage, are some large emblems looming high on the walls – a Red Bull logo and pictures from Apollo space missions. These images are sufficiently iconic and violent to be imagined as the symbols for some team, or perhaps American culture itself. Make no mistake, though; Hirschhorn's work is very much linked to notions of our collective psyches and to our deepest personal values.

This room is something other than an arena for sanitized romance. Those dangling chains everywhere are scary, suggesting that perhaps the real interior decorator here was a sadistic hoarder. And then there are the endless books and brochures, covering a range of difficult and disquieting subjects – the Taliban, ecology,

feminism, African poverty, war, peace and race among them. There are also magazine cut-outs that depict guns and wristwatches. Surely, the warped creator of this churning flash-and-trash sanctum should be investigated. When Hirschhorn explains that the items are mere “decoration,” we have to wonder if the artist isn't Mr. Sarcasm himself. For what he delivers is not a dance venue, but rather a whole world view – and it isn't a pretty site. However, it is morbidly fascinating, but possibly recommended for optimists only.

Indeed, in this decor, the world is that giant cake – five metres in diameter and two metres in height – in the centre of the room. This imitation pastry, topped with a thin coating of hair-spray, is, in a sense, for the taking. At least, this is strongly hinted by the human-size, non-metallic spoon facsimiles lined up like waiters near the walls, some dipped in imitation, hardened blood (or is it just jam?). These utensils bear words, in one instance that most piquant of triads, the letters USA.

One of the ideas behind Hirschhorn's piece has to do with the frightening international imperative to dig in when the digging's good (bauxite, coal, oil, etc.) and get the biggest share possible, and to heck with anyone else. This may be what proms are really meant to prepare us for.

And those brand new buckets mysteriously placed here and there, a true highlight in the overall mass of things, seem ready to collect the tears we shed when considering the mess that is the world today, or maybe just those caused by the stupendous pile of material goods in the show itself.

In the fine little catalogue accompanying the show, Hirschhorn explains that his creation “is not about all the materials, but instead the concept.”

This work is highly worthwhile, a Neo-conceptual meditation on consumerism, ritual, having, not having and the fundamental irrationality and inhumanity at the very core of our beings. Of course, the work, with its built-in prankish sarcasm, can just as well be savoured as something just plain fun. Extreme excess always gets a few laughs. Certainly, part of the deeper meaning is in the sheer ambiguity of Hirschhorn's unique approach.

Thomas Hirschhorn's installation is on view at the Musée d'art contemporain, 185 Ste. Catherine St. W., until Jan. 6. Call 514-847-6226.

Also using a room – a gallery space – as his basic format, Montreal artist Michel Archambault has put together an interior with a life of its own. For this, cryptically titled *Where is Julian*, the artist has not actually put up walls, but has used the existing

gallery walls for his own room. Unlike Hirschhorn's house of clutter, Archambault's room is as spare and open as can be. The walls are basically left to the imagination, with the furnishings consisting of several metal bars, these often draped with neatly folded towels. Here and there are mirrors, some flat on the floor. The straight neons fixed to some of the bars serve to highlight the wires that snake across the gallery floor.

Indeed, far from suggesting any kind of cakewalk, this installation alludes to an exercise gym or those Spartan, all-metal playgrounds of the first half of the 20th century. There are also taped noises, some relating to what we might hear in a public gym.

Michel Archambault's *Sculpture Son* remains on view at CIRCA, 372 Ste. Catherine St. W., Room 444, until Dec. 22. Call 514-393-8248 or check [www.circa-art.com](http://www.circa-art.com).

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