

Martine Rouleau

Paradise found in a disenchanted fairy tale

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Martine Rouleau, *Paradise Found in a Disenchanted Fairy Tale*

A man walks in a frozen desert. The immensity of the open space dwarfs him and the sky seems to weigh heavily on his shoulders as he struggles to reach a heavenly garden. But, just as it appears to be within his reach, he finds himself back at his starting point and he collapses, blood smeared on his face and shirt. He has fallen, but his paradise was never lost, because it was never found and only the spectator of the video installation *Cold Days* can see how desperate his plight was. Standing between the two screens that simultaneously present the barren land and the lush oasis, lulled by a slightly disquieting music, one is faced with the inevitable: in the game that opposes man to nature – be it his own nature or the one that surrounds him– man will always lose. That is, according to the artist Claude Ferland.



Image from series *Cold Days*, inkjet on polyester, 66 x 90 cm, edition of 3, 2004

Currently working in Berlin, Ferland has been fascinated by the never ending quest for happiness and the many ways in which we fail to ever attain a satisfying end. Using video, music, photography and sculpture, the artist conveys a disenchanted world in which all the elements of the fairy tale might be present but fail to yield the anticipated “happily ever after”.

Nostalgia for a lost state of innocence and unity with nature has inspired artists since the Middle Ages. But, Ferland’s work raises questions rather than providing a mere interpretation of what happiness should look like. The main concern that emerges from his video installations revolves around the understanding of nostalgia. Is it really the appropriate term to designate a sense of longing for something that was never lost because it was never possessed

in the first place? Milton, In his treatise *Of Education* writes, “The end then of Learning is to repair the ruines of our first Parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him”. The author of *Paradise Lost* believed that before the fall Adam possessed “a pure light of natural knowledge” and that he forfeited this perfect wisdom when he consumed the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge. The lesson to be learned for Adam, Eve and all their descendents was that Creation ought to be understood only as a sign of God’s greatness, not as something that can be possessed and criticized.



Image from series *Adieu*,
inkjet on polyester,
66 x 90 cm, 2004

THE STRANGE FRUITS OF THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

A young woman is tied to a tree, her delicate wrists bound by downy fibres reminiscent of flaxen hair. Her eyes are fixed on the horizon as the melancholy string arrangement of George Delerue’s *Thème de Camille*, accompanying these images, echo the sadness in her eyes. But the placid pre-Raphaelite scene is soon perturbed. Panic seizes the maiden as she writhes, entangled in the branches of the tree, seemingly prey to a mix of terror and wantonness. The more she struggles, the more her hair and limbs get intertwined with the branches. A pounding electronic soundtrack mixed with screams covers Delerue’s music and fibres and bandages bind the now immobilized character to the tree, as if she was caught in a web.

The characters in Ferland’s work have attained knowledge – that of the darkness into which creation falls when it is deprived of the divine light. The

woman of Adieu is engulfed by the tree of knowledge, bound to it in a mix of pleasure and fear. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they lost the capacity to attain intuitive knowledge and, because they were thus more removed from God, they had lost their former ability to know. When the angel Michael comes to earth to tell Adam about the future, he begins by giving him visions, but eventually must stop and narrate the rest because he perceives Adam's "mortal sight to faile" (PL 12.9).

Ira Clark writes, "Paradise Lost's narrators declare their problems of telling caused by problems of knowing" ("A Problem of Knowing Paradise in Paradise Lost," 183). These problems exist between God and the angels, between angels and humans, between Adam and Eve, and finally, between the poem and the reader. The ones who have fallen have no way of understanding Paradise, let alone Heaven and Hell. Whereas Milton employed metaphors and similes to describe them, Ferland illustrates the fall by showing human alienation from an unmerciful nature. Ferland's gallery of isolated characters is a multifaceted portrait of disenchantment. Whereas Adam and Eve had instant knowledge of everything they could name in Paradise, Ferland's anti-heroes know unhappiness and recognize evil when they see it. They seem to engage a cruel nature with the certainty that this confrontation will not leave them unscathed, but then one has to wonder what attraction could possibly lead to attempt this in the first place.

BECOMING TREE, BECOMING HAPPY

Satan is considered by many readers to be the anti-hero of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. As a central character, he struggles to overcome his own doubts and weaknesses as he strives to accomplish his goal of corrupting humankind. Milton's Satan is a peculiarly compelling character. Although not entirely sympathetic, he strikes a grand and majestic figure, apparently unafraid of being damned, and undeterred by such terrifying figures as Chaos or Death.

The reader's perception of Satan changes significantly from his first appearance in Book I to his final appearance in Book X. He might start off as a strong and imposing figure, but as the poem ends he slinks back to Hell in serpent form. Satan's gradual degradation is dramatized by the sequence of different shapes he assumes. He begins the poem as a fallen angel of enormous stature who looks like a comet as he leaves Hell, then disguises himself as a more humble cherub, then as a cormorant, a toad, and finally a snake. His ability to reason and argue also deteriorates. Once a powerful angel, he has become blinded to God's grace, forever unable to reconcile his past with his eternal punishment.

In Ferland's disillusioned fairytale world, Satan has become redundant because the characters are not falling from grace in their struggle with nature, rather, they are becoming nature. The concept of "becoming" is one which is found throughout Deleuze's work and can be thought of as forming the basis of his philosophy. Deleuze proposes that becoming, as opposed to being, forms the ontological basis of life. In *What is Becoming?* Deleuze writes: "This is

the simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic is to elude the present. Insofar as it eludes the present, becoming does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future.” In other words, a becoming is a pure event that might best be described by the Nietzschean aphorism “There is no doer behind the doing.”

In Claude Ferland’s videos, individuals overcome repressive forms of identity – the dashing young prince, the young maiden in distress – to become part of a wider universe: that of nature. They are deterritorialized from the universe of literature in order to reterritorialize as an element of the landscape. There is neither imitation nor resemblance in this event. Just as the crocodile does not reproduce a tree trunk, the young man of *Cold Days* does not imitate his inanimate surroundings and the young woman of *Adieu* does not mimic the tree. Rather, they are becoming-world, in an imperceptible and asignifying way.

Claude Ferland’s works show the melding of the human into the natural as an alternative to inevitable disappointment yielded by the search for happiness in established archetypes. If, in the game that opposes man to nature, man is destined to lose, perhaps the artist is suggesting in his own way that when an opponent can’t be defeated, the best solution remains to join him.

THIS ESSAY IS ASSOCIATED TO A VIDEO:

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BIOGRAPHY: CLAUDE FERLAND

Born in 1973, Claude Ferland currently lives and works in Berlin. His work allies photographic images, video, music and installation in order to explore themes of strangeness and melancholia as incarnated by archetypal spaces such as gardens and prisons. By investigating our relation to space as a cinematic device, he plays with our understanding of narrative processes.

Claude Ferland’s work was exhibited in Moscow, Montreal, Paris and Rennes.

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