

In the photos he's sent, and in our conversations over the phone, Paul Édouard Bourque offers me a small opening, a window: he's been visiting Roméo Savoie's studio—crowded with paintings, rolls of paper, plastic sheathing, research, objects—"piles of stuff," he says. Sitting at my computer, scrolling back and forth through a folder of digital images, there's also a feeling of accumulation echoing off the plane of the paintings themselves: layers of paint, wax, varnish, scratchy mark-making, and other debris. Right—so there's this accumulation happening on each piece of artwork, among stacks of many other artworks, surfaces, piled together, but there's also the gradual accumulation of time, passing. I read that Roméo's been a full-time artist for almost fifty years,<sup>1</sup> having begun nearly two decades before I was born, and over that period of time he's created a clear precedent for those Acadian artists who've come along after him.

He's the same age as my maternal grandmother, so I think of her, her long life, the forms of knowledge that she holds, and how these are valued differently than his. I consider the ways that we continue to carry forward these categories for "men" and "women." I wonder what for, when there have long-existed the same words, spoken with other kinds of breath...<sup>2</sup>

I imagine the smell of oil paints in his studio, solvents, heated wax—maybe there's a processed wood smell coming off the pressboard-covered floors, the wood-panelled ceilings. Art studio smells, but also the smells of this once-British "timber colony," New Brunswick<sup>3</sup>—a place haunted by the harvest of so many unceded trees, so many lies and displaced people. Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Acadians, Black Loyalists, Black slaves. Erased histories. (Layers of varnish, golden confetti.) (Canada)

There's a loose mark-making, a naive drawing style in Savoie's paintings—lending their solemn colours a certain kind of laughter, joking. These are floating figures—urns and orbs, dotted lines, a fish bowl, a boat—and this sense of humour offers us an alternative, it gives us a way out. No matter how strange or sombre, each picture also contains a certain feeling of order and calm and, as with other kinds of art objects, the parameters of each picture designate a finite system of things—things that can be understood in relation to one another, and in some way resolved.

What also comes to mind are the ways modernist art is and has been used to normalize white-European structures of patriarchy, exploitative capitalism, and colonial violence. Abstract painting has been constructed as a deeply exclusionary artistic tradition, and there's no way around that, so what does it mean to align yourself with it? Consider the Modernist construction and defence of a white, able-bodied, cis-male art history, its notions of singular authorship, virile and masculine and white—the Artist Genius. Still, we each encounter the paintings themselves (objects), and they are quite wonderful, perhaps mind-altering. (This is also true) *Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Roland Barthes, Marcel DuChamp, Andy Warhol, Cézanne, Malevitch.*<sup>4</sup>

After all, I do believe in art. It's important to have these ways of speaking beyond language and conscious recognition—seeking to be seen, feeling out strange shapes in the dark... I see that in Savoie's work. What feels more real to me is looking to understand the tradition of art-making through smaller, self-determined lineages of cultural practice—oral traditions, craft, folk culture, methods of storytelling—trivialized by colonial Modernist narratives.

Art and imagination have always been strategies for living, survival: a means of improvement, of improvisation, of history-telling and, at other times—escape. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves—might those be the most important ones? Our future folklores.

1. Reading from Virgil Hammock's essay "Roméo Savoie: The Right Questions" in *Roméo Savoie: Paintings 1964-2004* (Galerie d'art Louise-et-Reuben-Cohen de l'Université de Moncton, 2006).

2. In her book *Caliban and the Witch* (Autonomedia, 2004), Marxist-feminist scholar Sylvia Federici traces how binary gender and heterosexuality were only normalized and enforced by the European church and state in attempts to curb peasant uprisings, and because of industrial capitalism's increased demand for labourers (bodies).

3. A term used by geographer Graeme Wynn in his book *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth-Century New Brunswick* (University of Toronto Press, 1981).

4. Some of the white male artists referenced in relation to Savoie's work by Marie-Noëlle Ryan, Luc A. Charette and Herménégilde Chiasson in *Roméo Savoie: Paintings 1964 — 2004* (Galerie d'art Louise-et-Reuben-Cohen de l'Université de Moncton, 2006)

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*Born near a great lake in Ontario, and raised on the side of a mountain in the Pacific Northwest, sophia bartholomew now bases their practice along a wooded river valley, in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Their projects cycle through physical layers, membranes, endurance, protection, genuine care, absurdity, and exhaustion.*