

Habitat: Valerie LeBlanc and Daniel H. Dugas

Text by Jonathan Lamy

For thirty years Valerie LeBlanc and Daniel H. Dugas have been working together like video and poetry do in a videopoem: alongside one another, inextricably linked. A blend in itself, this artist duo creates works that also blend, that foster encounters. The creations presented in *Habitat* are neither film nor cinema, but videopoetry. A hybrid practice, a genre in itself, that blurs the boundaries between video and poetry. More than mere connection between the two there is fusion, the creation of a singular esthetic experience.

The three projects that this exhibition brings together – *Everglades*, *Oasis*, and *Around Osprey* – stem from creative adventures in southern Florida and are in some ways also duos. The first project features twelve videopoems and as many soundwalks, while the other two are diptychs where series of twelve videopoetic works are presented alongside a longer video. Connections arise between what is seen and heard, as well as between texts and images displayed on one or two screens. Adding to the dual nature of these works are the French and English versions of several of the videopoems.

Both artists sign each project. Either of them, solo or in collaboration, could have overseen any step of the creative process: video recording, sound recording, production, writing, translation, soundtrack, editing. Willingly exchanging roles, LeBlanc and Dugas work together, co-create. There are no credits at the end of the videopoems specifying who did what. It is also unclear which version of the text, French or English, was written first since the translation goes both ways. In their collaborative approach, the artists go so far as to share their “I”.

The result of collaborations with organizations dedicated to environmental protection, *Habitat* draws a portrait of this American state that moves radically away from clichés. A far cry from the kingdom of snowbirds, of Disney, and of a businessman who has taken any sense of grandeur away from the presidency of the United States. Instead, this artist duo’s Floridian trilogy brings us to an exceptional land, to an edge of the world. Where North America is once again Turtle Island and where nature attempts to reclaim its rights, resisting the ravages that we inflict upon the planet but nonetheless suffering their repercussions.

Valerie LeBlanc and Daniel H. Dugas centre on three areas: Everglades National Park, the Deering Estate near Miami, and the protected areas of the Conservative Foundation of the Gulf Coast. Their projects map out a territory that extends from the southern tip of Florida to the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. In each place, we see how various habitats—the different zones where a species lives—intersect and interact. The artists look at the inhabitants of each place, what has affected them and what threatens them. LeBlanc and Dugas also question their own presence in these places. From their hunt for images and sounds arises a form of discretion, a care not to disturb the ecosystem they visit, often accompanied by a discourse of criticism around the human activity that has disfigured the place. Their work manages to be both activism and meditation.

In *Everglades* (2014) especially, there is a sense of favouring the vegetation taking over recent ruins, as with this the “streetlight swallowed by vines”. The soundwalks and videopoems convey the absurdity of building a military camp in these magical places, the sadness of seeing mangoes from an old plantation languish on the ground, eaten by slugs, and the anticipation of glimpsing the mythical Florida panther. In the end comes the realization that flora and fauna benefit from having been abandoned by humans. These animals, these trees, and these plants, not to mention the swamp mosquitoes that we inadvertently swat away as we take in the videopoems, can very well exist “without us seeing them”. In truth, landscapes need us neither to validate their beauty nor to continue landscaping.

Oasis (2017) also questions the connection between human presence and the biosphere. This project lends historical depth to current approaches to environmental protection by means of yet another duo: Charles and James Deering. Valerie LeBlanc and Daniel H. Dugas engage in dialogue with the two brothers and their legacy: a preserved area, a villa and a correspondence that dates back nearly 100 years. In the twelve videopoetic chapters, certain images underline the opposition between nature and culture while others adeptly juxtapose the two, as in the sequence where bathroom tiles become water windows reflecting the landscape. The double reflection at work in this project (through thought and in the mirror) reveals a world where skyscrapers, totem poles, and centuries-old trees coexist. The evocative power of video and poetry presents things without explanation, an invitation to form our own reflections, poetic or activist.

Without moralizing, both artists attest their concerns for the fate of the planet, which surface particularly strongly in *Around Osprey* (2018). If the longest video of the *Oasis* project stages a silhouette that does not dare to interact with the landscape or a hole caused by ground erosion, the video from this third project creates a tension around the effects of the red tide plaguing the Gulf of Mexico. The image, which tracks a trail, the path of a turtle, then the journey of various birds, is constantly tinged red, following damages caused by toxic algae that siphon oxygen and kill what surrounds them. The camera of the *Around Osprey* series’ videopoems sometimes dives underwater and often hugs the ground. It is both active and creative, offering perspectives that differ from the human point of view. LeBlanc and Dugas’s images allow us to slink into the skin of the landscape, the eyes of a fish, the wings of a butterfly, the inside of a shell, just as they bring us to the heart of a dump’s heap of garbage.

Through their journeys in Florida, which resonate along the shore and with the migrations of birds all the way to Moncton, to the Bay of Fundy and this large turtle shell that is North America, Valerie LeBlanc and Daniel H. Dugas bring us on a trip across various habitats. They invite us to experience the landscapes through which they journey and, in turn, to engage with these places and their works. Listening to the soundwalks, we create our own internal images, which echo those of the artists. Watching the videopoems, we add our own reflections to what we see on the screen, our own thoughts to the poetry displayed. These texts, taking the words out of our mouths and making us see farther, are the voices of the landscape. And these images, their most precious silence.