



HAIRPLAY

The Director of Conservation greets me as I walk in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts by the side entrance. Once I sign the register and obtain a visitor's pass at the security desk, he proceeds to guide me through a maze of empty halls and galleries populated only by a few technicians, busy checking the installations. He leaves me in the contemporary gallery, amid a room covered in transparent drop sheets, where I find Roxane Cheibes, a professional hairdresser, who is touching up a work by Valerie Blass, *She was a Big Success* from 2010. She is hairsetting the outsized, caricatural wig atop the mannequin's one arm and two legs that together compose the sculpture. Standing on a short ladder, Roxane is delicately combing the flyaways and complements her styling gesture with aerosol spray. There, a quiet tingling sensation in the back of my mind, the soft pschiiit sounds of her titivations intermittently punctuate our entire conversation.

Maryse: Together with the conservator, you did some research on hair-spray formulas. I imagine you were concerned with finding the right product to restore Valerie's sculpture?

Roxane: We were looking for a hairspray that sets hair without stiffness. Some aerosol hairsprays are composed of a lot of alcohol or polymers, but worse, some contain essential oils and fragrances. We certainly need to avoid that the sculpture ends up smelling like cheap perfume!

Maryse: Right! That would be weird if the work would suddenly smelled like artificial coconut or vanilla, even though the idea of an ambrosial space for art is appealing to me.

Roxane: Yes, that would be completely absurd, especially in a museum where conservation and preservation protocols are meticulously observed. I usually make it a point to never use hairspray at the salon. It goes against my ethics, but here I am spraying away...

Maryse: Woah! You are spraying it all over, and there are a lot fumes...

Roxane: Yes, I have to use a lot of it, but it is necessary.

*Riiiiiiiiitttttt (sound of metal door closing down the entrance to the gallery)*

Maryse: Would that explain why they just closed the fire shutter, to prevent the vapours from leaking in the rest of the museum? We are locked in the room now!

Roxane: No, they are just doing some emergency tests while the museum is closed. But we must cover all surrounding artworks to protect them from incidental mists. Hairspray used to be very potent, but the way I apply it now is much more subtle.

Let me give you a demonstration. *Pschiiit! Pschiiit! Pschiiit!* This is exactly how to dispense it, in small sprays, keeping my finger on the aerosol nozzle! Look at all these little droplets on the plinth; thankfully we were cautious enough and put plastic sheeting over it. As I said, I am not a fan of hairspray, but I don't have a choice to use it because gels or pomades are too greasy and dust will stick to the hair. With hair lacquer, we discovered that dust just slides off the sculpture! So with my tail comb, I gently push the flyaway hair back into place. I use a metal comb because a plastic one would create static electricity and is also harder to wash. I start from the base, and go up. I have this feeling it is best to follow the sculptural movement upward. So I tuck in all the flyaway under the other hair with the comb, and smooth them over with a little spray of lacquer *Pschiiit!* to lock them in. The lacquer give extra shininess but you can't put too much of it otherwise the hair won't hold together anymore. I often need to take a few steps back, in order to see the sculpture at a distance to make sure there is no more frizz sticking out of it. I must work very slowly, so slowly it's almost never-ending. I have to say that it never feels truly perfect. The secret is to go very, very slowly. It looks like an easy thing to do but it's actually quite complex to complement and complete Valerie's gesture.

Maryse: How often do you have to come in here to style the sculpture?

Roxane: There will always be tiny hairs falling out of this massive sculptural beehive that I forgot to solidify the last time around. It would probably be best to retouch it every three weeks otherwise it might get out of control. In areas where hair gets thinner, I have to camouflage the sparseness by gently moving some of the strands. I do not replace or add hair to the piece. All I do is to clean the headpiece, brush off dust and tame unwanted flyaway hair caused by the turbulence in the museum atmosphere from the ventilation system, static electricity and the movement of visitors! The coiffed hair also gets messed up because some shorter strands tend to slide off the structure even though they were originally tucked in with hot glue underneath longer ones. The spray helps a lot to resolve and stabilise them. So even if visitors don't touch the piece, this very fragile and delicate artwork will always require a lot of care. *Pschiiit!*

Maryse In our eye-minded culture, the tactile value of a sculpture must be experienced at a distance, yet Valerie's piece seems to arouse in the viewer a keen interest, to a point where it was noticed that some will try to touch it. Why is that the case?

Roxane There is an intimacy to the work that somehow invites the public to want to touch it. The plinth, which is in fact an integral part of the piece, promotes greater proximity between the work and the viewer. The sculpture appears to be precarious-

ly standing near the edge of the plinth, even though it is quite steady in reality, which suddenly positions viewers within the personal space of the sculpture. This proximity coupled with the liveliness of the composition seems to compel the viewers to seek bodily encounters with the work. So this might explain why the body of the sculpture has been vandalized a few times. I was flabbergasted when a finger was completely torn away from the sculpture's hand. I also noticed a recess in the foot that is recent damage, which means someone firmly pressed on it. As for the wig part of the sculpture, sometimes visitors try to pull on hair strands but it has never been truly damaged.

Maryse Unlike museumgoers, though, you are entitled to touch the sculpture. In fact, your responsibility is to resurface these glamorous and voluminous locks and gently care for its most vulnerable extensions. Are there any similarities between hairstyling and sculpting?

Roxane More than anything, I relate to the way Valerie moves her whole body to prompt the transference of her vitality into her sculptures. The level of abstraction of her thought process transpires in the intensity that passes from her body and into the work, and back. This movement with her body, while natural for Valerie, produces quite an unusual gesture to observe. Suddenly, the vibrancy of the materials becomes one with her, travelling from the sculpture into Valerie's body in a sort of feedback loop!

Maryse The images Valerie has in mind about the work, as abstract as they might be, travel through her whole body and find their way into the work?

Roxane During studio visits, I have witnessed, and you have too, the unique manner in which she carries her body while she manipulates materials and how that movement extends into sculptural forms. This is a process of thinking through the body that materializes in space, and it seems like she has developed it intuitively, without her even noticing. This embodied logic is palpable in the present work through the ways in which Valerie experimented with hair as a solid material, curving the thousands of strands into perfect arcs contouring the Styrofoam balls. I keep thinking about how the passage of images, or imprints, through Valerie's body is what gives the work its intensity, its affective charge. Her bodily intensification confers an interiority to the sculpture which is manifested in the bulging hair, a soft weaving of tensions, a slow and profound implosion. But all this hair standing in for a face, a head, a chest, leaves me wondering where has this woman vanished to?

Maryse The disarticulated nude body parts — a body without a body

— perform a rather unusual pose with her pubis lifted up in the air, and the excrescence of hair gently lofted above it... What if we were presented here with a mass of body hair? What about the cascading locks of hair being a signifier that rearticulates the body into the formulation of a feminine imaginary?

Roxane This hirsute Artemis of Ephesus certainly provokes excitement! Her fluid mound of unctuous protuberances covered in black luscious mane speaks to the logic of her desire, of feminine pleasure. The sculpture takes up a lot space in the gallery for its hair presence radiates in such a way you have to engage with it. It's funny that everyone working here is talking to Valerie's sculpture as if it was a person. Colleagues stop by my work station to tell me how much good I am doing to her, how much she needs to be cared for, that it is cool that I am taking care of her and that a professional hairdresser is working with the conservator. Once my work was done, she would get a lot of compliments. Oh, she's so beautiful!

Maryse Do you have a pet name for the sculpture, like the way you would call a close friend something affectionate?

Roxane The museum staff here always call her "the wig", but I don't think she likes to be referred to like an object. I feel she wants to be treated like a person. I feel close to her as a unique being, close to her body, her hair, her spirit too. I have worked on a dress made of real human hair, and such an animate material gave me the impression it was becoming alive. Here I work with artificial hair yet my rapport with her allows me to think that she is her own being, through my work with her, she becomes real and alive.

Maryse Does she tell you her secrets sometimes?

Roxane She tells me some things, some little things. She confides her sadness to me. She feels like a little animal in here, and long for her return to her natural habitat, her home, wherever that might be. She scorns me when she feels I'm not visiting her often enough. But every time, she always ends up demanding that I leave her alone, that I let go of her...

Maryse And how do you feel about that?

Roxane It makes me feel uncomfortable to know she is not feeling good being here, and the awkwardness of her position and nudity leaves her vulnerable here. I can relate to how exposed she must feel. I'm sensing she is tired of holding it together.

Maryse If only she could gently fall apart, on the ground and relax a bit...

Roxane      Or stand up again, push herself up with one arm, start walking on her high-heeled legs towards the exit, and leave this mass of hair behind her, on the ground, unravelling in a soft puddle.

*Riiiiiiiiittttttt (sound of metal door opening the entrance to the gallery)*



Third Mind's Eye, 2017  
Collage on paper (magazine), 14.8 cm x 21 cm

