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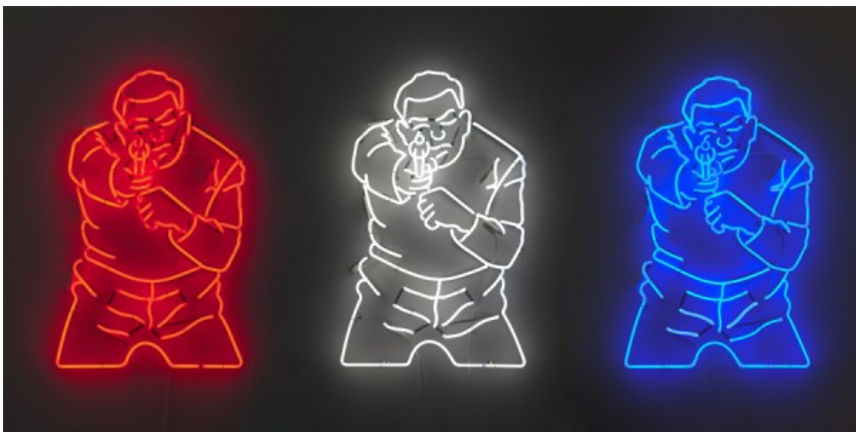
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Arts Advocacy at Its Best and On the Wall: An Interview with Monique Meloche

Posted by Rehema Barber on Oct 29, 2012 | [Leave a Comment](#)



Situated between Chicago's Wicker Park and Ukrainian Village communities is the gallery Monique Meloche. The gallery's on the wall program has become one of the freshest art windows in the area and a conversation piece with which Meloche seeks to engage passersby. Here's what Meloche had to say about the origins and future of this two-year old program, which seeks to encourage interest in the inner happenings of the gallery, while also going beyond the walls to engage her community.

Rehema Barber: Monique, so tell me about the on the wall program and how you came up with the idea.

Monique Meloche: It just seems like so many times galleries push that front wall up to the front of the window and just put the gallery's name on it and I felt like it was a missed opportunity, so I worked with the architect [of the space] and we figured out that if we pulled that wall back about three feet, there would be enough space for somebody to work in there, for something to happen and we were here for a few months before the series began at the beginning of 2010 (we moved to this space during the fall of 2009). We knew that [the projects] would be rotating, we didn't know what the formula was going to be, but it started with our first installation being assume vivid astro focus.

RB: I know. I saw pictures of that installation. It was amazing.

MM: So it was great, Eli is known for doing these wild psychedelic wall paper installations. It was something from the get-go. We kind of wanted to go beyond the scope of our stable of artists and try to use this as a platform to maybe work with artists we've never worked with before, artists who are probably, like a Kerry James Marshall, who is little bit beyond our scope, he lives and works here, but he really doesn't want to have a gallery exhibition. So that was the first one [assume vivid astro focus], which we were super happy with. Then it's been a very organic process, because I didn't want to be so strict, although I did say that it's had to be artists outside of the gallery. Then while that was up, we were planning our next exhibition, that was with Carla Arocha and Stephane Schraenen, who are gallery artists, but they live in Belgium and they came here to see the space and they said to me that, "we have to have the inside and the outside." The second showing of on the wall, I was like I've already changed my way. But they did this like beautiful, optical piece. There was a vinyl optical pattern on the window panes, as well as on the wall, and so it did this weird very op-motion [effect]. It ran for the [entirety] of their exhibition; and after their show we kept it up longer, and we realized that these projects are a little more intense installations, there are some serious budgets involved [in the production] of these works, and so we decided to do only 3-4 of these projects, instead of [running in conjunction] with the 6-8 gallery exhibitions we present annually. After assume vivid astro focus, we worked with Jason Middlebrook, who is an artist outside of the gallery, but I've been doing studio visits with him for years and he was in town doing a project with MCA with their Calder show. I invited him to do a project in the window and he came in and said, "What if I build it and it actually goes around

the space?" So, he actually ended up having a show for on the wall and within the gallery at the same time as well. The exhibition became a whole installation between the window outside and the gallery space inside.

RB: That's really cool, I like the way it sort of flows.

MM: Right, so that presentation proved to be versatile and then the next show was Carla and Stephan. Then I had a little winter experiment, where I worked with this young Jamaican artist, Ebony G. Patterson.



RB: Oh, yeah. I'm familiar with her work.

MM: Ebony had this existing work of these three tapestries, on this wallpaper with all sorts of embellishments and I had seen images of it from a show in L.A. and I asked her for the dimensions and it almost seemed like the work was made for our windows. I invited her to come and install it and it was part of this winter experiment. Every January, we keep that slot open for the presentation of experimental work. That time it was open for young artists we hadn't worked with before and so she was the first one, but there were three other artists showing inside the gallery. Again we keep this on the wall presentation up longer than the show we were featuring in January and something weird happened with our schedule and after about a week after installation, I called her and asked if she could do the entire show in February-because the show intended for that month wasn't quite ready. She ended up doing her first full-blown exhibition in our space and now we fully represent her. .. We only thought to do a week-long project and now it's [more than that]...

RB: That's really good.

MM: Yeah, she's been in that really big Caribbean show at the Studio Museum, Bronx Museum and Museo El Barrio. That was interesting and then I met this young Belgium artist, Rinus Van De Velde and because he was coming in from Belgium, and he wanted to do this whole installation. He wanted to do these charcoal drawings and all of this was drawn on the walls, so this is what was in the front window but the whole story continued on into the space.

RB: Wow, that's amazing!

MM: It was like one massive illustrated text installation about a fictitious artist who freaked out going to a meeting with a director of the New York Times and went to Naples to find himself and realized this director was a scam and then he came back, put back on his party shoes and went for a glass of champagne.

RB: So I have two questions now. First, what happens when it's time to paint over the wall?

MM: It's very sad; it's very sad. The first one, the wall paper, you pulled it down. Ebony's came down in parts and has since traveled. It was at a Museum of Arts and Crafts in an exhibition in Kentucky. So we've found homes, even assume vivid astro focus, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, the curator Margot Crutchfield... saw it and asked them to do something in their space. So they got a show out of their on the wall presentation. Other works, like the drawings were sold and shipped out and we had to wash and wash and wash the charcoal drawing off the walls, which was tricky... The site specific drawings are painted over.

RB: Yikes, but you document each project and then go on, right?

MM: Absolutely.

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RB: My second question deals with your community, your immediate community. What has been their response to these presentations?

MM: That's interesting; the first year I think people were curious. We never had the word gallery on the door, we just had my name and people didn't necessarily know what we were. At first we had that psychedelic work and then something else. They might have thought we were just an interesting shop that likes to do major presentations in their windows and then it wasn't until my husband, Evan suggested to discreetly put gallery hours on the door and all of sudden it clicked for people that we were a gallery. That's when people started to actually come in.

RB: Hmm, that's interesting.

MM: The real turning point was Cheryl Pope's on the wall installation. She a very young artist working here in Chicago, she was Nick Cave's assistant for years. I made a studio visit with her and saw that she did a project with the same south side high school that Mark Bradford had worked with on his MCA show, the Limbaum Academy. She had all of these students submit one truth and one lie about themselves and she picked what she thought were the best and made them into championship sports banners and installed them in their high school gymnasium. They are really amazing objects. "I am not a very sensitive person, I am Black, I am Gay, I am super model size." You don't know what's true or what's false. She had about twenty in the series and we could only fit six at a time. So I said how about over the course of your time here, why don't we curate four different series. So in this instance I let her pick out the first six, the second six and for the final presentation we worked with an after-school group of students at the MCA called the Creative Agency. It was really cool, we had her and like 20 to 25 students in the gallery, playing with little miniature banners and they came up with this idea that we would have never have thought of, which was to have only one of the banners with text facing outward and use the colors as more of a presentation of color theory.



RB: That's really interesting...

MM: Just because of the immediacy of text, their boldness and how familiar people are with these sports banners this is what got a lot of people in the community to come in and ask questions [like]: "What is this?" "What does this mean?" Ever since then, people pay more attention. After Cheryl's installation we worked with Kerry James Marshall. For two years I'd been lobbying for Kerry to do this window, because I just thought that he cares about the public and I'm pretty sure Kerry won't do a show, but I bet he'd be interested in doing the window project and after I badgered him enough, he finally said yes. I totally didn't think about the fact that his project was opening on February 4, during black history month, but he sure did. So—it was almost impossible to photograph this installation—but the Pan- African flag was in the background on sparkly vinyl in red, black and green and then there were these transparent almost-bows that he made screen-printed with images of both fictional and real characters from the civil rights history. The real Cleopatra Jones, some people from movies, some people from literature, some people from real life. It was kind of like his semi-I'll give you Black History Month, tie it up in a little bow, but I won't give you any of the characters that you recognize. So it was really provocative and still very aesthetically pleasing.

Once this presentation went up, this was a major undertaking for him. It was a huge installation and he does everything himself. It was just him and his long-time assistant; he will not let other people help him. That's when we decided we're keeping these projects up [longer] and will only do three of them a year; because we want to do some massive projects. So then following Kerry is the presentation that's up now, Type A. They gave me proposals for the window for a long time. They are a collaborative based out of New York. I've known them for

years. They are not known for their neon work. They do performance and sculpture and video. I'm fascinated with their work and they keep sending proposals and they didn't quite fit. I went to their studio and saw a photo of this piece and asked them about it. They told me the piece was in a solo show they were in at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver. They told me it was a triptych and it was one of those kismet moments again, because I came back and measured the windows and the dimensions of the work fit exactly, almost like the work was made for the window. We committed ourselves to the show in March and then this summer with all the crazy gun violence in our city, we began to have some conversations about whether this particular piece was inviting trouble. This piece is based off a very specific target that was called Klo, it was done in the 1960s and the NYPD used for training. Two young guys came on their bikes when we were installing and were like "Oh dude, that's our target we use at the shooting range right now!"

RB: Oh wow, this work is definitely a conversation piece. When you see what kind of gun violence is going on here, it really is unfathomable. You recognize now that people aren't shooting those they actually have an issue with, they are targeting random individuals. That's the most painful thing about it. Gangs used to fight each other, now everyone's their enemy. It's really scary.

MM: I'm actually quite surprised that no one has said anything about it more; I think the work is very timely.

RB: I think you're right, but at the end of the day how closely are people paying attention to this image. While it is very clear, people have a tendency to read neon imagery and signs much more differently than regular text.

MM: That's exactly what Type A is trying to say. The imagery is violent, but somehow it becomes more tolerable in red, white and blue.

RB: I also think that the question of patriotism is underlying. Who's a patriot? Even just recently there have become these questions posed in society about ones level of patriotism and even within the media outlets; it's been even more inflammatory. I'm really excited to go on and read some more about it and I'll be looking at more of their work.

MM: We had been talking about a light piece for a long time, if the right project presented itself; and at night the work looks incredible. It will be up through December and cross over into our next show. A kind of nice happenstance is that we don't program what's going on inside and outside to go together, but this coincided very nicely. You have this gun culture, red, white and blue, America, Joel Ross is a Texas born artist –it's all about being on the road with a gun, public signage. There is this really perfect mirror. Joel would never make this particular piece in the window, but at the same time both projects reflect the sentiments of the other.

RB: Now the work even makes me think about how people talk about it being their constitutional right to bear arms. Our constitution was written during an era of wartime. It was a completely different era from how we live today; does this particular piece of legislation still mean the same thing now as it did back then? They say people kill people, not guns kill people but if someone has access to a gun or other weapon they may kill someone. This work is very provocative.

MM: Many times it's been an instance when I've reached out to artists that I'm interested in, maybe asking them for a proposal, or suggesting to them some of the work that is existing like theirs [Type A] and Cheryl's that may actually have a different and more interesting life because when they [Type A] talked about this piece it was inside the museum, not outside but they talk about the language of the storefront and those neon signs and it kind of gives the piece the life that they had wished for it and the work is not festering away in a museum. So right now we've been talking to Tony Fair, he's slated for the spring, so I don't know. He's really busy, so it may be later, but he is doing a project for us in 2013. The last proposal was very interesting because it has more to do with outside the space, than inside the space, so we'll see.

RB: That sounds really intriguing.

MM: We reached out to this new collaborative that Ruby Lerner from Creative Capital was telling me about this thing that these artists did during this ideas conference in Louisville, KY. So I contacted them and said I'm not offering a show, but here are a few images of the space, send me a proposal and maybe we can get something done.

RB: So you're definitely open to someone seeing the window and sending you a proposal for the program.

MM: Oh yes, we've received some unsolicited proposals and we work with artists both in and out of town, but I've reached out to Kay Rosen and Jessica Stockholder here in town to maybe get the idea that maybe we can work together sometime in the future. I'm totally open to the idea because we're not working with artists we represent; it totally gives us a lot of opportunity to work with artists both young and old, established or emerging. Although I have been talking to Rashid about doing a project because he's super busy and I don't think we can get a whole show out of him, so he may do something crazy and experimental for our window, which I'm sure everyone here will enjoy.



RB: I think that's so cool. I was really excited when I saw the program because I was really curious as to how you came this new series and what this means for the direction of the gallery. I think it does provide opportunity not only for the gallery, but the artists themselves.

MM: Well you know when I first opened, my first show was Joel Ross, the same artist whose photographs are showing currently and the title of the show was *I Borrowed My Mother's Bedroom* and he went down to Texas and borrowed his mother's bedroom. I'm talking the bed, the ceiling fan, the carpet, the answering machine still blinking with messages, all of her underwear, all of her jewelry, like everything, everything. He basically bought her a provisional wardrobe and she stayed in the guest bedroom for the month and half the show was up. That said it was this very big and ballsy exhibition and on the price list it said, "Ask Joel's mother," because clearly this was not for sale. That was very important for me and continues to be one of the main tenets of the gallery to show challenging art work that may not be commercially viable. The on the wall program allows us to do this on an even more public level. In my old location in the West Loop, I wouldn't have the same opportunity to engage the public whereas here, I have the barista down the street saying, "Oh that's the best one you've done yet."

RB: People, especially within your community, are anticipating what you're doing. That's really cool because that impacts the community. They start to talk about it; it begins to stoke the flames. You're getting people to think in a different way.

MM: Right and especially now we get some more walk-in traffic. People are like, we've now been by this 200 times; we probably need to go in there. I just remember one day there was this young teenager; she was out there looking at the Cheryl Pope banners. She's reading them—I think it was summertime, so we had the door propped open. So she asks, "Can you tell me about this?" We explained the whole thing; and then we had her come into the gallery and explained the show that was up at the time as well. And a week later, she comes back with two friends and she says to them, "It's okay, they're nice to us in here." When the Kerry James Marshall project was up, they came back and I was like you know this is a super-famous artist. His stuff is up at the Art Institute and the Museum of Contemporary Art; you should go to one of those museums sometime. I didn't realize that I was going to be in this position.

RB: You've become an advocate. That's important. In this day in age that's important, there's an awakening that happens. There was something important that you did as an advocate and it was how you treated them. So many times you hear stories about how people felt unwelcome or were treated badly and then art has these negative connotations associated with it as a result. So it's important to have people like yourself who are not only open to conversing, but conversing with a diverse public.

MM: I've always been one to bring the art outside of the white cube model. I collaborate with the James Hotel, I do public art in there lobby there. We've done a couple of projects with a few restaurants in town. At one point I was working with a theatre group...Any way to get the art outside the building, the better. And the on the wall program allows me to do that on a daily basis. I want people to feel welcome here and to be like meet me on that corner, where the building that has that installation of....I want it [the gallery] to become a sort of a marker for the community.

RB: That's also something so different from gallery culture. Just entering into a gallery, there's this feeling of sterility. You look and exit. Asking questions aren't welcome. But for me if you have something that may be challenging on your walls, I think it's important to let viewers look, but it's also important to ask if they have questions, regardless of what a person looks like.

MM: It's simple really, it's about engagement. I'm appreciative that anyone has taken the time to come in here. So if I can give them some information, great.