

**Alternative Fables:
Lapointe, Chagall, La Fontaine, Bellemare,
and the continuum of suspended reality**

*Creativity is that marvelous capacity to grasp mutually distinct realities and
draw a spark from their juxtaposition.*

Max Ernst

Recent political revelations of "alternative facts" being proclaimed south of the border bring into question the notion of fact versus fiction, the realm of reality and the place of fables and myths in a post-modern world. Indeed the alternative of fact is fiction – the fabric of the creative imagination. It is the telling of a story, a narrative that suspends belief yet, as in the literary genre of fables and myths, may include or suggest a timeless maxim or moral as an injection of reality. Fables suspend reality in a way that allows for a reconstruction of a fictional possibility that may in turn offer a measure of truth.

From 1668 to 1694 French poet and fabulist Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695) published twelve books of fables based primarily on works by Aesop and Phaedrus as well as later authors and traditional folklore. The freshness of his narrative, the vivid imagery of his poetry, and his touching insight into the foibles of human nature made *les fables de La Fontaine* part of the French literary classics and required reading for centuries.

Fast forward to the early twentieth century and to Marc Chagall's (1887-1985) arrival in Paris in 1911. Although Chagall set out to capture the avant-garde art movements of the day – cubism, surrealism, and especially the bold colour of the Fauves – it was his unique portrayal of the richness of Jewish folk life in Russia that distinguished his art from that of his contemporaries. Without doubt, it was his use of an imaginative narrative in his paintings that prompted the gallerist, Ambroise Vollard, to commission Chagall to illustrate *les fables de La Fontaine*. Between 1927 and 1930, one hundred plates were engraved only to be set aside until 1952 when a deluxe edition was published by André Teriade. Two hundred copies were printed that included a suite of eighty-five hand-coloured watercolours by Chagall, as well as one hundred sets of black and white etchings on paper. With each impression, Chagall recounted a

fable, some more familiar to the viewer than others. In these works, he not only captured the essence of La Fontaine's poetry, but he provided a vivid visual picture of what is evoked through words and language – all within the very typical vocabulary of Chagall. There are his familiar motifs of floating figures, a full menagerie of animals, along with inanimate objects and celestial bodies. Chagall's compositions are innovative interpretations of each particular fable, seldom literal, and never repetitive; while he uses every possible means in the etching process to cover the surface. The lines are delicately etched with the needle in a rhythm of movement and increasing density to create an intensive painterly touch. Texture of fur, patterns of foliage, and repetitive lines of cross-hatching gives a rich range of tones from darkest black to a luminosity and lightness that denotes a full mastery of the technique by the artist. While it has been noted that none of La Fontaine's fables were his original tales, he was a master of irony and his brilliant manipulation of the narrative was the result of his use of language and the humanity of his characters. Chagall's illustrations corresponding to each story are a pure expression of his ability to transform the subjects with his own original creative, poetic invention.

To this pairing of La Fontaine and Chagall, we add Quebec artist Lyne Lapointe (b.1957), a collector of curiosities and an artist who creates memories, histories, and, yes, fables. Her early collaboration with Martha Fleming revisited lost narratives in abandoned buildings, ephemeral explorations of individual and collective lives. For the past decade or so, Lapointe has developed a body of work that thrives on a melding of disparate objects and media in which she creates a unique narrative of hope and understanding.

Now enter Montreal curator/gallery owner Roger Bellemare who, in the recent exhibition *Lyne Lapointe et Les Fables de La Fontaine par Marc Chagall* (Galerie Roger Bellemare/Galerie Christian Lambert – January 21 to March 4, 2017), has used the gallery spaces to juxtapose the film-like sequencing of Chagall's black and white etchings with the colour of Lapointe's primarily three-dimensional works. Bellemare thus proposes a *continuité* or flow of meaning – creating alternative fables for the here and now. Using various themes such as music, water, the moon, interior and exterior common to both Chagall and Lapointe, and *en passant*, La Fontaine, Bellemare "conjugate[s] history and the present by forming bridges between long term projects" (Gallery press communiqué, 2017).

By artfully grouping Chagall's etchings with Lapointe's large prints or sculpture, Bellemare avoids viewer fatigue, for to actually examine one hundred, thirty by twenty-four centimeter identical sized prints in one gallery visit is beyond even the most avid aficionado's stamina. The installation evolves almost organically through Bellemare's eclectic associations that in turn offer a distillation of La Fontaine's voice, Chagall's illustrations, and Lapointe's concrete vision. The first room is punctuated with three naïve-like forms, *Personnage avec boîte à surprise* (2016), *Personnage avec cloche* (2016) and *Ane* (2016) that echo the subjects in the fable of *The Miller, his son and donkey* (*Le meunier, son fils et l'âne*). Working with wood panels joined with wooden dowels, Lapointe has enhanced the sculptures with found objects, or as in the donkey, with wooden hinges that allow for movement of the head and body. The matching Chagall print is, however, found in another area of the gallery. There it joins a series of etchings that build on narratives of man and beast. Rather than making literal associations, Bellemare instead invites viewers/visitors to discover their own affiliations, constructing new narratives.

Fables typically feature animals or legendary creatures so it is not surprising that Lapointe's *Cerf Albinos* (1999) with its elaborate accordion-like frame resembling a medieval altarpiece casts a magical spell. It marks an interesting contrast to her zoological garden, *Carnaval des animaux* (2012), in which each animal is painted separately on vertical pieces of glass. This assortment of creatures, in some cases almost crammed together, are mounted on a massive low-standing table, and seem to have been extracted from the Chagall etchings on the adjoining walls, a mystical movement of birds and beasts. What stories are they now preparing to tell?

An imposing antique window with ornately carved details partially obstructs the visitor's direct entry into the second gallery. *Datcha* (2016) evokes images of Chagall's Russian heritage and highlights the flavour of the folklore on view throughout the exhibition. Multiple disks of clear and opaque glass mounted in the milky glass window offer narrow views into the gallery space. Here, as in other parts of the gallery, Bellemare has grouped the Chagall illustrations according to images or themes that are repeated in several Fables. Eight etchings, each with a

tiny candle or flame encircle a small relief carving by Lapointe of a white candle with a bright golden flame. In what could be termed the "nocturne" room of the galleries, another selection of Chagall's prints denoting various stages of the moon, some with tiny crescents as in *Les deux pigeons*, others with full circular disks, join several of Lapointe's pieces. Works such as *Personnage nocturne à tête de loup* (2014) in which a figure-form appears to be howling at the moon, or *Éclipse* (2001), with its magnificent grid-like design of the stages of an eclipse, recall memories of bedtime stories – the fables of old and new.

There is a sense of rhythm to the installation that confirms Bellemare's role as conductor of the trio of La Fontaine, Chagall, and Lapointe. If the *Chagall: Colour and Music* exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts claims Chagall as a musical painter, Bellemare's critical placement of the Chagall prints with Lapointe's work can be read as a musical arrangement. The configuration within each gallery becomes like a continuous phrase of notes. The intervals of space between the groups act as rests or short pauses in the composition forming duos, trios, quartets, and sextets. Although throughout the galleries none of the groupings are repeated, they often echo earlier clusters but with a different tone due to the actual images in each set of prints. Are they the melody or the counterpoint to Lapointe's work? The tempo can be felt, almost heard.

Bellemare also points directly to musical associations in several places. For example in the first room he couples Chagall's etching, *Le berger et la mer* and Lapointe's mixed media work, *La clé et le diapason* (2016). In the Chagall work, a reclining *berger* gazes out to sea, listening to the sound of the waves and the wind rocking the tiny boat in the distance like a duet. Lapointe's painted treble clef is superimposed on top of a photograph of the sea with a distant cropping of rocks that recalls Chagall's boat on the horizon. Instead of placed in the traditional upright position as on a musical score, the key is positioned diagonally such that it echoes the angle of Chagall's figure. On the photograph itself, Lapointe has integrated the image of a tuning fork, which of course, when struck offers the universal solfège *La*.

Installed in the third and fourth rooms of the gallery are two works by Lapointe that seem to act as the cadence in harmony with Chagall's etchings in Bellemare's musical analogy.

Printed on strips of tissue paper using a wood block technique and hanging delicately on the wall of the largest gallery is an image of a cello with a swarm of brightly coloured bees or wasps hovering above its neck. Mounted across the top of Lapointe's *Violoncelle et abeilles + nid de guêpes* (2014) is a scavenged wasps' nest on a bare tree branch in a melding of illusion and reality. Next door in the "nocturne" room, the last note is found in Lapointe's small sculpture *Violoncelle* (2016). From the back of the beautifully carved instrument, the miniature cello emits, not a delicate sound but a length of plastic tubing used in medical procedures. Enclosed in the same protective plexiglass box is the Chagall print of La Fontaine's fable, *Le cerf malade*, the only framed etching in the exhibition. Bellemare notes that he thought the print seemed to warrant the old gilded frame; honouring the beast, who, in the fable, denounces those who console his soul while leaving him to starve.

The way in which Roger Bellemare has juxtaposed the work of Marc Chagall and Lyne Lapointe reminds us of the enormous power of art to provide continuity, suspending our reality, building one form with another, that added together can reveal a new narrative and provoke thought and understanding. In this age of fake news and alternative facts, Bellemare, Lapointe, Chagall, La Fontaine and others reveal the complex irony of the nature of truth and fiction. The multiple interpretations of the fables of old are given added perspectives, new strategies, and with them alternative fables to ponder.

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