

Tale for the End of Times

Notes on the series *Extinctions* (2017–18) by Lyne Lapointe

How do we give meaning to our lives now when so many forces are pushing us, irredeemably, towards planetary disaster? Are we actually capable of honouring the equilibrium and habitability of the world? But what's to be done, give up? How can we and should we face the signs of devastation?

These questions become more pressing with each passing day, and art can start to look like frivolous luxury. Yet we should do more than just our best, take a step back, despite the avalanche of urgent needs, and with all our strength begin looking for forms that can crystalize the meaning of and engagement with life. These questions have framed the work of Lyne Lapointe for over forty years. From her stunning site-specific installations in abandoned buildings, made in collaboration with Martha Fleming, to her most recent series of portraits suffused with many mythologies and cosmologies, Lapointe has constantly conjured the alienation experienced by subjectivities, paying particular attention to minoritized lives.

Created almost a decade ago yet hardly exhibited until today,¹ the *Extinctions* series takes in these serious considerations, giving them form through twenty paintings-alcoves. They act as refuges and relay stations that can orient a sensory exploration, guided by titles that sound like those of tales: *Le sabot de la Vierge* [Pink Lady Slipper], *Opale* [Opal], *Paysage* [Landscape], *Spectre des couleurs* [Colour Spectrum], *Ciel* [Sky], *Le coucou et la grenouille* [The Cuckoo and the Frog], *Antidote*, *Chute* [Waterfall], *La pomme, l'œuf et le ginseng* [The Apple, Egg, and Ginseng], *Lit d'argent* [Silver Bed], *Mirage*, *Langues en voie de disparition* [Disappearing Languages], *Sable* [Sand], *Feuilles d'or* [Gold Leaf], *Figue de barbarie* [Prickly Pear], *Migrants*, *Horizon*, *Bateau* [Boat], *La guérison de la Terre* [The Healing of the Earth].² Nowadays, what might we expect from tales and fantastical elements?

In this series, Lapointe continues an exploration begun with the installation *Cabinet de curiosités empaillé* [Stuffed Cabinet of Curiosities] (2017),³ for which she filled a cabinet-like sculpture with haystacks and small elements affectionately "stuffed": a shell, a vial, an anatomical chart, an egg, a drawing of sperm. Although alluding to taxidermy and the scientific practices of conserving lifeforms, instead of preserving the envelope of a living thing by replacing the organs with invisible straw, Lapointe wraps objects in copious amounts of hay, as though to prepare them for a turbulent journey, protect them from future collisions, even camouflage them by burying them like needles in a haystack. This polysemic and humorous gesture is Lapointe's response to the American presidential election of 2016 and its retinue of gloomy foreboding.

Several works in *Extinctions* are also cushioned by hay—a horizon, a mirage, and even a fragment of sky.⁴ Instead of stuffing a cabinet, here Lapointe focused on handmade individual refuges, small habitats leaning against or attached to the painting's frame, metamorphosing it into what she calls “alcoves,” intimate crevices and cases. Those who have already visited Lapointe's studio-home in the Eastern Townships will recognize certain domestic details, such as the sloped roof, the screens, the enameled wood floors, the window frames and shutters. The series also draws some of its subject matter from the surrounding area: the landscape of Lake Memphremagog, the pink lady's slipper associated with summertime swimming in the nearby pond, or the frog whose nighttime croaking has become rarer and subtler over the years. Other, more unusual motifs are added, such as opal, indigo, and the prickly pear. Nature's various kingdoms come together and invent unprecedented alliances. The mineral, the vegetal, the animal, the vaporous, the luminous, and the verbal thus form a heterogeneous assembly, united under the common sign of “the healing of the Earth.”

Healing is more than just an act of conservation. Healing detoxifies and restores life, like the hundreds of acupuncture needles inserted in the miniature body of the blue planet. Similarly, every work in *Extinctions* can be interpreted as a site of regeneration functioning in accordance to a principle of good neighbourliness and resonance. A waterfall is amplified by the solidary waves of an adjacent tuning fork. A frog is augmented by a clock mechanism, undoubtedly encouraging the vigour of its croaking. Compasses protect the edges of a disappearing landscape, while a simple piece of wood, shaped like a hoof, supports the flower's existence as though through morphological sympathy. In the painting-alcove, the image is reinforced by words, materials, and objects. The colour spectrum shimmers between indigo powder, a human shape in mica, and a brass knocker. We simply need to use some imagination and above all lend an ear—through a stethoscope or an empty tin can, a vernacular form of the ear trumpet. An entire network of signs comes alive and begins to murmur. A vivifying vibration.

So what might we expect from tales? Not to change the world or escape it, but perhaps to offer us something to hold and to support us when everything seems destined to be depleted. In *Extinctions*, Lapointe creates alcoves of enchantment that can revitalize our imaginations, reform our sense of solidarity, and cultivate our affection for all nuances of earthly existence. This is not the least of the achievements of a body of work that was abruptly interrupted by illness, after which Lapointe had to reinvent her way of making, and started introducing the human figure as the central theme of her paintings.

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Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

¹ This essay was written for Lapointe's solo exhibition at Galeries Bellemare Lambert, in Montréal, from October 18 to November 29, 2025. Some of the works in the series were exhibited at Galerie d'art Antoine-Sirois at Université de Sherbrooke, in spring 2025, as part of the exhibition *Lyne Lapointe: Cabinet / Circulado*, curated by Marie-France Beaudoin and Roxanne Labrèche P.

² Two works from *Extinctions* have this title, one of which was acquired by the Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec for their collection.

³ *Cabinet de curiosités empaillé* (2017) was presented in the group exhibition *Travelogue* at The School/Jack Shainman Gallery, Kinderhook (New York), in summer 2018. The cabinet of curiosities is an important trope in Lapointe's work and studio. See *Cabinets de curiosités* (*Bruxa*, *Le Cerveau* et *Le Voyage*) (1990–94), drawn from the site-specific installation *The Wilds and the Deep* (1990) and part of the collection of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, or the fifty paintings of *Cabinet* (2008–09), created for the Société des médecins de l'Université de Sherbrooke.

⁴ These are the following six panoramic paintings: (*Bateau*, *Paysage*, *Sable*, *Horizon*, *Ciel*, and *Mirage*), as well as *Chute*.