



JOSÉ LUIS TORRES QUESTION D'ADAPTATION

June 21 to August 26, 2018
Koffler Gallery
Curator: Mona Filip



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by Mona Filip

Any bureaucratic system, by its intended nature, intimidates. Inevitable as part of life in any organized society, the experiences of applying for a driver's licence, obtaining a health card or filing taxes can rate as small annoyances or daunting hurdles, depending on your abilities to navigate government regulations and to decipher institutional forms. The anxiety is scaled proportionately when the bureaucracy you have to untangle is foreign and holds the key to whether or not you may be allowed to reach a yet-unknown but much-imagined place where you might rebuild your home. Each step, each choice, each decision has a life-altering impact.

A tentacular system such as this – with built-in pitfalls and traps meant to dissuade – can hardly be tackled head on, for fear of being petrified by its Medusa gaze. Instead, the element of absurdity that permeates every level of this bureaucracy lends itself to a less direct approach. An always-dependable survival strategy, comedy can offer recourse when all else fails. Such is the feeling conveyed by José Luis Torres' installation created at the Koffler Gallery, *Question d'adaptation* – of an ambiguous play between humour and dread.

A sense of disorientation prevails. At the entrance, a long hallway lined with an eclectic array of mirrors confronts visitors with their own reflected image and a reversal of perspective. The installation then continues unfolding like a labyrinth structured around an unattainable centre. Multiple pathways offer alternative trajectories, demanding action in one direction or another. Precarious-looking constructions hide secret passages. Once on the other side, new options continue, in an endless loop of routes to be followed. Crossing through holes in the walls, following tunnels or climbing makeshift platforms, the paths remain obstinately peripheral, never providing access to a final destination. Breaking through seems just an illusion.

Born and raised in Argentina, Torres immigrated to Canada fifteen years ago, and the process of displacement and adaptation became the root of his current artistic practice. Equally informed by the study of architecture and sculpture as by observations of vernacular construction and unplanned urban development, his intricate artworks address, under the guise of playfulness, the serious turmoil of life in transition. In *Question d'adaptation*, Torres mines three notions central to the experience of migration: construction, camouflage and reflection. Attempting to blend into a new cultural milieu and to mirror social conventions is a familiar process to newcomers. As assimilation indelibly affects one's sense of identity, layers of individuality risk being chipped away or reconfigured into ever more complex forms of self-expression. Metaphorically exploring the adaptation strategies and fluid reinvention of identity in migration, Torres' enfolding construction reflects the state of uncertainty and perpetual change intrinsic to the immigrant condition.

Adaptation was, in fact, the underlying strategy employed to create the site-specific installation at the Koffler: Torres was invited to use the display layout of the previous exhibition as a starting point for his radical transformation of the space. Emulating the approach of someone who, upon arriving in a new place, might track the topography of their new location, he traced his own desire lines across the gallery. He sculpturally reimagined the narrative of his relocation, translating into concrete shapes the physical as well as psychological obstacles, detours and recalibrations undertaken.

The materials he used were those at hand, easily procured from hardware stores or curbside refuse: plywood, two-by-fours, interior paint and discarded furniture. Torres employs the readymade in ways that run counter to Duchampian intentions of divorcing the mundane utilitarian from its function and investing it with new thought, thus changing its status to become art. Instead, he chooses his found objects precisely for the evocative power of their formal qualities, highlighting their real life function and bringing out the indelible sense of memory they carry. Accumulations of folded chairs, desks, tables, lamps, ironing boards, bed frames and child wagons spill out from tucked away corners like hoarded goods saved for an unknowable moment when their usefulness will become evident. Generic and unremarkable, they are objects scavenged from sidewalks, left there by those who have moved on to more choice designs to be taken up by newcomers who seek the essentials for building their new homes, in a never-ending cycle of arrival.





While some objects anchor the installation in Canada – a pair of snowshoes hanging in the low-rise tunnel to the left – others reference different geographies and speak of global realities. The white and blue duster conspicuously attempting to blend in with a set of golf clubs in the corner sports the colours of the Argentinian flag, hinting at the artist's origins, while the "Made-in-Romania" stamp on the folding chairs nods to the curator's home country. Moreover, once passing the mirror-lined entranceway that confronts visitors with their own reflections, the first thing you encounter is a map of the world, the kind used to teach geography in schools. On the floor below it and leaning casually against the wall, as if forgotten by an absent-minded janitor, is a cleaning mop and bucket. These objects seem to urge visitors to reflect on the state of the world and acknowledge the responsibility we all share for addressing its current condition.

In this first room of the installation, a few key elements contrast necessity with aspiration. An old-fashioned picture of a North American suburban house and its luscious front lawn hangs on the wall, next to the leather-trimmed golf bag. Across from it, a touch of Astroturf supplements the dreamed-of house with an awkwardly staged, faux backyard patio, complete with colourful paper lanterns and plastic Muskoka chairs. While they may signal the longing that still drives or simply sustains an immigrant's intent, these tableaux lack lustre, betraying a jaded and deceptive "American Dream." Serving as a point of both departure and return, this room articulates an unreachable idea of home, already flawed in its conception.

Two paths are available for continuing the exploration: a conspicuous tunnel to the left, and one hiding behind a massive plywood partition leaning awkwardly against the wall. Taking the former, the low-ceilinged tunnel bends to the right, leading into a new space where heaps of old furniture surprise the visitor. Dominating most of this space, domestic objects fill the mezzanine above the tunnel, spilling over its entrance frame and continuing down into the niche next to the exit on the other side. A gracefully balanced column of stacked furniture – beach umbrella upon folding chair upon kitchen table – occupies the centre of this room, as elegant as any modernist assemblage. Behind it, a ramp leads up to a covered platform built on top of horizontally-laid metal barrels – an allusion to the ingeniously improvised architectural structures familiar to the artist from the unplanned developments of Latin American city outskirts. Painted bright red, another tunnel





opens on the platform, leading to the other side of yet another dividing wall, beckoning the visitor to cross over. A larger doorframe positioned a few feet to the right offers a more easily accessible passage into the next room.

Plywood abounds in this last space. Opposite the red tunnel ramp, past a grouping of construction remnants and a portable chalkboard, another tilted partition obscures the access back into the first room. Behind it, a rough-cut hole in the wall creates a throughway protected from view by bright yellow walls. The threshold is lined with an ornate rug that has been cut to fit the shape of the makeshift opening, suggesting a contradictory sense of hospitality and futility. The light bouncing off the yellow walls into the eyes of the trespasser creates a feeling of exposure and vulnerability rather than welcoming warmth. Back where it all started, the cheerful lights of the Astroturf patio offer only an ambivalent sense of optimism tinged with questions about value and worth. Arrival remains elusive.

While the iconography of second-hand domestic furnishings may suggest a universally familiar experience of moving – such as the ordinary circumstances of leaving a parental house to start university – the tunnels, turns, separation walls and holes convey a more bleak reality. The year leading up to the opening of *Question d'adaptation* was weighted heavily with news of anti-immigration sentiment and repressive policies. At a time when global migration faces one of its worst crises, more doors are closing rather than opening. The United States, a long-time beacon of hope and refuge, is tightening its borders and turning inward to instead nurture xenophobic, nationalistic and prejudiced views. The same dangerous tendencies appear to be gaining traction here in Canada.

Bureaucracy no longer seems just a deterrent strategy one can aspire to surmount with tenacity and acumen. Strategies of intimidation have reached a new level, tantamount to overt and unreasonable cruelty. Ethical questions and moral benchmarks seem to have been divorced from any notions of empathic humanity. However, rather than succumbing to despair in the wake of terrible international events and the collapse of democratic values, artists mobilize the affective power of art and lend their voices to resist and oppose intimidating and repressive tactics.





Implicitly responding to these harsh realities, *Question d'adaptation* takes a hopeful stand. An exhibition dealing with exclusionary systems offers a paradoxically accessible experience, allowing for a level of physical engagement unusual to most encounters with art in galleries. The playfulness of the environment feeds a poignant tension with the sombre content, ultimately asserting the inventiveness and determination of those who find ways to elude oppressive systems and forge their way forward under unthinkable circumstances, making possible a good-enough dwelling space between the unreachable and the unbearable.

José Luis Torres was born in Argentina and has been living and working in Québec since 2003. He has a Bachelor's Degree in Visual Arts, a Master's Degree in Sculpture and a degree in Architecture. His work has been showcased in many solo and group exhibitions, as well as public interventions in both Canada and abroad, including Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (Québec), Human Cities/Places to be (Brussels, Belgium), Museum London (London, ON), The Works Art & Design Festival (Edmonton, Alberta), Manif d'art the Québec City Biennial (Québec), UCCS Gallery of Contemporary Art, (Colorado Springs, USA), Latitude 53 Contemporary Visual Culture (Edmonton, Alberta), X-Border Art Biennial (Rovaniemi, Finland) and CAFKA – Contemporary Art Forum Kitchener and Area (Cambridge, Ontario), among many others. Torres has also participated in various artist residencies in Canada, Argentina, the United States, Mexico and Europe.







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