

# SÉBASTIAN MALTAIS: LE POIDS DES OMBRES PORTÉES

June 16, 2016 • 4 minute read • by Kara Williams



## Sébastien Maltais

*Le poids des ombres portées*

Galerie Dominique Bouffard

May 12 to June 12, 2016

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The new series of paintings by Sébastien Maltais, beautifully presented at Galerie Dominique Bouffard, is a superb achievement of black and white encaustics, largely inspired by the existentialist writings of Albert Camus, which were written in the turbulent post-war era of disillusionment. Camus said that the creation of meaning is a logical leap which evades the world's true problems. Is Maltais saying that the creation of meaning in ideologies and religion is what leads to the human catastrophes he paints? The simple fact of existence brings those capable of reflection to ask such questions, and what better guide through life than philosophy?

A native Montrealer and devoted painter with over twenty years of experience, Sébastien Maltais is a

contemporary master of the age-old medium known as "encaustic". He has been exploring the medium in depth since 2000. Encaustic is a complicated process which involves heating and pigmenting wax, applying it with a brush or other tools, then reheating the surface to fuse the paint. As wax dries very quickly, this makes the normal process of painting much more difficult than painting with oil. Despite these limitations, Dominique Bouffard assured me that Maltais enjoys the challenge.

The history of encaustic stretches back to 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Greece—and was widely used for icons, few of which survived iconoclasm—and the consequent Greek influence over later Egyptian art and philosophy following the conquests by Alexander the Great. The tradition likely emerged from pigmented dyes used to seal ships, and was then used by Greek artists in place of tempura for its greater longevity. The most famous encaustics are probably the Fayum funeral portraits, which were placed over the mummies, signaling a confluence of Greek and Egyptian culture.

Encaustic fell out of favour with artists for centuries and then enjoyed a revival from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward to varying degrees. Modern artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg also explored painting with wax, but Sébastien Maltais' persistent dedication to the medium as well as the depth of his philosophical and humanitarian concerns in his work will assure him of a place in history as one of its masters.

*Le poids des ombres portées*, or *The Weight of Projected Shadows*, contains two related bodies of work, *Propagande* and *Territoires*. The former utilizes images of children used in propaganda, reclaiming their images in a long meditative process, bringing a degree of humanity and respect back to their images through the painstaking brushstrokes of the artist. *Territoires* reclaims the land on which crimes against culture and history were committed. At first glance these images seem to be not much more than faded blown-up newspaper clippings. Yet a closer reflection on these tragic images makes us view them with empathy, through the waxen blur of tears, memory and time, leaving one with a lingering sadness and concern for the future of humanity.

The moon, titled *40 Days in the Desert*, sits high above the exhibition, a light softly glowing, reminding us of the light in the darkness. Yet the full moon also calls to our primal, animalistic selves, the root of such violence. It perhaps represents the influence of temptation. The *Territoires* contain such outrages as the empty caverns which once contained the massive Buddhas of Bayiman in Afghanistan, dynamited by the Taliban in 2001, and the ruins of Palmyra, further ruined by Isis during their occupation of the site of antiquity. The exhibition is also watched over by Camus, cigarette dangling from his mouth, and then a portrait of Pope Pius the XII, pre-war critic of Nazism who called for love, charity and compassion to rule over war—although Nazism was proclaimed from many Catholic pulpits in Europe. This is followed by the artist in *autoportrait*, pensively observing the viewer's observation.

Images included in *Propagande* include child soldiers with hard eyes in the soft face of youth, and *Helge*, who is

Helga Goebbels, one of five children of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister who murdered his offspring before committing suicide with his wife during the fall of the regime.

These works challenge us to not give in to death and absurdity, or to the madness of cruelty and hate that swarm around us today, to endure our forty days in the desert, and they reminded me of the tender concern we should have for our fellow travelers on this earth.

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