

Sébastien Maltais' Icarus complex

*Pride goeth before
destruction, and a
haughty spirit
before the fall.*
— Proverb

By P.A. Sévigny
The Suburban

In a world where visual communication has often been

reduced to little more than a two-dimensional scrawl, Sébastien Maltais' latest work may be seen by some as the first light of a new day for Montreal's visual art community.

Maltais manages to reduce one of western civilization's central narratives into a series of single epic images that tell their own story about ambition and oedipal pride. His use of encaustic (hot wax) provides the template by which the texture and depth of each painting alludes to the complex history behind the iconic images, which provide this exhibition's narrative context. Painting with hot wax is considered to be among the most difficult of techniques and by far one of the most expressive. The layers of wax impose depth and a refreshing three-dimensional plane to the piece. They also open up all sorts of multi-media opportunities since bits and pieces of other materials can be integrated into the work as successive layers of wax (one for each color) are applied to the piece.

"When I paint with hot wax, it's as if I pick a fight with each and every canvas," says the artist.

Maltais' *Cicatrice* (Scar) is one of the exhibition's stellar pieces. At first glance, the piece is nothing but a postcard image of a typical European train yard in the provinces. But hidden under multiple layers of wax, the photograph of a boy with a haunted look does much to refer to the collective memory of thousands of cattle cars rattling over those tracks on their way to Hitler's death camps. A closer inspection reveals how a multitude of other pictures, including that of Franz Kafka, and other documents were inserted to one degree or another under the surface of the train yard. Maltais' Scar is not so much in this image as it is in our own collective psyche.

In a word, his work is all about ambition. Deep hues of brown and ochre allude to the fact that all of these stories are part of a greater one as old as time itself. Just as Icarus fell to his death because he flew too high, Maltais' paintings refer to the kind of ambition that does as much to create as it does to kill.

When the viewer sees the painting of Baron Manfred von Richthofen (The Red Baron) playing with his dog, one can't help but think of the day when he too, like Icarus, would



Sur des terres brûlées, 2008, Oil and encaustic on canvas, 122 x 221 cm.

COURTESY OF GALERIE DOMINIQUE BOUFFARD

fly too high and meet his own doom. The picture of Charles Lindbergh is another iconic portrait of a man who represented everything the American people felt was good and great about their nation. That image is offset by another portrait, that of the Lindbergh baby before it was kidnapped and killed in 1932.

Maltais' painting of a frozen moment in a football game could easily be called Stalingrad, Agincourt, the Somme or Verdun. The image of an offensive lineman trying to make his way past two hulking defenders is a metaphor for war through the ages. As much as this painting is wildly evocative, it is also derivative as even Maltais admits he owes a debt to German painter Anselm Kiefer among others. Others noticed how

Hergé's character Tintin could be found under layers of wax in every one of his paintings. "In fact, Rembrandt and Hergé's Tintin are my greatest influence," Maltais told *The Suburban*.

As a young gallery owner and director, Dominique Bouffard is quickly beginning to make a name for herself as having an eye for young talent in this city. If she continues to hang shows like this one, her gallery will soon join the epicentre of the city's thriving arts community. As for Maltais, if this is the work of a young man at the beginning of his career, this city is going to see lots of good art for years to come.

Galerie Dominique Bouffard is located at 1000 Amherst St., #101. Call 514-678-7054. ■

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