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June 14th, 2007

Carsten Höller

Mid-flight

Isa Tousignant

Carsten Höller gets off to a great start (but little else) in Shawinigan

There's something admirable about the nonchalance Belgian artist Carsten Höller exhibited at the press opening of his solo show at the National Gallery of Canada's Shawinigan Space at the Cité de l'Énergie. He's a really unassuming man for such an international art star. Considering two out of three sections of his exhibition were ineffective, he was as calm as a cucumber.

Then again, the fault may be his. For Höller's first solo exhibition in Canada, titled *One, Some, Many*, he divided the massive space in three. Let's start with the tightest: The middle section, *The Histories of the Laboratory of Doubt*, is unquestionably successful and amazing. Two large mazes, placed face-to-face, plunge the viewer into complete and disquieting darkness (it's extremely off-putting to feel so vulnerable in such a public space) until you resurface, at the other end, into a room that in one case comprises a gigantic wall full of flashing light bulbs, and in the other, a soundstage full of sensors, each of which responds to your movements and behaviour by making a different sound. Fantastic.

The third part, *Amusement Park*, is among Höller's most famous works. Into the far-end, windowless room of the Shawinigan Space are squeezed a defunct bumper car amusement park ride, a Twister, a Gravitron - five or six huge metal rides that have seen better days. As you wander among these mechanical ghosts, and you start to settle on musings of the bygone heyday of places like Coney Island, you'll notice that this or that machine is actually moving. Höller's concept was to contrast the rides' original fast-paced high thrills with a false slowness that renders them garishly surreal and useless. The problem being, there are only two or three of the rides that are mobile for the exhibition. The others are suffering mechanical problems. And so, is the concept any more useful than the rides are now?

But the biggest problem rests in the first work. Right at the entrance of the space, *The Belgian Problem* presents two enormous, 30-foot-high symmetrical aviaries encasing trees and birdhouses - but with ne'er a bird in sight. The idea? "The piece is an exploration of the origin of difference," explained the amiable artist. He wished to share the story of starlings, a bird whose history in North America started in 1890, when a wealthy British manufacturer called Eugene Schieffelin, posted in New York, wished to cure his homesickness by importing all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare to Central Park. "There were 60 starlings released, and now, we're talking about a population of 200,000,000 all across North America," says Höller. "But what's most interesting is that the birds here developed a different culture. They speak a different language than their European counterparts. So I wanted to reintroduce the Europeans into this North American starling environment."

The plan was to have one batch of European starlings in one aviary, another batch of North American starlings in the other, and to see what happens "linguistically." It's a great idea, but by press time, two weeks after the exhibition officially opened, there were still no birds. There are animal rights issues, as well as gestation-time issues - apparently, the hatching time wasn't right, so it'll be "another week or so," says Cité de l'Énergie director Robert Trudel.

I get the distinct feeling Höller's better at thinking them up than following 'em through.

Carsten Höller: One, Some, Many

At the Shawinigan Space (1882 Cascade, Shawinigan), to Sept. 30
www.national.gallery.ca

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The Belgian Problem is that there are no birds!

I've seen some of Höller's work and the first thing you notice outside of an artistic view, is the size of these things. They're just as big as the article makes them seem. It's actually intimidating. And not just because of the size, but because you can tell so much effort and care has gone into everything produced. You have to admire a person like that just as you'd admire their art.

[Joshua Gordon](#)

June 25th, 2007

Give a Shout and Höller

These concepts sound very interesting - sort of like a the Ontario Science Museum meets Mensa. It sounds like a lot of fun and would be of interest to most - timing seems to be an issue which can be overcome as well.

[Cheryl Ramnanan](#)

June 14th, 2007

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