

Profile of the Artists: BGL

CANADISSIMO // 56TH VENICE BIENNALE

By Tina Gelsomini

Something of the magical and humid Mediterranean atmosphere fills the air. As you wander through the lush paths surrounding the select national pavilions in the giardini, you happen on a rather opposing structure. It is supported by long metal beams; to the left, its entrance is small and unassuming, a door to a shack. You walk inside expecting a hidden surprise, and are perhaps disappointed to find yourself standing in the middle of a *Dépanneur* (often referred to as “the Dep”), a Quebecois version of a corner store. A woman to your right shoulder is jostling to get a better look at the believably sparse rows of soda pop and chips lined along the shelves, but its familiar items are out of focus. You expect your eyes to adjust, but the products remain unyieldingly blurred. In a muffled breath, her lips nearly brush your ear as she whispers one unintelligible word: *Canadassimo*.

This store is a stage set. Its props betray all expectations; no clerk will see you at the counter. This is not a run for the basics at midnight; this is a simulacrum of experience. Perhaps you are on camera. You realize this is not the fault of your eyes, but that the products on these shelves are purposefully pixelated, like holograms that show both aspects of their animation at once, without resolve. Perhaps now would be the moment when Jasmin Bilodeau, Sébastien Giguère, and Nicolas Laverdière—better known as the collective BGL—would step out from behind an unseen curtain, and reveal their exhibition at the 56th Venice Biennale’s Canadian Pavilion to you in all of its mundane yet mischievous glory. No such theatricality occurs; you are left in the ghost of the recognizable. The identifiable slowly slips away to farce.

Bilodeau, Giguère, and Laverdière have been working together under

the collective moniker BGL for nearly twenty years. Once a trio of artist-students at Quebec City’s Laval University, BGL rose to national and international recognition through dozens of exhibitions, and are now represented by two major contemporary Canadian galleries (Toronto’s Diaz Contemporary and Montréal’s Parisian Laundry). Their works are in prominent institutional collections such as the National Gallery of Canada and the Musée d’art Contemporain de Montréal—institutions which the group promptly broke out of by bringing their primary focus onto the street, as recycled object sculptors who have installed works in public spaces across Canada and abroad. Since this departure, BGL has gained so much notoriety that they were selected as the featured Canadian artists for the 2015 Venice Biennale without ever submitting an application. As they noted in their Vice Canada interview with Kristel Jax, “We just picked up the phone.”

Whether by design or by fluke, Canada’s newest artworld darlings are constructing a dialogue around the current Canadian artistic landscape—an identity they see as being in line with a series of like-minded artists that provoke viewers through a deadpan inventiveness that prioritizes a sense of inane humor. BGL has undoubtedly carved out their own space within this arena—their gimmickry seems far from slowing down and is, rather, becoming rapidly more accessible toward a definition of contemporary Canadian art. The interview that follows traces BGL’s collective thoughts on the international art world, and their local perspectives on a globalized North American culture.

TINA GELSOMINI: As Quebecois artists, you not only have been given the chance to represent Canada, but

to do so from a distinctly Quebecois perspective at the Venice Biennale. How did this awareness influence *Canadassimo*?

BGL: Given that we are sculptor-recyclers, we work with what surrounds us. Our creative centre is Quebec City, so our art is coloured by the territory. Our North American attributes are fun to exploit and have always been part of our approach. But are we, as francophones, so different? Perhaps we are just more conscious of the critical mass of outside influences.

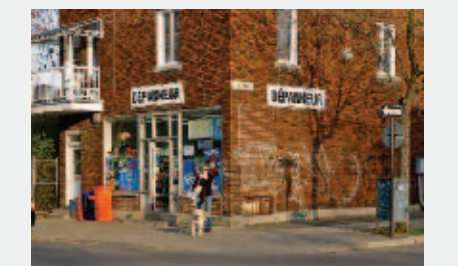
TG: Nevertheless, there is an immense amount of expectation to live up to as the selected artists to represent Canada. How did that enormity sit with you individually, and with BGL as the collective?

BGL: Well, to start—it was a huge surprise; we had not heard any rumours [of the selection]. The news came just as we were working on two major outdoor architectural-integration projects—one in Toronto and the other in Montréal. Let’s just say that the unprecedented pressure added a few white hairs to our respective beards. It remains to be seen, now, whether these trees will bear fruit...

TG: I’ve read that your first step for imagining *Canadassimo* was to have a bas-relief wooden sculpture of the Canadian Pavilion carved by a local Quebecois artist. How did the Canadian Pavilion’s existing architecture influence the works you created?

BGL: We are always responsive to place and environment. In this case, the physical position of the pavilion in the gardens very quickly gave us the idea of a small convenience store that

We try as much as possible to offer a relevant reflection of our era.



TITLE PAGE: Installation views: BGL, *Canadassimo*, 2015. Installation for the Canada Pavilion at the 56th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia, 2014. Photo: Paolo Pellion di Persano, courtesy of BGL, Parisian Laundry, Montreal, and Diaz Contemporary, Toronto.

ABOVE: “Dépanneur-ville-emard” by Minm - Own work. Licensed under CC BY 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons and *Canadassimo*.

FOLLOWING SPREAD, LEFT: BGL, 2008 © Richard-Max Tremblay. Courtesy of BGL.

FOLLOWING SPREAD, RIGHT: Installation views: BGL, *Canadassimo*, 2015. Installation for the Canada Pavilion at the 56th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia, 2014. Photo: Paolo Pellion di Persano, courtesy of BGL, Parisian Laundry, Montreal, and Diaz Contemporary, Toronto.

would become the entrance to our installation. Also, the building's extensive fenestration inspired the labyrinthine windows into which visitors can drop coins. And the whole place has a "welcoming little cottage" feel that made it the perfect place to create the studio, as if it belonged to a not very adept artist-handyman-hoarder. You have to see it to grasp all the subtleties and the osmosis that takes place.

TG: There are so many found objects and minute details incorporated into the installation, tell me more about the process, the timeline and the team that you worked with.

BGL: We had a whole year to work on *Canadassimo*, which does not happen often in our practice. This extended period allowed us to produce a complex sculpture that went beyond us, and whose meaning we are still trying to figure out.

In terms of the installation, we were working with fantastic teams, in Quebec City and at the National Gallery in Ottawa, who were a tremendous help all the way to Venice, where the logistics of transport are crucial, complex and hugely expensive—but where the gelato is really good.

TG: As irreverent humorists that thrive on low forms of culture and art, one might imagine that you felt at-odds with the aesthetic and intensity of the Venice Biennale and the other artists representing the national pavilions throughout this process. How did this conflict inspire you creatively? In your minds, was *Canadassimo* a safe-space or break from the "high" art world?

BGL: We saw it as a great opportunity to provide an experience that would contrast with the Biennale's more prestigious aspect. One that

would get away from ostentation. Make art simple again. Bring it down to earth and allow spectators to participate. This is what shaped the choices we made. Challenging conventions and clichés will always be an important source of inspiration for us, whatever the project.

TG: Is the expectation of a viewer's curiosity and their potential interaction one of the driving forces behind your work?

BGL: Yes. Very often one of the aims with our installations is to give spectators the feeling that they are discovering an environment. It seems that this sense of discovery heightens viewers' curiosity, and makes them more attentive to details—to particular visual phenomena.

TG: Both BGL & *Canadassimo* not only play on our conceived definitions of art, but also challenge

the status quo of consumerist North American culture. How do you balance this critique with playfulness? How does this pre-set define you as artists?

BGL: You know, laughing at one's failings is very healthy. We try as much as possible to offer a relevant reflection of our era. We are conscious of our privileged position as both witnesses and actors in today's world. We are constantly experiencing the beauty of boundless exuberance, which is what inspires us.

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BGL is an artist collective composed of Jasmin Bilodeau (born: 1973), Sébastien Giguère (born: 1972), Nicolas Laverdière (born: 1972) originally from Quebec city. The trio was formed some 13 years ago while the three artists were still studying at Université de Laval in Québec City.

