

GLITZ & GORE - about Céline B. La Terreur's *The Antechamber of Death* By Skye Maule-O'Brien

Are you prepared to marvel at the life and death of a Diva, as she bedazzles you from the morgue? The crime scene of the diva, Elizabetha Von Gorgenstein, is no regular investigation of misdemeanor. At first glance you may recognize signs from the multitude of CSI-esque shows filling our channels, but with closer inspection the scene will begin to feel more like an episode of Twin Peaks, with a touch of glamour, rather than a primetime drama. The diva's body, which is currently undergoing an autopsy, seems to hold preternatural qualities having bled glitter-infused blood... maybe she has even cried tears of liquid gold?

Céline B. La Terreur's artistic fascination with the tragedy, mystery and controversy surrounding the life and death of opera's La Divina, Maria Callas, is the inspiration for *The Antechamber of Death*. Emerging from earlier work using Callas as her muse, La Terreur embodies the persona of the diva, completely transforming herself into the role. This current exhibition has expanded her painting, photography and performance works into a fully immersive environment. Developing an all-consuming character and space, La Terreur's *Antechamber of Death* provokes feminist questioning through attention to detail, story development, and playfulness, while bringing light to life's ill fortunes.

The crime scene installation dually acts as an elaborate altar to the late Callas. A tribute to the real life diva that lived through tragedy and loss; who pined for a life filled with domestic bliss, and threw everything away for the love of a man. La Terreur's prima donna, Elizabetha Von Gorgenstein, like Callas, was living in isolation in her Paris mansion and died in solitude, found with a handwritten note of "Suicidio" from Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, by her bed. Affording a further air of mystery, the only people in the château at the time of Von Gorgenstein death were her five young muscular man-servants —her gardener, dressmaker, hairdresser, chauffeur and maid. As the story unfolds, Von Gorgenstein's Doberman pinscher has too been found dead, and in the climax the autopsy shows the dog was poisoned! Could this be connected to Von Gorgenstein's death?

La Terreur's *The Antechamber of Death* feeds our fascination with death and uneasiness, and introduces the public to a world of high culture and class, mystery and misery. The installation confronts audiences with a systematic catalogue of evidence, dense narrative and a layered plot that thickens as clues are uncovered. Heading the investigative team, Detective-Lieutenant number 6798, with a group of young male police officers working under her, has combed the house and grounds for all incriminating evidence, which is now pinned to the adjacent wall.

As spectators, we are invited join in the investigation through examination, deductive reasoning, and hypothesis, while left to ponder the recorded testimonies and wonder just what kind of woman Von Gorgenstein was, and who Detective-Lieutenant number 6798 is. There are clear connections between the two women —the most apparent being their dominant positions in relation to their pack of hunky subservient men working beneath them.

Themes of death, rebirth, femininity, vulnerability and majestic powerful figures reoccur throughout La Terreur's work. The guardian figure of the Doberman seems to share characteristics with the diva, both physically and in personality, while the prominence of vanitas symbolism —skulls and flowers— are reminders of the transient nature of life and of pointless vanity; the certainty no one will escape life's guarantee of death. La Terreur does not allow for the option of fear and denial, instead she celebrates death's banality through adornment and humour.

La Terreur works to remind us of mortality —forcing us to look at death head on. While *The Antechamber of Death* fancifies, it does not avoid the carnal side. The installation is embellished with glitter, blood, fingerprints, hair, and fine art. The cold bold font of the yellow crime scene caution tape has been replaced with a classic cursive script, forensic science is used as décor, all working to fuse femininity with traditionally masculine subject matter. Creating texture in her installation with scientific elements, and references to classical Italian painting and opera, La Terreur also makes connections with the past, drawing attention to the human desire to adore and idolize. Our current celebrity-drama-obsessed society that glamourizes destruction and decay does not stand alone in history. *The Antechamber of Death* confronts the internal and external conflict and tension that exists as part of the human condition.

As an artist who grounds her work within social issues, critical thought, research and reflection, La Terreur consciously pushes her viewers to question and acknowledge apparent problems in our contemporary environment. Tackling marginalized issues through a feminist and often anti-oppressive framework, her work combines elegance and the grotesque, high and low art, fashion and pop culture, while juxtaposing the macabre with humour and parody to effectively create strategies that forge critical statements about our society.¹ Her multidisciplinary work brings the world of classical painting, sculpture, photography, contemporary video and performance together into an eruption of melodramatic satire.

The Antechamber of Death is a dramatic whodunit full of glitz and gore that will bring you feelings of pleasure, isolation, longing, desire, fantasy, and pain. Violent subject matter with a satirical twist, the dark comedy from the depths of La Terreur’s mind has the power to reach into the caverns of your imagination, excite you with absurdity and suffering all under a guise of beauty and charm. You’re invited to delve in, dare yourself to wander and enjoy the death-ride!

¹ Céline B. La Terreur, “Artist Statement,” consulted 31 January 2009: <<http://www.laterreur.com/english/statement.htm>>

Skye Maule-O’Brien’s interests lie in raising social consciousness and transformative learning through critical inquiry and art-based education. Her approach is based in an anti-oppressive pedagogy and works to create more inclusive environments and programming. She holds a BFA in Art History and is now pursuing graduate work in Educational Studies focusing on adult education, art theory and artist-run centre outreach initiatives in Montreal.

This text is part of a writing series by members of the gallery, reflecting on the works presented during articule’s 2008-2009 programming season. Skye Maule-O’Brien’s text has been produced for Céline B. La Terreur’s exhibition *The Antechamber of Death*, presented from February 13 to March 22, 2009, and is also available as a pdf on the gallery’s web site.

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