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PIERRE COUPEY
ECHO'S BONES

Echo's Bones

Colin Browne

Do I hear Ovid's echo in *Echo's Bones*?

Titles matter.

Poor Echo. Spurned by Narcissus, she left the world behind, choosing exile in a desolate wasteland of trees and crags, and there, neglecting herself, the heartbroken Nymph mouldered into the forest floor and was embraced by decaying leaves. Her bones, according to Ovid, transformed to stone. You may sometimes hear her voice on a gust of wind, but she is no longer among the visible. Her words are final words, cut short, bobbed, docked. In the emotionally complex and generous paintings he calls *Echo's Bones*, Pierre Coupey reminds us that if we listen carefully, we can still hear Echo's grieving cry, humanity's cry; it's a voice that scrapes the planet clean.

An artist is a hunter, a candler in a field of bones. Bones lie at the heart of hearing. The middle ear hosts three: the *malleus*, the *incus*, and the *stapes*. These tiny bones transform sound waves into vibrations conducted deep into the ear's inner sanctum. Their Latin names recall the language in which Ovid composed the *Metamorphoseon*, his great poem of origins—a work composed in exile and in which he catalogued for the future all that might be lost. The paintings that make up *Echo's Bones* reach deep into memory. It would be fair to say that these are haunted works, by which I mean that within their layers, in the act of painting and over-painting, they summon and discharge luminous traces of the dreams, ideals, and companions that have informed the artist's life. Is Coupey suggesting with his title that the bones in the collective ears of contemporary culture have turned to stone? Not entirely. There is exuberance and joy in these canvases, flights of fancy, shards of the present, and homages to love and sorrow.

Born of a poet's sensibility, these vibrant, rigorous works bear the scars of being seduced by and resisting nostalgia. They're improvisational, muscular, teased from impulses both besotted by and in flight from recurrence and abstraction. They're sensual, lyrical, sometimes angry; they track the hidden, the feared, the unrecognizable, and the longed for. Coupey often works on two canvases at the same time, initiating a conversation between the two. We encounter action and reaction, tenderness and ferocity, passionate duets between intellect and emotion. Their vertical fields are ripped by ribbons of bold, often fiery colour anchored by illusory fields beneath them; their vigorous surfaces release the beautiful, the eternal, and the unbearable. When we turn away, we are no longer strangers to ourselves, but we are no longer familiar to ourselves. Pierre Coupey is also *pierre coupée*.

The series may or may not pivot on the stencilled, fragmented, sometimes smudged words that act as tokens or anti-words, daring an observer to transform them into nouns or verbs. To cling to these signs, however, may send one plunging into the realm of self-referential Narcissus. Are they decoys? And if so, what are they trying to lure. Something always leaks out of stencilled letters. They recall consumption and war, packing crates, and military supplies. And how to interpret the gaps that break the cursive loops? Are they

punctures, do they suggest the repulsion and attraction between two magnets? Are these signs meant to be cryptic? If something declares itself to be something, is it, or is it not? Who, or what, is one's ally in the sacred glade of *Echo's Bones*?

I have been interested in the dimensionality of these works, in the illusion of layered depths, and in some cases by the blue-grey ground—what I would call the fogbank grey of warships—that appears in some of the paintings as an inner layer or perhaps the inner sanctum in a forest glade. But I am being a romantic. The blue-greys tease me with an illusion of depth. Everything's out front. Aspects of Jasper Johns may come to mind, his play with signs and the delight that comes with them.

Pierre Coupey is absorbed by colour, light, texture, and absence as presence. He works among ghosts, and they will not shut up. In their honour, the paint comes to life, rushing in and changing places with the world. These are works about consciousness and transformation, the central concerns of every era. In a recent vision I saw a figure reaching up with his hands, as high as possible, pulling at the black panel or curtain of the night sky, and, as he lifted it away, twinkling stars appeared. The surface may have been liquid; perhaps the figure was poking pinholes while reaching up into the darkness, feeling around for a little hatch, pulling it open—and to my surprise a beam of light appeared, a galactic spurt of Hera's milk. Can the universe be held in the mind, and who or what do we glimpse when the world drops away like a rocket booster? Pierre Coupey returns to his studio each morning, picking up his brushes and his tools, and the threads of his daily interventions and conversations, feeling his way through densities and dimensions—and a world rich in allusion, opening hatches, releasing bright colour and light into the world. O throbbing world! Yes, I hear Ovid's echo in *Echo's Bones*.

Colin Browne is the author most recently of *Here*, a collection of poetry, and *Entering Time: The Fungus Man Platters of Charles Edenshaw*, an investigation of three argillite platters by Haida artist Da.a xiigang that depict a crucial incident at the beginning of time. In 2016, he was the guest curator for the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition "*I Had an Interesting French Artist to See Me This Summer*": *Emily Carr and Wolfgang Paalen in British Columbia*. He is currently completing a book about the Surrealist engagement with the Northwest Coast in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Vancouver is situated on the traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.



PIERRE COUPEY: ECHO'S BONES

Exhibition dates: January 12 - February 11, 2023.

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Pierre Coupey, founding editor of *The Capilano Review*, has been exhibiting nationally and internationally in solo and group shows since 1964. He has received awards for poetry and painting, private and public commissions, and grants from the Conseil des Arts du Québec, the Canada Council, and the BC Arts Council. In 2013 his work was the subject of a survey show, *Cutting Out the Tongue: Selected Work 1976-2012*, jointly curated by the West Vancouver Art Museum and the Art Gallery at Evergreen. The exhibition catalogue was supported by a grant from the Audain Foundation for the Arts. He is represented in private collections in Canada and abroad, and in corporate, university and public collections, including the Belkin Art Gallery, Burnaby Art Gallery, Canada Council Art Bank, Kamloops Art Gallery, Kelowna Art Gallery, Simon Fraser University Art Gallery, University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery, and West Vancouver Art Museum.

Front: *Echo's Bones XI (for B.F.)*, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches.

Left flap: *Echo's Bones XII*, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches.

Right flap: *Echo's Bones VII*, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches.

Back: *Echo's Bones III*, oil on canvas, 70 x 64 inches.

Left: *Stanza for Echo's Bones (2)*, oil and collage on Arches paper, 30 x 22.5 inches.

Above: *Echo's Bones XIII, XIV, XV, XVI* (left to right), oil on canvas, 40 x 36 inches each, photographed in the Artist's studio.

Images: Ted Clarke Photography, installation images: Shane O'Brien.