

Group discussion for the exhibit

Swaggering Resonance: Le Boudoir 1994-2006

Sunday July 26, 2020

Participants: J Lo, Lo J, Rose, Itza

This transcript was made to make these discussions more accessible, to facilitate research and participant consent. Speakers participated with the understanding that they would only be identified by their nicknames above. For more information, please contact leboudoirarchives@gmail.com

Itza Well, thanks for participating in this session. And as I told you in the email, I'm going to show you some flyers that were used to advertise queer and lesbian parties in the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s in Montreal.

They happened in old cabaret theaters, and they included cabaret numbers, and every one of these parties at the end had a dance section. So, you will see something on stage, and then you will dance after it. That was, more or less, the dynamic.

Okay. It always takes time to appear.

[Inaudible].

Do you see that one?

So, we can start with this one.

Rose I don't see any.

00:01:13

J Lo Yes, me neither.

Itza Oh, that's weird.

Rose Are you sharing the screen?

Itza Yes, I am. I'll try again. Do you?

Lo J Not yet.

Itza What? That is weird. It worked the other time.

J Lo Something's started, there.

Itza Okay, cool. So, we are all looking at the same thing now. So, this was the first flyer of the event and, yes, I wonder about your reactions, mostly.

J Lo I guess at first, I was trying to figure out whether she was Asian or not, just because everything's unclear, because it's lo-res and high contrast. I wasn't completely sure, maybe I'm still not completely sure, I don't know.

At first, I thought that she was licking someone else, or that she was with someone else's foot, but it's sort of like she's a contortionist, right?

00:02:35

Lo J Mhmm.

J Lo I guess I'm slow at this.

(Laughs)

Itza No, it's fine.

Lo J You are describing what you were seeing and your thoughts and reactions.

J Lo Whenever I think that I'm seeing someone Asian that's portrayed, then I get a little bit on edge. I guess I start getting a little bit, it's like, grrrr. All of a sudden, I tense up, and I'm starting to scrutinize what is the representation, but I guess I feel like I'm not quite sure, so maybe it led me to look at different parts of the image and just figure out what's happening in it. I don't know.

Lo J Yeah. I think that kind of imagery was probably really common in the 90s and 2000s. It's pretty much like this cabaret style of thing. My reaction at the time, not now, at the time, probably would have been not my scene, even though I went to *Le Boudoir* a couple of times. And this, this actually surprises me, that it was a DiversCité event. I didn't know that it was a DiversCité event for a while. Because DiversCité actually had much more radical parties later on, I suppose.

Today, I have a different reaction to it. Because today, I think the discourse, and just my own education in terms of visual culture is different, and the information that I have is different. So today, I have a more negative reaction than not my scene. I tend to see those images as exoticizing and a little bit problematic.

00:04:40

Even though it's not really clear, the ethnicity is ambiguous, but it seems to be referencing a non-white person anyway. I wouldn't say that this person is white. Maybe Asian, likely Asian, and so I have a little bit of a negative reaction to that kind of imagery, especially because it's a queer event. So, I would hope that it would be a little bit more, it would be better, than mainstream culture. Especially because it was also a DiversCité event, so it was sort of a counter Pride event.

J Lo But that's PerversCité.

Lo J Oh, that's PerversCité, DiversCité is the Pride. Oh yes, right, because there's like five Prides in

Montreal (Laughs), so it's hard to keep track.

Yes, that makes sense, that makes total sense. DiversCité was a bit of a conservative organization, and very white. It was a very white organization.

Itza Well, that's very interesting to see. I wonder how the producer of the event would have reacted to that comment, just in terms of information. But well, for now, I'll just leave it there. Thanks for expressing your perception of this scene. Also, I didn't know that you went to the events.

Do you remember anything about them? It can be very vague.

00:06:33

Lo J [Unclear] if you remember anything about it.

J Lo I guess I ended up going to more than one of them. There were some, I just remember the cabaret, the performances. I would go with friends, and then at the end everyone would clear out the tables and there would be dancing. I don't know, I guess I just came out when I started going to these, so I felt like it was, I don't know, everything felt new and strange. I didn't really feel part of it, but it was because I'd been just coming out in a way. I felt that everyone knew each other, and then that I didn't feel like I was part of this or included. Then, I don't know, maybe that's all I felt. Maybe not necessarily part of it, or very included or something, but it was okay. It was something to go to.

Itza Was it a white scene?

J Lo Yes, yes, I think so.

Lo J I don't think I would remember those events if the flyer didn't have the location, but since it has the location then I immediately thought, oh yes, I know what that is. Those things that we went to, and the Lion d'Or. Many of the people, we're still friends with them. Lots of those people in the arts scene would go to those events. I always thought they were, it's not my thing, cabaret is not my thing. I don't have lots of fun at cabaret-like events. I would have, probably, if the cabaret was a little bit different, a little bit more fun than the variety show sort of thing.

00:08:31

It was okay. I remember clearly that the music that they played after was really bad. It was always bad music. I'd say, okay, this is like the curse of the lesbian party, the bad DJ. Turns out that's not true, because now we have parties with really good music. So, I don't know what was happening, but it was a constant, and everybody complained. So, it was like this mystery, who is enjoying them? There were, I remember it was always very similar to the other one.

J Lo Meow Mix.

Lo J Meow Mix. It was the same performers, more or less, so the events were very similar. It was drag kings, drag kings were cute. There was a little bit of comedy, and there was actually a woman who would do contortionism. There was striptease, there was always a striptease number. I think my favorite thing in those events were the MCs, because sometimes they had really fun MCs, so it was actually funny. That was it, it was something to do.

I think I went twice, actually. I think Jenny went more, because I think she went before I arrived

in Montreal. Then we met, and then we realized that both of us, neither of us, enjoyed it very much. It was just a way to meet friends, and we could meet friends without having to go to that kind of event.

00:10:24

Lo J It was interesting for me to see the scene, because I had just arrived in Montreal, so it was interesting to see this sort of a lesbian scene. It was a time that, the lesbian bars in São Paulo, where I'm from, they were not very active at that moment. So, it was like, at least there was something.

The performers, I would say they were 90% white, if not all white. The audience was mostly white, but with a few, I remember some Latin American people there. I don't remember black people being there. Jenny was usually the only Asian. So, it was a bit alienating. It was a bit alienating in that sense, and in other senses too, because some of the things were so distant from my personal taste.

J Lo Can I ask what year it's from?

Itza I would like to give the mic to Rose. This was 1994, yes.

Lo J Okay, that was a lot before I came to Montreal.

Itza Do you want to say something, Rose, or not? I'm not sure.

Rose About this image, from 1994?

Itza Yes. Also, we can move to the next one. I would like to show you three more.

Rose Okay, I can say something very quickly about this one. When I first saw it, I was thinking that she looked very Eurasian, and that has a very different kind of cultural history, right? With assimilation, and also acceptance and passing.

00:12:43

I had a similar thing to what J Lo were saying. I thought it was someone else's foot, and then I thought part of her elbow was her breast, and then I thought that that was pubic hair. So, the whole contortionist thing just threw me off, and I got distracted from whatever it was supposed to be about. So, it was more of a curiosity than eroticism for me, in terms of the fetishization of a foot. Like, it starts with the foot, and then it gets lost.

Itza Okay. Should we move to the next one? Cool. Can you see it?

Rose No.

Itza No? Why? So many mysteries tonight, today, or whatever. Can you now? Oh, I understand now. Sharing is paused. No. I'll just try again. Okay, can you see it now? Or not yet?

Rose Uuuuh.

Itza It's not clear to me if you can see this image or not.

J Lo Yeah.

Rose Oh, I can see it.

Itza Okay.

00:14:39

Rose This reminds me of all the Orientalist postcards from the 19th century onwards. 18th century actually, also. Well, wait, whenever photography was invented, and since then, that we study in art history.

Itza Yes, that was my first reaction with them too, sort of invention of photography. I've tried to date some of the postcards, and I'd stick with end of the last two decades of the 19th century, or early 20th century.

So yes, there's a lot of studio photos that are made to look as if they are in a landscape that is tropical, probably this is not the best example, but all this weirdness of what is interior space and what is sort documentary photographers. I imagine white photographers going to places and documenting what they are seeing, but also curating it a lot, and framing it a lot, and choosing what the models are wearing, and suggesting postures, and all this super heavy composition that is imposed on the model.

Rose Yes, they're all conventional staged poses that are typical studio shots. But these images are meant to transport you to some imaginary place, right? This imaginary Orient. But the thing about this kind of intimacy, because if you look at this object, it's a postcard size, so it really is a photograph size, and that carries with it a kind of intimacy, right? Media intimacy, as opposed to seeing it on a poster. I think that just amplifies the fact that the imaginary space is precisely that harem, that sort of heterotopia, that is taboo and secretive, clandestine.

00:17:15

Lo J Yes, I think what they're going after here is a subversion of the original purpose of the image, which is like the consumption of the image as a sexualized image, and exotic, by men. I think the subversion is, oh, we're presenting them to women, so we're being subversive, and they're completely ignoring, or not even noticing, the cultural context and how that could actually be harmful. I cannot even imagine someone who is a dyke who is, I don't know, Moroccan or Arab, going to one of those parties and looking at the flyer and not feeling like shit.

So, the fact that they completely ignored this shows, well, basically, the flyer encapsulates the problem with Quebec feminism (laughs).

I think this image actually bothers me a lot more than the other, because it's not even clear whether this woman is white or not, but it's so clear what they're trying to do. Whereas the other is more ambiguous, but this one is just like, yes, it's consumption. It's not only exotic, but it's racialized, and badly done, because nobody wears this thing in her hair, this whatever. It's not real, right? It's invented by a white photographer. Nobody wears a mass, like a massive bunch of fabric in their hair like that. So, this annoys me.

Again, I think back then the same thing would actually have caught my attention as slightly annoying, while nowadays, I just find it unacceptable.

00:19:25

Itza Yes, it's also interesting that there is a replication or recirculation of old postcards in this small flyer format, and the idea was that they were meant to be collected. So, some people were actually collecting all these postcards as the events moved through the years. So, it also has this quality of a sort of series of nudes that you could collect or not. Also, they were used for posters, not precisely the ones that I am showing you, but some of them were then enlarged. It was the same structure of the flyer, the title and then a central photo, and that was the big poster.

I would like to move to the next flyer, if that's okay with you. Hopefully, can you see that one?

J Lo No.

Itza Why? (Laughs) Okay, it's like all the other times that I've done this, it works perfectly, but not today. Okay, there.

J Lo Oooh.

Itza So, this one is one of the more, if we can say, realistic, or documentary. It's not as staged, and I would like to start there with you.

(Few seconds of silence)

Rose I can start. I think that as a racialized body that is objectified here, it's, for me, an instantly offensive image. Historically and art historically, because of my training, I recognize it also, instantly, as a typical pose that is used in Orientalized painting for the slave auction, or the slave market. Some context like that. So, there's already a colonial power dynamic that's imposed in the setup of the image of two people. Again, immediately offensive.

00:22:36

Itza Yes. When I saw this one, I devoted many hours to catalog the collections, and I remember how hard it was to continue cataloging after this one, and another one that I'm going to show you about a white woman. I was really on the verge of, should I keep putting hours in this work?

What does it mean for me to continue it?

My solution with myself was to do a lot of research, about this one specifically, and trying to somehow put some flesh next to the story and explain why I was uncomfortable with that. Also, in the conversations that we have had so far, in general, everybody is, like, ugh yes, we shouldn't have. But then their articulation of why it's wrong, or why it's offensive and racist, is where a lot of the people that we have talked to so far have failed. It's also hard to say. I think in that space of why it's hard to say, I also found myself, by having to look at it, I felt like I was doing so much violence by looking at this. The frame, and the bodies there for scrutiny, and the facial expressions of the woman that we can see. It doesn't suggest this performative energy, this like, I'm here because I am posing for the camera. It's totally different. There's almost a rictus in the model. There is a certain tension that also transmits toward us.

What I have done is to sort of map them in the Maghreb area. They could be from Kabylia, or other Berber nations. I did that through music and the very few elements of realness that are there. So, it was also hard.

00:25:21

Nudity, in this case, became this super uncomfortable information, but at the same time anti-information, because I couldn't work with the usual details of studying or determining precedence. Anyway.

Rose I actually thought, because I think you were saying that these are mid-90s, or 1994, you said that these postcards were from?

Itza This one that you have in front of your eyes is 1999.

Rose 1999? Wow. It's 1999, and you're still seeing these images. I'm working on, well, I have been working for the last 25 years on this exhibition that took place in 1989 that toured across Canada. It was put on by black women artists, 11 black women artists, and curated by two black women curators, which was historic and groundbreaking, never before.

One of the exhibitions was at Articule, in 1991, and by the time you get to the mid-90s, you have a resurgence in identity politics in the arts in Canada, and a huge amount of anti-racism initiatives taking place within the artist run centers. So, in a sense, it's like a case in point of why these initiatives were necessary, and still are. Because, at the same time, concurrent to this, are these images that are circulating in certain sub-cultures, but still part of the visual culture.

00:27:23

Itza Yes, and also circulating in spaces of pleasure and associated with parties. J lo were already saying how am I supposed to enter these spaces if I have this image that feels astringent? This being a flyer of a space that is supposed to be about fun and pleasure, making out and flirting and all that. What does it mean to have images like this being handed to you? We're not finding them in the archive, or in TV, or in films, it's spaces that we are probably going to go for fun.

J Lo It's almost, I feel like they're trying to entice. It's *Le Boudoir*, and then you can peer into this little window, and then you're allowed to just let go of all of your inhibitions. I mean, sorry, you're allowed to just let go of all of your carefulness, or, if people want to say this stupid, or, you don't have to be politically correct anymore, or something. Then that's supposed to be exhilarating. But it's not targeting a BIPOC audience or anything.

Lo J Yeh, it is very clever, that one.

J Lo It's also so disturbing, I guess I didn't notice this at the time. It's disturbing to see it as a series, I guess.

Lo J Yes, and especially this image, yes. I imagine the performances themselves were very problematic. I wouldn't be surprised if someone remembers that there was someone doing blackface. Seriously, I wouldn't be surprised.

Itza I really appreciate how we can link this perception of the stage just by looking at this flyer.

00:29:54

Itza And also, I think that was my initial reaction, like, okay, what happened on stage? Now you have to really explain to me which were the differences between this visual language and what was happening on stage. I specifically asked, and there was no black face or no yellow face. There were also black performers. They were a minority, but some of them were recurrent. So, yes, it's not as

easy to say that it was the same thing happening, there were solid differences. Still, the thing is, what we have left now is these images of the flyers, mostly, in terms of the archive.

Rose I think it's also interesting in how it relates to the history of Montreal. How there were also segregation policies for black and white clientele to drinking establishments, for example, but also performing theatres and clubs. There is a history of black minstrelsy in Montreal. I'm thinking, okay, this is an archive that's being excavated to bring it back to 1999, and within the time that this might have been taken and 1999, there's this huge amount of history of blacks in Montreal. You know, of black culture in Montreal. And then the Jazz Fest. For me, I'm astounded, I'm flummoxed, I'm stupefied, at how these images can circulate at this recent a date, you know, not that long ago.

Itza Yes, in terms of pinning emotions and feelings, this one gave me pain. It made me super sad, you know. It was such a hard, arrrg, I lost a little bit of hope in the project. I was personally hurt, let's say. So, it's also these complicated feelings of how much can we play with queerness as a trans-racial category? Do we fit in it, or do we belong? Or, up to which point? Which is the marker that makes us feel at home, or not, with these archives of queerness if we are of other ethnicities? Right?

00:33:21

Rose What if, speculatively speaking, we were told that these images, eventually you, hypothetically, found some information, and you found out that this is probably the earliest depiction of black, queer lives in Montreal? My reaction would be completely different, in terms of how the information that you find out about these archives, not just of the postcards, but even of the image that's being used in the postcards. There are so many different excavations going on here when people are reacting to these images.

Itza Yes. I would like to ask J Lo if we should continue to the next one, or if you want to make a final comment to close this? This is the most painful section, and I'm very sorry. But also, I am thankful that we got to articulate a common flux of words that is not part of the archive at the moment. So, it is very valuable that we are holding space for these feelings together, and also coming from all of your training as visual artists, and curators, and artists of color in Montreal.

So, yes, do you want to add something, J Lo, or do you prefer to move to the next?

Lo J I'm okay.

J Lo Next is good. Let's get out of here.

Lo J You're muted.

00:35:34

Itza Thank you. I'm probably, it's also the discomfort, I will say, of all these images.

Can you see that one?

J Lo Not yet, no.

Itza What?

J Lo (Laughs)

Itza Okay, let's try again. Yes, this will be the last one, and it's about whiteness, so hopefully will be less painful. Or maybe not, I don't know. This one also was very hard for me to look at, just because I think it's the only image with even a non-direct representation of indigeneity, and I was like, damn, is this the only one?

J Lo Oh wow.

Itza Can you see the background?

Lo J Yeah.

Itza Okay.

J Lo This is terrible.

Lo J There is no flyer though, just a photo.

Rose Is it just a photo?

Itza It is a flyer. It is part of a flyer, I just cropped it out, but yes, it is. I can tell you which year it circulated very soon, if you give me one minute while you warm up for this one.

Rose Do you know what that thing is that the gun is pointing to?

00:37:42

J Lo I would have said it's a curtain. You mean the white thing at the front?

Lo J Yes, I think they're in front of a picture, and there's a bit of a stage sort of thing on the floor that they're standing on. Maybe there's like a curtain front (inaudible), sort of like a photographer's studio, sometimes they have drapes flowing [inaudible]. I think it's that.

Rose (Laughs) What is it? Is it an animal, supposed to be?

Itza I think it's bones. I think it's the carcass of an animal.

Lo J Is it a carcass of an animal?

Itza I will come back to that, but I'm just trying to [inaudible].

Rose It's supposed to be a carcass. Oh, okay.

Itza So, yes, we have this white woman with a gun that has some tipis behind her. Her name is Annie Oakley, and she was a white performer that became very famous for being a good shot. She was part of this horrible show that depicted real Indian attacks and real buffalo hunting, very Wild West. The show was written by Buffalo Bill, something like that, and it toured around.

00:39:11

J Lo Like a vaudeville sort of thing?

Itza It's like a what?

J Lo A vaudeville sort of thing, like live theatre?

Itza Yes, like a touring show that included different little acts of, well, white people being attacked by different groups. Indian attacks, but also attacks of Turks and Mongols.

Lo J (Laughs)

Itza And I'm just using the words that were coming from the descriptions. (Laughs). Yes.

A very unfortunate encounter in the archive. I should shut up and just let you talk a little bit.

J Lo I don't know, maybe someone else could go first.

Lo J I can talk a little bit, because I don't really have much to say. First, I don't really, immediately, I don't understand that person as indigenous when I look at her.

Itza Oh, no, she's not indigenous, she's white. The reference to indigeneity is the tipis, and those tipis are the only indigenous markers.

J Lo Okay, I thought she was a white person making indigenous face, like, dressed as an indigenous person who had attacked the white person, in a Vaudeville theatre sort of way.

Itza No, let me explain, I'm glad you asked. No, she's just a white performer that has these tipis behind her, and her show was being a good shot. So, she was shooting at things.

00:41:11

J Lo Oh jeez.

Lo J It's just very ridiculous that queer people would have used this image. I cannot, I don't have much else to say. It's like, what the fuck? Why would you even think of doing that? And then I remember that I'm in Quebec, so I just think, oh, that's why. (Laughs) I don't know, it's just so ridiculous, but, whatever, right? It's like, I don't know.

J Lo Well, it's just like this fantasy, this total detachment from reality about what an indigenous person, or community, is. Then, thinking of this TV villain, they're always indigenous or another person of color, that's the evil person, so then the white person's the hero. Then we're supposed to automatically just grasp this by knowing already, by watching all of this stuff. So, I guess in all the images it seems like maybe the reason they chose it might be because they're all performative. But then, it's really a bizarre selection.

Itza Well, there were many flyers, I'm also showing you just four. It doesn't quite give you the full length and complexity of it, and I'm also showing you the problematic ones, specifically, so we address them in the exhibit as problems. Yes, Annie Oakley circulated in 1996.

00:43:05

Lo J Okay. I think at that time people were really not even thinking, and so there's like, oh yeah, this woman looks hot because she's strong and carrying a gun. I guess that was the thinking, right? It's very blind and very unthoughtful, but again, especially considering that was the 90s, it's just not very surprising. It doesn't make it less disappointing. I don't know. I don't have anything to add to the things I already said.

Itza It's fine, that's okay. Rose, do you want to?

Lo J It's weird, because you look at these images, and you have to go through the process, somehow, to try to be in the subjective position of the designer and party organizer, and that is uncomfortable to be in that position, you know? To inhabit that mentality is, like, ugh, it's a bit gross. And it's sad, because we're still hanging on to those people, they're still out there, in positions of power sometimes, within the so-called queer community. They're still making excuses in the artistic community, when you think about it.

Theatre in Quebec, which is something that I don't follow, but once in a while there's a little bit of a scandal here and there, and in television, stuff like that. It's still very, all of those ideas are still very entrenched, and they're not being challenged. Like the Orientalist show at the Musée des beaux arts was just, what, two years ago, three years ago? It was very recent. It was like, the way it was framed was this. It was no more critical than exactly this flyer.

00:45:33

I don't think things changed so much as more people of color are being more aware and talking more about it. But the values that are entrenched in certain very high-power public spheres in this city, and in this province, are very much still the same. So, it's not surprising. You just see how the reaction to Black Lives Matter is in the public sphere in Quebec from the white majority. It's basically dismissal, right?

Itza Well, thanks for that effort of sharing those words with me. Yes, it is complicated, and I agree that sometimes it's difficult to perceive how things evolve and change in terms of sensitivities and basic politics around what should be represented, and not. Like, come on, we can do better.

I think we really need to promote queerness as a space in which different ethnicities can converge, and that means take the spot out of whiteness and really feel each other's feelings. Like, just check with your people of color friends, and if you don't have friends to check in with, that's already a symptom of the queer scene that you are sort of supporting.

I am going to do as curator the best that I can, just to try to expose the difficult feelings around this imagery. Also, I just want to say that the co-curator who was the producer of the event, it's also her decision too. She's like, okay, I fuck it up, let's talk about this in public. It's an agreement that we have that we have chosen these complicated pieces, and that we will put them for the public. Like, it could have been her decision to choose the prettier ones, the ones that I am comfortable, and I can enjoy, and also, she, probably, I don't know. But it's also this sort of relation in which we have decided to commit with the haunting objects, as we call them and, and well, that is something.

00:48:35

Lo J Yes, totally, it is cool. It's so cool that you're doing that, Itza. I think it's important because whenever people say, no, it's not like this, you'll say well, but look at this. Every time, you can say yes, you say that, but look at this. Then there's less space for the denial, which seems to be a strategy that's used as commonly as it can be. We're still in the denial phase here. There's a lot of denial, so it's super, super cool that you're doing that, even though it's so emotionally draining for you. So, thank you.

Itza Yes, for me and for everybody it's difficult, and thanks for taking time and space to sit with the difficult feelings with me. Rose, did you want to add something? Shall we wrap it up? Shall we

just, we can end the recording here and have a little goodbye without the mic on if you want that?
Okay?

Lo J Ok.

Itza That works for everybody. Okay, so, I will just stop the recording now, and thank you again everybody for this effort. Where is, ah, give me a second.

00:50:15

J Lo Ok.