

MOMIUS

— A RETURN TO ART CRITICISM —

An Open Door, By the Lake: Nadia Belerique Advances Her Symbolism

BY SKY GOODDEN • **REVIEWS** • JUNE 2, 2018

A gift embedded in the trip to leafy, tony Oakville Galleries (a half-hour train ride from Toronto) is the moment you give yourself by the lake. The wide expanse of Lake Ontario sits at the bottom of Gairloch Gardens (which houses the Galleries' central location), and offers a moment of repose and consideration that art, in an ideal world, would always be framed by. (In place of cloying gift shops and crowded restaurants, imagine lapping water and a blue horizon, like a palette of sorbet.) In the case of Nadia Belerique's current exhibition, time by the water serves a more vital function. Stirring the work up, lapping our judgements, leaving a filament (and the odd water bottle) on our thoughts, with flies ping-ponging against our cheeks and bouncing light to remind us of our bodies, the lake wants something, after what we've seen; it wants to perform a coda.

As the sky pulls weather across the water, however, and up to meet Gairloch's windows, it's a mistake to interpret Belerique's title, *The Weather Channel*, too literally. Reading this work through the pell of the [Anthropocene](#), or environmental crises, pulls you away from a nearer shore. Belerique traces the subconscious, lends it – hesitatingly – an image. *The Weather Channel* as title, then, nods to what is unreliable, ancient: what cleaves to powers beyond our control. And its exhibition, both spare and cluttered, both legible and obscure, roots into what James Elkins calls the “empty space between the protagonists.” These are images of an intimacy at once protected and falling open. Belerique has us looking up at her installations, leaving a clue in this: we are tilting our heads back in the vain effort to seek all things memorial, dreamed, buried, half-remembered, and unsolicited, lying there like lifted driftwood, both sharp and soft.

The Oakville exhibition performs like an extension – perhaps the apogee – of Belerique's work at the last [Montreal Biennial](#) (2016), where she made an installation of tall, spindly-legged tables pushed up a few feet above our heads, requiring us to stagger around beneath their frosted panes and peer at the bottoms of colored wine bottles, at the snaking formations of trailing necklaces, a minimalist ode to party refuse. *The Weather Channel* takes this further, putting more on the line in terms of symbolism and figuration.

For Belerique's recent [mural-scaled image](#), *In the Belly of a Cat* (on view in Vancouver until March 2019), I [noted](#) for its catalogue essay that, despite our looking ahead at the photograph (it's positioned on the side of a building), Belerique places us beneath a glass table, again. It's a pane "marked by spare detritus (another wine bottle, an elegant vine, some sun-lit shapes and geometric traces)," but "the distinguishing element here – and a first, in Belerique's practice – is the presence of the human form." A weighted, shadowy limb stretches out across the surface, its fingers suggesting movement. I wrote: "placed among these essential objects and talismanic traces (both recurring profiles in her work), Belerique's animated self-reference has the effect of marking the distance between the artist and her viewer. The extended arm not only reaches across the surface of the image (and so, the lens), but, in a sense, also symbolically extends toward us, across the gap that, you could argue, is unbridgeable."



Nadia Belerique, "The Lake Room" (detail, from beneath), 2018. Courtesy Oakville Galleries.

In Oakville (Belerique's first solo show at a museum), this implied distance is collapsed into a more solipsistic channel. Here, we can read the tract between our subconscious and our consciousness, though Belerique materializes this division as, again, tables bearing trace, like the runic netting of our draggy mind. This has a wondrous effect, especially with the jewel-paned windows of Gairloch's old house everywhere around, the lake stretching out beyond.

As I've [written before](#), the most successful exhibitions at Gairloch Gardens are those that lean into its historic and idiosyncratic location. Belerique achieves this in freeing up the

floors and letting the architecture sing, but also by nature of the work she's presenting, which speaks to the house as metaphor. Despite the ingrained coding of "contemporary art" in her aesthetic (one I hope she'll outgrow, or take more chances with, as her practice matures), this setting does much more for this work than a white cube ever has. To quote Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, 1958 (itself a fairly literal examination of the house as metaphor):

The house, like fire and water, will permit me [...] to recall flashes of daydreams that illuminate the synthesis of immemorial and recollected. In this remote region, memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening. In the order of values, they both constitute a community of memory and image.

Among the lean array of wall works, *Doors* (2018) is the most assertive and compelling. The diptych features, to quote the exhibition text, "a pressed wood door, the kind familiar to anyone who grew up in a post-war subdivision." We're positioned (Belerique asserts a welcome confidence in knowing where to put us) at the height of the doorknob, facing the door's edge, perhaps stewarding its opening, or helpless before its swing. She's places stickers, redolent of an eighties childhood, levitating above their subject. This sweet touch signals the small assertion of ownership that we venture in our youth – a sticker to mark our real estate. "The world pulse beats beyond my door," writes Pierre Albert Birot. Belerique's doors makes a symbol personal, and the personal mythological. It's these gestures that shepherd us down to the lake, after all is said and seen. A place to consider what lies beneath, within, beyond, above.

- Goodden, Sky. "An Open Door, By the Lake: Nadia Belerique Advances Her Symbolism", *Momus*, June 2, 2018.