

A postmodern memoir

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Herménégilde Chiasson in his home in January, 2014.

Photo: MATHIEU LEGER zarbes@gmail.com

Dapper as always in a grey jacket and vest, Herménégilde Chiasson, 67, sits across from me in his dining room as Renoir – one of his three cats, the other two being Toulouse and Chekhov – prowls about, crazed by the numerous scrambling squirrels just outside the room's floor-to-ceiling windows.

On the table between us is Chiasson's attempt at ikebana, a minimalist Japanese flower arrangement of a pine and spruce branch mixed with white-budded twigs. There is also a glass tea-light holder and a thimble-sized set of salt and pepper shakers, both of which Chiasson will fiddle with off and on during our two-hour chat.

These facts all form, no matter how thin, layers of Chiasson's identity. Of course, he's also a Governor General's Literary Award-winning poet, a playwright whose work has been performed across Canada, a novelist, a filmmaker and a visual artist with more than 100 shows on his CV. For these artistic accomplishments, he received one of the \$50,000 Canada Council for the Arts Molson Prizes in 2011.

He is also a former lieutenant-governor of the province and a proud Acadian who has remained in his home for much of his career.

I mention all of this because identity is something very much on Chiasson's mind.

His new poetry series *Autoportrait*, published by Éditions Prise de parole, will be launched on Jan. 23. The 12-part series was written in one year from 2002 to 2003. Each part corresponds with one of the 12 letters in his name – Herménégilde. The letters inspired the section's theme. The first book, *Histoires*, is a collection of stories people have told him, each one taking exactly one page to tell.

The "I" books are about identities; Chiasson extrapolating the identities of strangers based on superficial observations. "G" is for gestures. "E" is for excuses. "D" is for dedication – a 50-page dedication to all the people who have been in his life.

Autoportrait is just a part of his recent work that when assembled could be considered Chiasson's postmodern memoir. This month, on top of teaching a course on Acadian art history at Université de Moncton, he is exhibiting a 45-year retrospective of his printmaking (1968-2013) at Galerie Bernard-Jean in Caraquet and unveiling new work inspired by his father at Galerie 12 in Moncton.

In a final grand achievement, Chiasson has also curated 50//50//50, a group show of 50 works from 50 Université de Moncton graduates to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the school's fine arts program, which will to March 30 at Galerie d'art Louise-et-Reuben-Cohen. Although he's not including his own work, Chiasson's story is inextricably entwined with most of the artists, be it through friendship, group shows or the local institutions he helped found: Théâtre de l'Escaouette, Les Éditions Perce-neige, Atelier d'estampe Imago and the Association acadienne des artistes professionnel.le.s du Nouveau-Brunswick. To tell the story of contemporary Acadian art is to speak of Chiasson.

I met up with Chiasson in his home near the Northumberland Strait earlier this month to discuss this idea:

Has your course started at the university?

Last night. The class is at 6:30 and ends at 9:15 p.m. It's a tough class because it's the end of their day, but I try to make it interesting. What I teach is the history of Acadian art. I'm working on a book on that topic, because, like I told them last night, I'm not eternal. Eventually, I'll have to drop teaching. But I feel I'm sort of the living memory of Acadian art, because it started in 1963 with the coming of Claude Roussel to Université de Moncton and this is sort of the theme of the show I'm putting together now, 50 years of not of Acadian art but academic Acadian art, I suppose, art being taught in school, and art being aware of its position in the history of art and where we stand. I've put the book on the shelf because I'm working on this major exhibition.

What I did was, there is a stipend expense account in my contract as resident artist at the university. It's \$10,000, and last year I didn't touch a penny because, I don't know, I forgot to keep an expense account.

So, I asked if I could reclaim that. I thought they're going to say no, but they said yes. So, I'm going to take my stipend from this year and from last year and that will make about \$20,000 and with the gallery we've put together a lump sum.

Choosing 50 artists is a lot. What was your selection process?

Right now, we have four generations of artists: you have Roméo Savoie and Claude Roussel, which would be the first contingent; and then you have people like Paul Édouard Bourque, Yvon Gallant, then it's Jennifer Bélanger and Mathieu Léger, and then you have Rémi Belliveau and Jessica Arseneau and Dominik Robichaud. So you have four generations, and you have to sort of match these artists together. Of course, there are people who come right on top because they have a long career and they're sort of notorious and you can't ignore them. But I'm choosing Angie Richard and Mario LeBlanc who graduated last year. In 1967, Claude Roussel put together the first sort of professional art show held in the new university gallery, and I was just coming out of the university and he chose me. So, I'm doing the same thing.

You are connected to many of these artists. How did you judge the work objectively?

Well, when they have a long career, what I've asked them to do is select a work they are particularly proud of, or that sort of fits into all of the production they've made. When I moved to the younger ones, I asked them to send me pictures, because their work is all so scattered. It's very different.

Did any of the pieces surprise you?

Yes, especially the young people. Like Joël Boudreau, a sculptor. Since there are 50 people, and the gallery is kind of small, what I did was make a maquette. I glued together pieces of cardboard. It took me a long time. I made all little squares, which would amount to the size of the works. So, I knew I had a space for everyone. And I had a space in the centre of the major gallery for Joël, and he sent me this little work – a little house in glass – and he said he'd like to have it on the wall. So that was sort of surprising.

Also, I noticed younger people tend to do installations, they tend to do large works, and there are some of those works that I really like, such as Domink Robichaud's. We had a wall built so that we could put up more work.

Will there be a catalogue for the show?

I'm going to do a series of postcards. I don't know, I find it's postmodern. It's interesting. Instead of just putting out a book, what I'm going to do is put out 50 postcards, and I'm going to have them glued, so you can tear them away or you can keep them in a form. At the back of those cards, I'm going to have a bio or artist statement, or whatever, in 250 words. I told the artists they had 250 words to do whatever they want. On the other sides, I'm going to write 50 fragments – on the show, on Acadian art; something that's self-contained.

It's been 50 years, but fine arts in Moncton is still rarely considered a central culture hub outside of Acadie. Why isn't fine art in Moncton more widely acknowledged?

What happened in Acadie is very strange, because what you have in the Maritimes is realism, like the

Colville school. And what happened in Moncton was very different. Because I'm artist-in-residence at both Mount Allison University and in Moncton, I can see the difference. At Mount Allison, it seems the work is more finished, they have more of an accomplishment in the work. But what you have in Moncton is sometimes very sketchy, very hazy, but you can see it could open something that could be very interesting and avant-garde, and some of the artists that have come out of Moncton have done that.

There's been a rupture in Acadian art, because what you had before was naive art, or art that was bordering on craft, and then all of sudden you have an ideologically oriented art, something that carried ideas or sort of connected to an international view of the arts.

What role do you think Acadian art plays within that larger narrative of art history?

That's something I've been thinking about. I believe if we are to make something that's going to be major, we have to connect to our tradition, however naive, however small and thin it is. We have to connect to that and sort of reconnect to modern art, but the two really aren't that far apart. Like I was thinking of Claude Roussel, when he came back and he did those paintings of fishermen and he treated it as a Jackson Pollock sort of approach and then threw sand in it. The sand is a connotation, in the idea of Joseph Beuys, that everything is related to a connotation. You look at sand and all of a sudden it's an element of a landscape that's close to us. Claude should have kept on using that as his medium. He could have done installation with it. He could have done lots of things. It's an element that's indigenous to this place, but at the same time would have been very modern in the way you treat it.

As marginal as Acadie may remain, it's also reaching a market unheard of before through the music of Lisa LeBlanc and Radio Radio. How does this rising notoriety play into your thoughts about Acadie.

It's interesting you mention them. I always say it's as if there is only one form of art in Acadie, and it's music, and the rest is sort of on the back burner. And the reason is we haven't developed a discourse. That's one of things I want to put forward in this show.

I can't really talk about it in my catalogue essay, but I thought of the courage of the Acadian artists and why are they're working in a milieu where there seems to be, I wouldn't say a dead end, but the chances of moving out of the milieu are very slim. But they are still doing it and are still very concerned. That always amazes me, and I always find it an act of courage. It's also an act of hope in the culture and in the society.

There are two Acadias: there is one that is made in Quebec and one that is made in Acadie. And the one that is made in Quebec has more means than the one made in Acadie. For a long time, what we did was we pumped cod out of the sea to make those frozen blocks that were shipped to the U.S. to make fish sticks and we would eat them. It's the same thing: we take the raw material – Lisa LeBlanc, Antonine Maillet – ship it to Montreal and it's transformed and proposed to Acadie that this is your culture. We never had that much of a say on what's going on. We have access to our culture as a product of import. The courage of the artists who are staying here is that they believe we can craft a culture here and export it. I always say the country works in English, but it doesn't work in French, because how often do you see an Acadian artist, or even an Acadian, on the national net? It's very seldom.

The work of art is a very small signal, and if it's not amplified by the media, it will stay a small signal. So

this is the main reason why you don't hear as much about us. When you look at a lot of what's going on, it's as if we are extras in a silent film. You don't know what's going on in our heads. We look like primitives making fire.

Yes, and more and more in Acadie, people are looking toward artists not to reinforce their idea of culture but inform it.

We know right now that esthetics are decided in some major centres – New York, Berlin, Beijing – and we sort of adapt to that. Canadians do that and Quebecers do that and Acadians do that, if you want to look at the chain of influence. So the way to move, to do something really authentic and original in a way, would be to draw on the tradition, however thin it is, and make it sophisticated. I was looking at this African artist that does these murals out of bottle caps – there is one at the Royal Ontario Museum. It's absolutely beautiful, so luscious. Of course, it proceeds from Dada and Rauschenberg, but you look at Africa, and it's a true expression of where they're at. I find that's a strategy that we could adopt.

As much as this is a 50-year recap, it doesn't sound like you're approaching it with nostalgia. You seem to be using it as a template for going forward.

Absolutely. That's what I hope people get out of that show, looking at these works. I tried to make the exhibition as eclectic as possible, so there is no direction. It's as if everyone is so unique but at the same time they connect to this general project of building a discourse

In a truly postmodern approach, I always like to do things in disconnect, create what I call rupture, or a collage effect. I want to show that Acadie is not really working as a unique society, but as a diverse society. For a long time, our notion of music was singing in a choir. Everybody was singing together. And that was fine, but nowadays you have different kinds of music. It's the same thing in visual art. But I'm sure there are plenty of people who are going to be surprised. And a lot of people are going to very proud.

How does 50//50//50 crossover with Autoportrait? Both seem to be exploring your identity, and I see a connection in the way you as author aren't attempting to force a narrative, while leaving it open for a narrative to be formed.

In *Autoportrait*, Acadie is never mentioned, if I'm not mistaken, but it's always there, because I believe it sort of moves in the style and the way things are coming together. A lot of the time when we think about identity we always think of a reduction. If I say, 'Who is Herménégilde Chiasson?' People will say Herménégilde Chiasson is an Acadian, or he's Marcia Babineau's boyfriend, so you get reduced to that thing. And I think that's very dangerous. What I think is more interesting, in a postmodern way, is kind of layered identity. Of course, the Acadian layer is, in certain circumstances, very important. But say I've been invited to go to Japan to read my poetry translated in English. That's a very postmodern experience. And in that configuration, the Acadian layer of my identity gets reduced and the literature layer will be emphasized and I will be recognized as a writer. Of course some layers can be very thin, as I say: Who is Herménégilde Chiasson? He is a guy with a grey coat.

All collected, Autoportrait will be about 600 pages. That is a very substantial work.

It's something I never thought would see the light of day. When I started, I told myself I would do it just as

an exercise. For some odd reason, major Acadian writers work a lot on constraints – Serge Patrice Thibodeau, France Daigle. That's what this was, a constraint, but it's also something I knew would force me to sit down and write. I know if I just try to sit down with a hazy project I just tend to let it go and procrastinate.

Although your work isn't in 50//50//50, it's in two other shows, one now in Caraquet, the other opening Jan. 31 in Moncton.

Yes, because my specialty is really in printmaking; it's been 45 years since I started making prints. So I decided I was going to do a selection of 20 prints that I liked and would like to see on the wall in a gallery. Then I did another show for Galerie 12. My father was 47 when I was born, and he was really like my grandfather. My father couldn't read or write. He had been a lumberjack, but he was very clever with his hands, and he would do all these little things cut out of shingles and give them to me as toys. And I remembered that and I thought it would be interesting. I decided I was going to start with writing and use that as texture, and then I wrote fragments of sentences, and then I did all these sort of enigmatic narratives that I cut on my scroll saw.

Again with these new mixed-media you're playing with multiple narratives, the incoherency of text and the juxtaposition of simple scenes.

And there are these sentences that seem to be the end of something or the beginning of something. They're like clues. That's how the postmodern experience works. It's like watching TV and flipping through the channels – you just get little blurbs.

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