

# Seeing the Unseen

by Tatum Dooley

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Véronique Chagnon Côté  
& Élise Lafontaine

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I recently learned that, when people think of an object (say, a bouquet of flowers) they picture what it looks like in their mind. Not having that specific ability, my mind in a constant state of blackness, I am starting to understand my desire to look at paintings. The clinical term for this is aphantasia—a lack of the “mind’s eye”. For this reason, paintings are an opportunity to see into a portal slightly outside of reality. *Sous ses yeux de pierre*, a two-person exhibition featuring paintings by Véronique Chagnon Côté and Élise Lafontaine, feature paintings that become a conduit for misplaced memories and projected daydreams. In other words, they allow me to see the unseen.

The paintings of Chagnon Côté depict unrealized architectural spaces, painted from virtual architectural models using drafting software. Rooms, hallways, courtyards that don’t exist are made visible through Chagnon Côté’s careful build up of brushstrokes. The result are spaces that exist only in paint, but emulate the feeling of walking into a space. By looking at Chagnon Côté’s paintings, something that previously didn’t exist becomes real. The cold colour palette, frosty blues bounce off deep greens and surprising reds, simulate the feeling of a fantasy or far-away memory.

“I approached this project by putting myself in the place of an architect and worked through an architectural lens. The paintings created for this project all reveal different views on this place,” says Chagnon Côté . The viewer, looking at the painting in the space of the gallery, is offered a portal into a separate world. The gallery becomes a courtyard inside the belly of the house. You can imagine walking into the paintings and looking around. The slightly disjointed, surreal spaces

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depicted by Chagnon Côté replicate the feeling of walking through a space for the first time. As you walk, the space around you changes and fractures. In *The Door*, a gateway looks towards a space with barely recognizable debris: a gazebo tilts, a rose garden is fenced in. Recognizable architecture—a door, a window, a floor—collide with surrealism, suspending the viewer in time and space.

Elise Lafontaine's painting, *Lombrives*, similarly offers transportation to an architectural destination. This time, the spaces are real and the depictions are abstract. The burst of colours and shapes in Lafontaine's work are like the fleeting remnants of light when you close your eyes, fireworks etched onto the back of your eyelids. Lafontaine, through rigorous research and on-site study, captures the invisible side of architecture: the feeling of being within an enclosed space. Starting at the physical site of the canvas, Lafontaine paints the sensation of being enveloped. The immersion is amplified by the size of the canvas, which necessitates a turn of the head to fully see the composition. The paintings in *Sous ses yeux de pierre* become their own architectural sites.

Lafontaine's paintings deal in feelings, rather than images. The result is an acute sense of *deja vu*; a trace of a memory that I can't quite place, but swear I have experienced previously. If Chagnon Côté offers me an experience I otherwise couldn't imagine (on account of the aforementioned *aphantasia*), Lafontaine's paintings are closer to how I see the world: through vague memories and fleeting feelings. The large painting featured in *Sous ses yeux de pierre* is inspired by Lafontaine's brief residency in the cave of *Lombrives* in France in 2017. "As the cave shrinks on me, an imaginary space opens up.

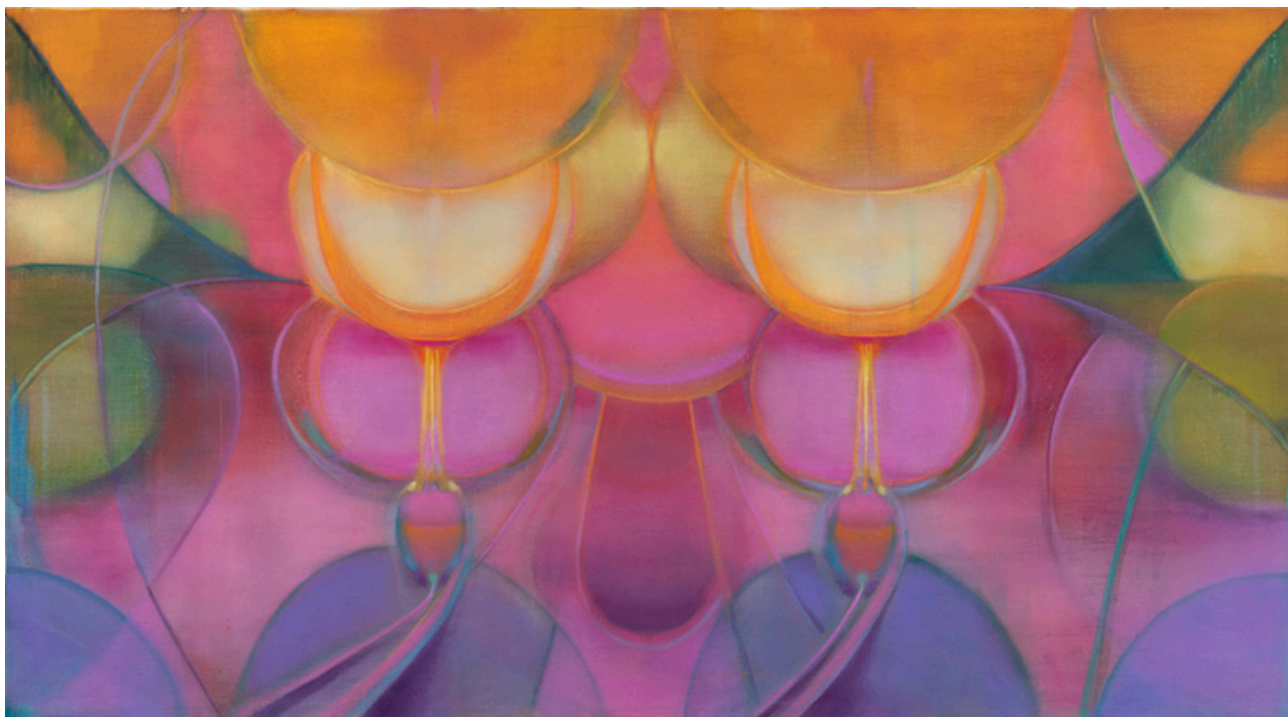


*The Nymphaeum* (2023)  
Véronique Chagnon Côté  
22 x 17 in  
Acrylic and acrylic transfer on wood panel

*Two Intertwined Sisters* (2023)  
Véronique Chagnon Côté  
14 x 7.5 in  
Acrylic on wood panel



*Lombrives* (2022)  
Élise Lafontaine  
142 x 252 cm  
Oil on linen



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Here, one does not see darkness; one feels it, becomes it. Black turns to red like my organs. In the core of the earth, I am out of time, with my heart beat as the only marker,” writes Lafontaine. While similar to the sense of claustrophobia, the description feels closer to the feeling of wearing clothing: hard to separate from the body, the architecture of the cave cloaks. It becomes impossible to tell where the body ends and architecture begins. Lafontaine’s paintings do the same.

While Chagnon Côté’s paintings of architectural renderings provide access to unrealized, utopian architecture, her cut-outs of flowers create permanence in the ephemeral. Sculptural bouquets are hung upside down throughout the show, alluding to the feminine ritual of gardening and drying flowers and herbs. Hung in front of Lafontaine’s *Lombrives*, the floral sculptures create a conversation between the two artists and link realms of reality and feeling. By translating floral bouquets, Chagnon Côté gives weight and permanence to the overlooked techniques of women. In one sculpture, two mirror bouquets touch ever so slightly as if they are holding hands. The sign is clear (a bouquet of flowers), while the signified is numerous: friendship between women, traditions that are passed on between generations, the act of caring for living objects, the cultural history of gardens.

How do we see things that don’t exist? Chagnon Côté and Lafontaine give us access to a dimension of architectural metaphor that expands our understanding of space and ourselves within space. “It’s important to remember that for painters, the fabric is the first material of our foundations. It is with this material that we create a physical space and emotional space, space of illusion. In this exhibition, we want

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to create this sensation of intimacy and the meeting between different places which invites intimacy with its own body,” says Lafontaine. The works in *Sous ses yeux de pierre* provide us a 360 degree experience of what it means to be within architecture—what we can see, and what we cannot.

