



STEPHEN HARPER HATES ME

Gabrielle de Montmollin

The Fantastic, Fearless and Furious World of Gabrielle de Montmollin

Susan Swan © 2013

The genesis of Gabrielle de Montmollin's enthralling new series of monoprints, *Stephen Harper Hates Me*, is unabashedly political. It belongs to a growing (and, so far, one way) conversation that Canadian artists and writers are attempting to have with a prime minister inclined to ignore the arts. In 2007, Yann Martel began sending Harper a literary book every two weeks and advertising his campaign on his web site, *What is Stephen Harper Reading?* Martel started his initiative after the prime minister snubbed the artists and writers sitting in the House of Commons gallery during a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Canada Council.

De Montmollin's controversial new series grows out of a similar dissatisfaction with the prime minister and his leadership. When the federal government held the G-20 summit in 2010, Gabrielle de Montmollin started brooding about Stephen Harper. Why did the prime minister hold the summit in downtown Toronto? The summit cost over \$858 million, and led to police brutality and riots. De Montmollin believes its billion-dollar price tag would have been better spent on the social programs that her prime minister has insisted on cutting.

Soon she began noticing Harper's influence everywhere. It was an influence that she felt harmed the arts along with women's organizations. She points out that the first programs he slashed were funding for women's groups and often these groups were threatened with more cuts if they discussed the changes to their budgets. De Montmollin first learned about the cuts and stifling of dissent from her part-time work for a university research project called Anti-Poverty Community, Organizing and Learning.

Like a large number of writers and artists, de Montmollin feels she has been disenfranchised by Harper who won't claim the arts as part of his democratic constituency. As proof, she quotes his disparaging remark about artistic elites and their galas. She is convinced Harper thinks artists are not hard-working citizens. She also believes he doesn't approve of women unless they

are relegated to raising children in their homes. Ergo, Stephen Harper hates me—both as a woman and an artistic creator, says de Montmollin.

After the G-20 summit, Harper began showing up in her mixed media photographs of dolls. At first, his presence was a surprise to de Montmollin who is known for her enigmatic photographs of Barbie doll knock-offs and toys. Then she began to work with it. In a frenzy of creative energy, she found herself constructing montages of Harper using images collected from newspapers and the Internet. She made digital prints of the montages on coarse art paper and then painted in colours and designs on the prints.

De Montmollin prefers the limits imposed by using older computer technology as well as old cameras, and in her playful new series most of her prints display a crude, homemade look as if she's saying anyone can express their personal feelings in affecting political art if they put their minds to it. And perhaps it's no surprise that in most of her new monoprints the prime minister emerges as a subliminal, disapproving figure. He haunts her artist's studio and cavorts in menacing and satiric ways with the dolls that were once de Montmollin's dominant artistic focus.

"I wanted people to see Harper's contempt for the ordinary person as well as for the artist," de Montmollin says. "And I wanted to use humour as a sharp tool to make my point."

In one monoprint, *Ignorant Man Despising What He Doesn't Know Standing in My Studio*, Harper appears to be lecturing the viewer while a naked and lavishly pink female artist slaves at her desk, her back to the prime minister. The artist's slightly akimbo legs and arms suggest a sense of creative ease in contrast to the stiffly erect Harper figure. In another print, *Smug Man Standing at Attention for God, the Queen and Himself*, Harper is standing next to the jubilant chaos of a wall in de Montmollin's studio, a floor-to-ceiling wall that is bursting with books and colourful objects. In the far right of this print, a miniature figure of Carl Jung appears to be pointing at the prime minister.

In *My World, His World: Winter Walk*, Harper walks across a snowy bridge smiling uncertainly while strange, elfin-like female dolls dance in the air ahead of him. In *My World, His World: Handshake*, half-naked, featureless

female dolls brazenly display themselves on a sofa and coffee table as Harper shakes hands with a white-haired functionary. The brazen and joyful dolls appear to exist far from Harper's world of materialist concerns, as if the dolls are inviting the prime minister to consider a more free-wheeling and imaginative way of looking at things. Obviously, the dolls represent de Montmollin's world. But what is left unstated is her need to connect with the prime minister himself and influence his philosophy of life.

However, the impish dolls are not present in all the monoprints. Many in the series feature Harper in one aspect or another of his leadership role, usually in surprising presentations or juxtapositions. In a three-headed triptych, *Three-Faced*, Harper appears as a beige Chairman Mao against a purple, green and blue backdrop. In *Ha, Ha, Ha*, he sits for the throne speech in the House of Commons wearing a muddy green suit and leprechaun green tie. He appears almost jolly, as if he's been affected by de Montmollin's whimsical mood. In *Bush Buss*, he's still wearing muddy green (green for de Montmollin is a hideous colour) and kissing George W. Bush. Parts of the men's mouths are hidden so it's impossible to tell if their kiss is passionately affectionate or just self-referential, suggesting the deepest feeling each man has is for themselves and the power they wield.

In other portraits, de Montmollin has depicted Harper in more menacing postures. In some of those, he wears a clown suit; in others, he's hidden behind a horned devil's mask. Still another image shows Harper in a head to toe black mask that simultaneously suggests terrorism and Little Black Sambo. The prime minister is also shown playing with adorable kittens while protestors are being arrested in the background. In another print he strikes a gleeful pose with featureless members of a Canadian hockey team, perhaps a reference to his government's enthusiastic funding of hockey teams and arenas in opposition to the cut backs in the arts.

Nevertheless, in nearly all cases, the artist's longing to stage a conversation with Harper has seeped into the images de Montmollin has created. The longing creates a folkloric and almost voodoo effect in her work. It's as if de Montmollin has made artistic images of the most powerful man in Canada in the hope that she truly can talk to him about what is on her mind. And her new, exhilarating images are tinged not only with the hope that she can have a conversation with her prime minister but that he will also listen.



Ignorant Man Despising What He Doesn't Know Standing in My Studio, 2012, mixed media on paper, 16 x 22 inches



Satan, 2012, mixed media on paper, 2012



Clown, 2012, mixed media on paper, 2011



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April 24 - May 18, 2013

Opening reception: April 27, 2-6 pm

Born in Toronto, **Gabrielle de Montmollin** began her career in television and film but moved on to still photography once she discovered it was the medium best suited to her unique vision and independent nature. For many years she worked exclusively with black and white film photographing throwaway plastic toys and dolls arranged in constructed, fantasy settings. Recently she has been working with mixed media blending painting, drawing and montage elements with digital prints. In addition, over the past three years, her focus has shifted from the recording of personal imaginings to finding visual expression of her feelings about social justice issues and politics.

Susan Swan is a Toronto writer and activist who has written about Stephen Harper's government and the arts. Her newest novel is *The Western Light*, published by Cormorant Books in 2012.