

Carmela Laganse: *Debaser*
Sally McKay

Carmela Laganse and I are friends, and for several months I have been dropping in to the studio where she has been constructing her new installation, *Debaser*. I have seen her puzzling over multiple dimensions, calculating difficult geometries, wiring circuits, cutting wood, casting molds, mixing paint, glazing small ceramic objects, sanding wooden surfaces, fastening tiny joists together...arranging and rearranging shapes and assessing her materials, always deep in thought.

Laganse is my favourite kind of philosopher; her inquiries into the nature of human consciousness take the forms of objects, spatial relations and modes of interaction rather than written texts. Perception is physiological, after all. As Laganse says, “material is object, concept and process.”

Debaser is constructed like a science fiction cityscape. As with all the best sci-fi, it does not really offer a fantastical diversion from reality, but rather makes a critical impact by destabilizing the familiar. Laganse uses the charm of diminished scale to captivate her audiences. Like a doll’s house or a video game, the piece calls on viewers to project themselves into its miniatures spaces, demanding both a suspension of disbelief and active looking. Tiny rooms are constructed of tiny joists and beams, mimicking the processes of construction on an unexpected scale. In one section, a screen has been raised above the pseudo-city, like a video billboard you might find in Times Square, but it’s frame is finished with the kind of wood laminate you would see in a basement rec room. There is an immanent sense of humour at play, a kind of physical comedy that results from confounded expectations. Within this environment, perception becomes strange — cameras produce oddly fragmented points of view, surface treatments reflect oddly precise decisions, structures present odd angles — allowing the body of the viewer to become pleasantly confused. It is impossible to visualize this piece in its entirety, even when you are standing right inside of it.

Throughout her career, Laganse has digested theories of mind and materiality produced by thinkers such as renegade physicist David Bohm, constructivist philosopher Jean Piaget and philosopher of science Karen Barad. At the same time, she also combs through YouTube and Netflix, popular music videos, video games, etc., keenly attuned to the influences of popular culture as they play out in lived experience.

Growing up in Winnipeg as the child of parents who immigrated from the Philippines, Laganse developed an acute awareness for the ways that culture inflects experience and perception. Sometimes her humour gets dark. For example, for the 2010 sculpture series called *Spread*, she created eerie, elegant furniture pieces designed for blood-letting. Speaking directly to the body, these works riff on popular thanatotic obsessions with vampires, while commenting on tropes of youth, beauty and consumption in post-capitalist Western society.

Laganse’s 2012 series, *Gag*, consists of furniture sets reminiscent of 1950s modernist design. The works convey an uncanny visceral affect because each piece is equipped with a sink, clearly designed for vomiting. An elegant ladies dressing table titled *In Vain*, an angular divan titled

Levitate Me, an upright kitchen chair with a tray titled *TV Dinner* — each object speaks of middle-class decadence and a subtle, physical distress. Laganse explains, “*Gag* reflects my discomfort with my comfort in the first world.”

Laganse questions social structures which, in her words, “encourage us to put faith in institutions — economic, educational, political, etc. — for an illusion of some sort of advancement.” For *Tromper* (2013), Laganse fabricated a church kneeler and attached it to a slot machine. Here, she mashes together elements of material culture from two powerful cultural institutions — casinos and the church — and draws attention to the ways that each exercises power by manipulating participants’ actions. The slot machine is perceptually immersive and mechanically addictive, triggering the desire to play and play again, while the church kneeler is an infrastructure that physically guides one into a subservient pose. The title of the work plays on the French meaning of the word “tromper”: to fool.

According to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, the verb “debase” means to “lower in quality, value, or character.” The title *Debaser* also references a song by the Pixies, which in turn references the famous surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou*. Everything is not as it seems.

Compared to her past projects, Laganse is perhaps more forgiving of illusion with *Debaser*, acknowledging that social contexts almost involve some form of fabrication. In fact fabrication, or construction, is a major theme in this work. Both terms have double meanings. We say that a story is fabricated or constructed when we want to indicate that it is somehow fictional, but at the same time both words also refer to the material solidity of building and making forms. While the two meanings may seem contradictory, proposing them together suggests the philosophical position that social constructs are real and that real objects are socially constructed.

As an artist and an educator, Laganse draws on Jean Piaget and Seymour Papert who both suggests that learning is not the passive reception of information, but rather an active process by which people construct knowledge based on their experiences. Indeed, recent experiences of Laganse’s inform this work. For example, a nurse in a hospital covers a dying patient with crisp, clean bedding before allowing visitors into the room. The architecture of the hospital itself has been aesthetically engineered to create an atmosphere of clarity and calm through its logical, antiseptic geometries. And yet this building has been designed to contain the murky, unpredictable messiness of human bodies breaking down. “It’s all about the fallacies of construction materials, surfaces, veneers” says Laganse, “but these things affect us. Our built environments inform our moral compass.”

The modernist refrain “truth to materials” references a kind of puritanical approach to the concept that media themselves have always conveyed meaning within the traditions of craft, architecture and sculptural practice. Laganse teases this history with subtle, humorous precision. For example, in *Debaser* she has painted many of the wooden surfaces with a colour carefully mixed to be as close to that of the original wood as possible. Thus, the wood is simultaneously concealed and represented within the piece. In other areas she has Varathaned plywood, poking fun at conventions of the construction industry in which a cheap material like plywood would rarely be considered a surface worthy of fine finish and display.

There are too many conceptually rich processes happening here for me to describe them all in detail. I leave it to the viewer to explore the many nuances that *Debaser* has to offer. This kind of active exploration is key to Laganse's practice. Here is an imaginary, fabricated environment made manifest; a miniature place for thinking through your body; a playful space designed to help us understand perception in multiple dimensions. Humans are material beings, and material is object, concept and process.