



Breaking News
Geneviève Thauvette

This catalogue is published on the occasion of Geneviève Thauvette's installation, *Breaking News*, on view from September 12, 2020 to July 6, 2021 on Hamilton Artists Inc.'s exterior Cannon Project Wall.

Geneviève Thauvette is a Franco-Ontarian artist currently residing in Toronto. Her photographs have shown internationally, notably at the 17th Japan Media Arts Festival, the Perth International Arts Festival (Australia), the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, and the Vie Jeux de la Francophonie in Beirut where she won the gold medal for Canada. Her series *Les quintuplées Dionne* have been acquired by the Canadian Museum of History and the City of Ottawa Fine Art Collection. She is a 2013 recipient of the FlashForward emerging artists award and has earned several grants, including a 2011, 2016, and 2017 Artist Production Grant from the Ontario Arts Council and the 2015 and 2017 Artists in the Library grant from the Toronto Arts Council.

Jill Glessing's writing typically blends research in art and aesthetics with political, cultural, and historical contexts, with a focus on contemporary art and photo-based practices. She regularly contributes art criticism to a range of international publications and teaches Art History and History of Photography at Ryerson University.

Chills and Thrills of Contemporary News Media

Jill Glessing

‘The news’, and our relation to it, has changed: what had been one-directional flows of information presented by a few authoritative and supposedly neutral broadcasters is now a wild and contested space wherein multitudes of citizen journalists battle for attention—a free-for-all of opinion based on a smattering of alarming facts. Geneviève Thauvette’s series *Breaking News* (2017), displayed on Hamilton Artists Inc.’s Cannon Project Wall, considers the role of the news-bearer as a conflicted site of negotiation between objectivity and lived experience.

The photographic mural, with its vivid colours and comic content, rivets attention, brightening the downtown Hamilton intersection. Thauvette’s concoction of camp, humour, and absurdism cuts through the confusion of alternative facts that characterizes our current hyper-active media landscape.

Each of the three images within the large billboard-style display depict different television news formats, such as the news desk and on-location journalist. The photographic images, heavily staged through costume and drama, manipulated

through Photoshop and hand-tinting, then digitally printed on vinyl, were drawn from a larger series of seven. In each tableaux a female journalist delivers a news story. With this work, Thauvette continues her earlier practice of using her own body to represent theatrical characters. In her series *Les quintuplées Dionne* (2009), for example, the costumed and multiplied Thauvette enacts each of the girls who, like the news presenters performed in *Breaking News*, are victims of sensationalist media. In *World's Smallest Dictator Dies*, the artist enacts three figures: a tiny tyrant—an oblique reference to Filipino authoritarian Ferdinand Marcos—lies encased in a Plexiglas tomb, dressed in military regalia and surrounded by a profusion of flowers. His glamorous wife stands by him, posturing dramatic mourning. Microphone in hand, the recoiling journalist struggles to maintain the contrived scene. The scene's colours are luscious, with creamy skin tones and pastel petals, while in other images they appear discordant and garish.

Aiming to accentuate the artificiality of news formats, Thauvette departs from the reds, blues, and whites in conventional news settings; in *Lost and Found*, for example, acid blues and lime green jar with cyan, turquoise, pink, and violet. A news desk host delivers a story about a missing girl, whose youthful portrait is inset on screen looking uncannily like the journalist herself, with identical hairstyles and similar clothing. As the producer interrupts the broadcast and whispers in her ear the host suddenly recognizes, with disturbed confusion, her own identity as the missing girl.

The colour palette is more natural in *Chance of Rain*, a scene that mimics dangerous 'on the ground' news coverage journalists perform for the sake of authenticity and immediacy. Wearing light rain gear and clutching a flimsy umbrella, the



journalist valiantly tries to disguise her anxiety with a cheery expression as brown flood waters rise around her. Throughout the series, costumes and make-up are exaggerated and clownish; here, the suffering journalist's cheeks are blotched with a bright pink.

Thauvette packs her images with meaningful detail that darken what may initially seem light and comical. The broach worn by the news anchor in *Lost and Found*,

for instance, appears as a tiny rope that recalls her abduction. Such cues point to an underlying darkness in Thauvette's work more prevalent in images not included in this public installation. For example, *Technical Difficulties* shows a news anchor with weird make-up and a manic grin holding a gun to her head; behind her on the wall of silvery tinsel is a circle of red, a reference to a real news host who killed herself on air.¹ *Oh the Humanity*, also referencing a historical news event, depicts an anchor in circus-like attire against a backdrop of a world map; an insert image of a silver balloon surrounded by sparking fireworks floats in front of a sunset-hued atomic explosion. A bag of popcorn lies spilled on the desk before her. Divided in gleeful anticipation and dread, she pokes darts at the balloon with one hand and plugs her ear with the other. The title draws on what news host, Herbert Morrison, wailed during his live coverage of the Hindenburg zeppelin fire;² but Thauvette's image also suggests large-scale global war and our mediated fascination with disaster.

The greatest value of *Breaking News* is that it displays in a public venue a much-needed commentary on the unsettling mix of horror and entertainment that dominates our contemporary news environment. Through an intelligent use of humour, Thauvette's commentary on the dangers of commercial media—with its sensational skewering of fact directed at vulnerable consumers—is a timely alert.

1 Christian Blauvelt, "Christine Chubbuck: The broadcaster who shot herself on air," BBC, February 1, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160201-christine-chubbuck-the-broadcaster-who-shot-herself-on-air>

2 Dylan Hayley Leavitt, "'Oh, the Humanity!' and the Hindenburg," PBS, November 2, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/stories/articles/2014/6/23/oh-humanity-and-hindenburg>

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Cover: Geneviève Thauvette, *World's Smallest Dictator Dies*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.
Inside: Geneviève Thauvette, *Breaking News*, 2017. Installation view at Hamilton Artists Inc.,
July 2021. Image: Abedar Kamgari.

