

*LE GRAND SALON*

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Department of Visual Arts  
Faculty of Arts  
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*to Stephanie and Lara, my sisters-in-arms*

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## ABSTRACT

### *The Secret Society of Montreal Oculists*

1. Our earliest records of their activities date back to the spring of 1898 with the birth of Lambert. Coincidentally, that spring saw the most destructive flood the settlement had ever known. Lambert was immediately inducted into the *Society* by his mother, Mme Lepage, who practiced capnomancy and kept a pair of female Dobermans in the basement of the family home. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1994, when Lambert was five years old and despite his mother's recommendations, he opened his eyes during the solar eclipse, burning them instantly. From the smoke, Mme Lepage divined a future flood that would engulf the mountain. 2. A narrative device. 3. *LE GRAND SALON*, wherein the *Society* ritualistically performed Lambert's demise at each partial solar eclipse, staring at the skies until they could see no more. Presented here is the facsimile of such a ritual, including an *Oculists* statuary.

## IMAGES

*NB: THE IMAGES FROM PAGE 2 TO PAGE 15 WERE TAKEN IN A DARKENED ROOM  
VISITORS WERE ENCOURAGED TO EXPLORE USING A FLASHLIGHT*



1



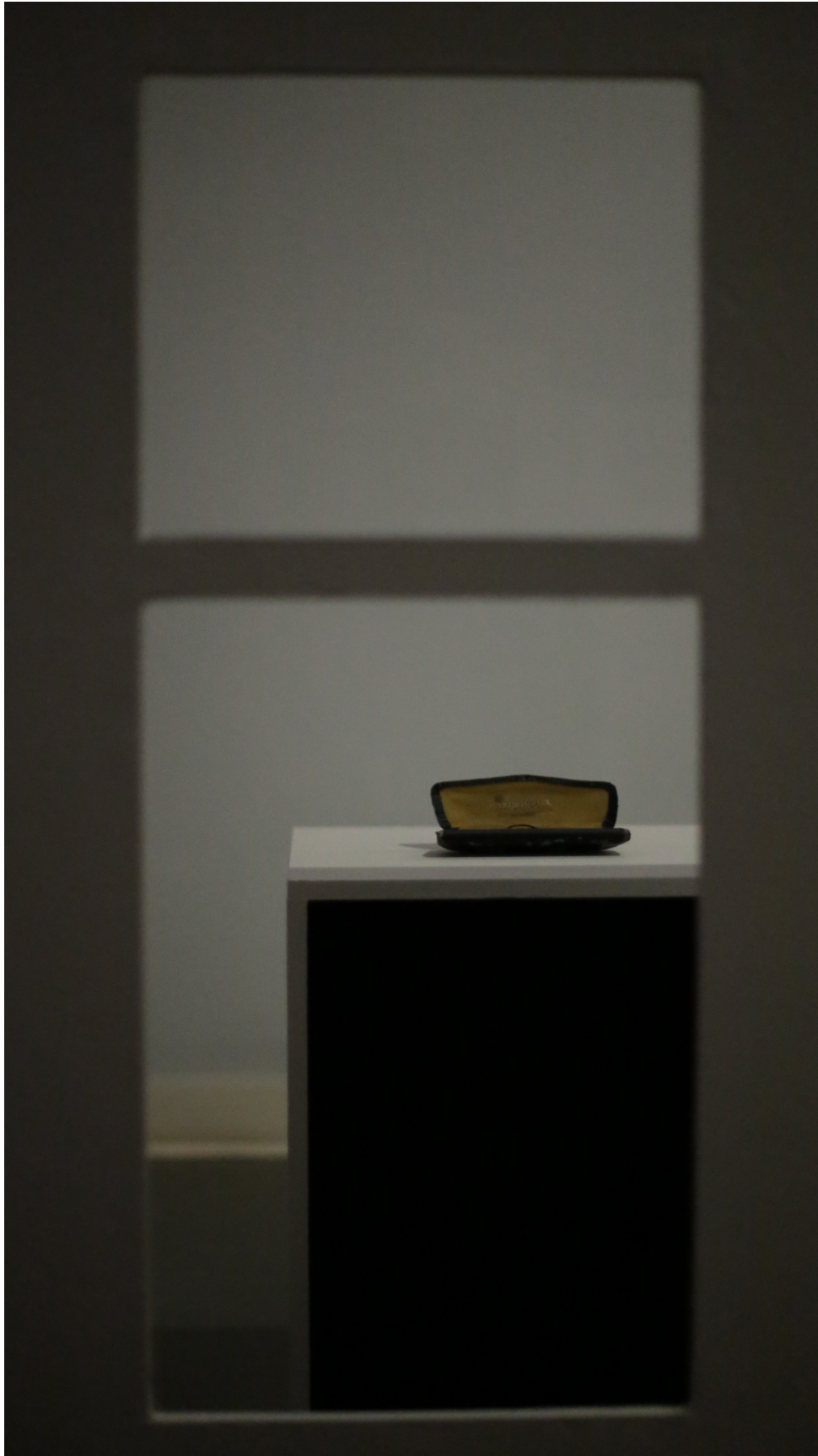
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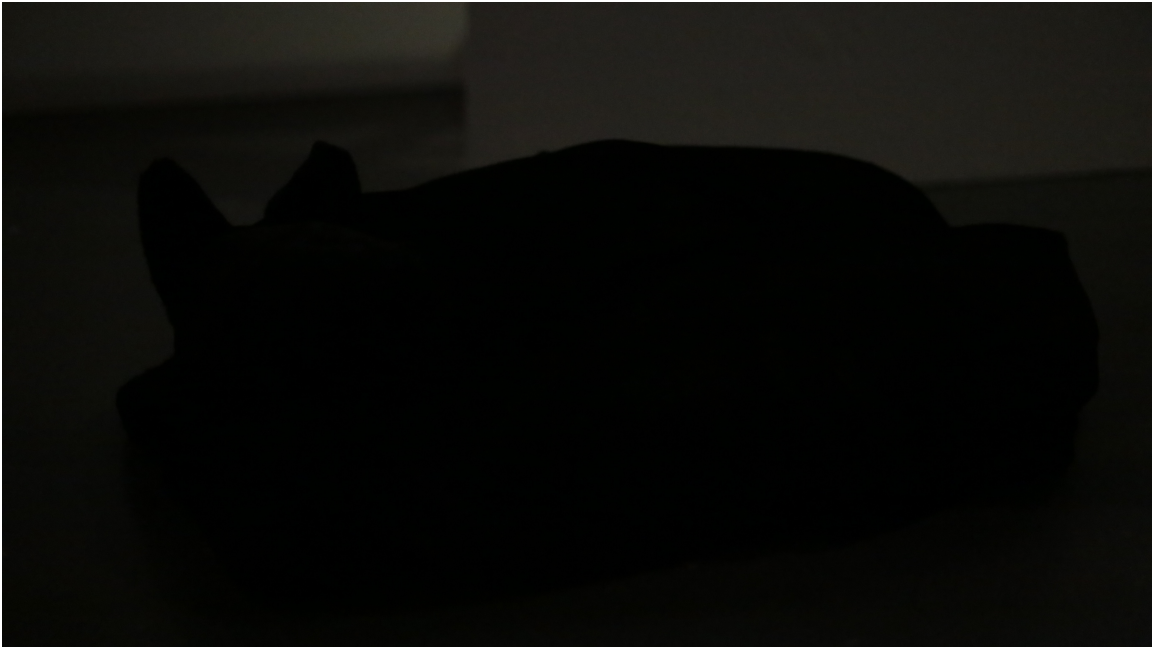
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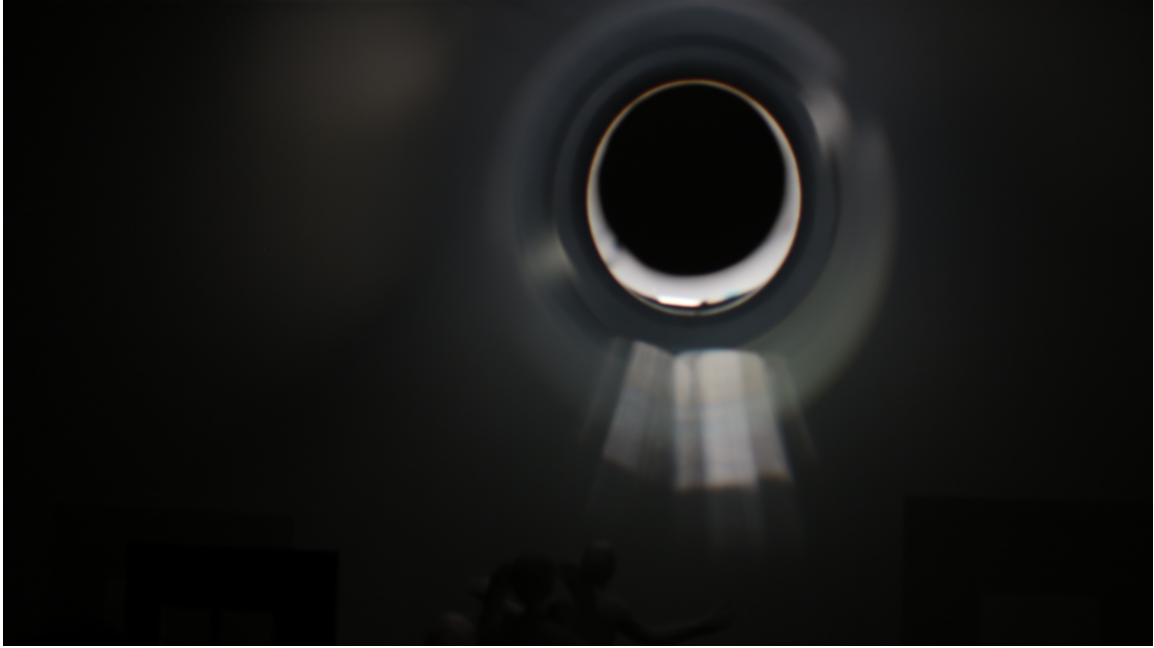
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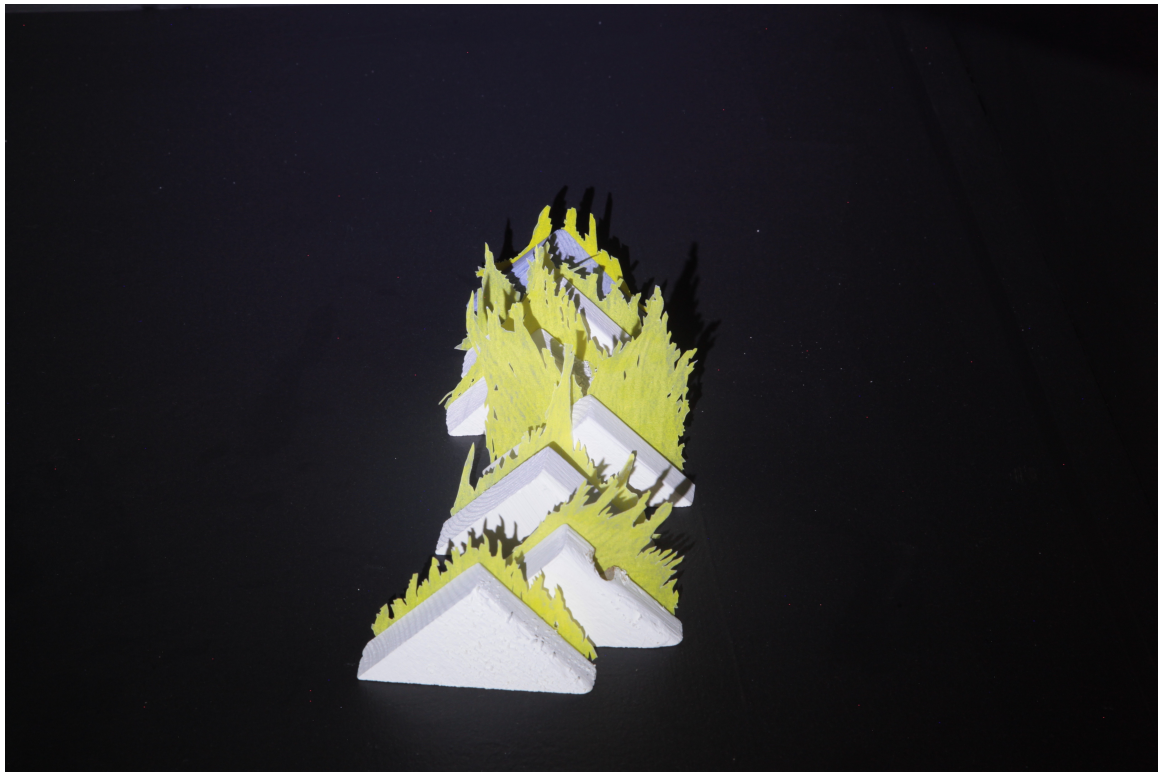
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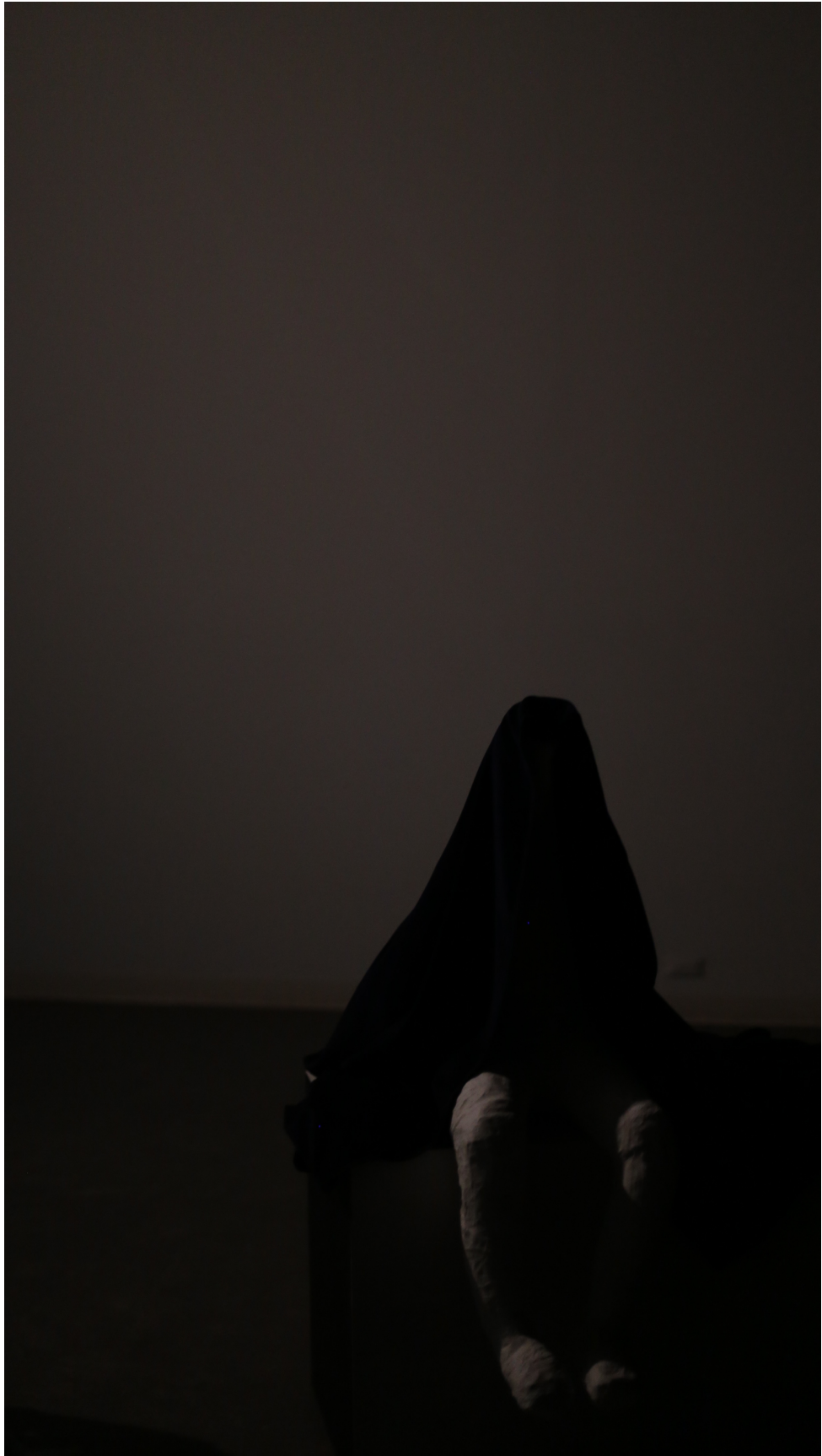
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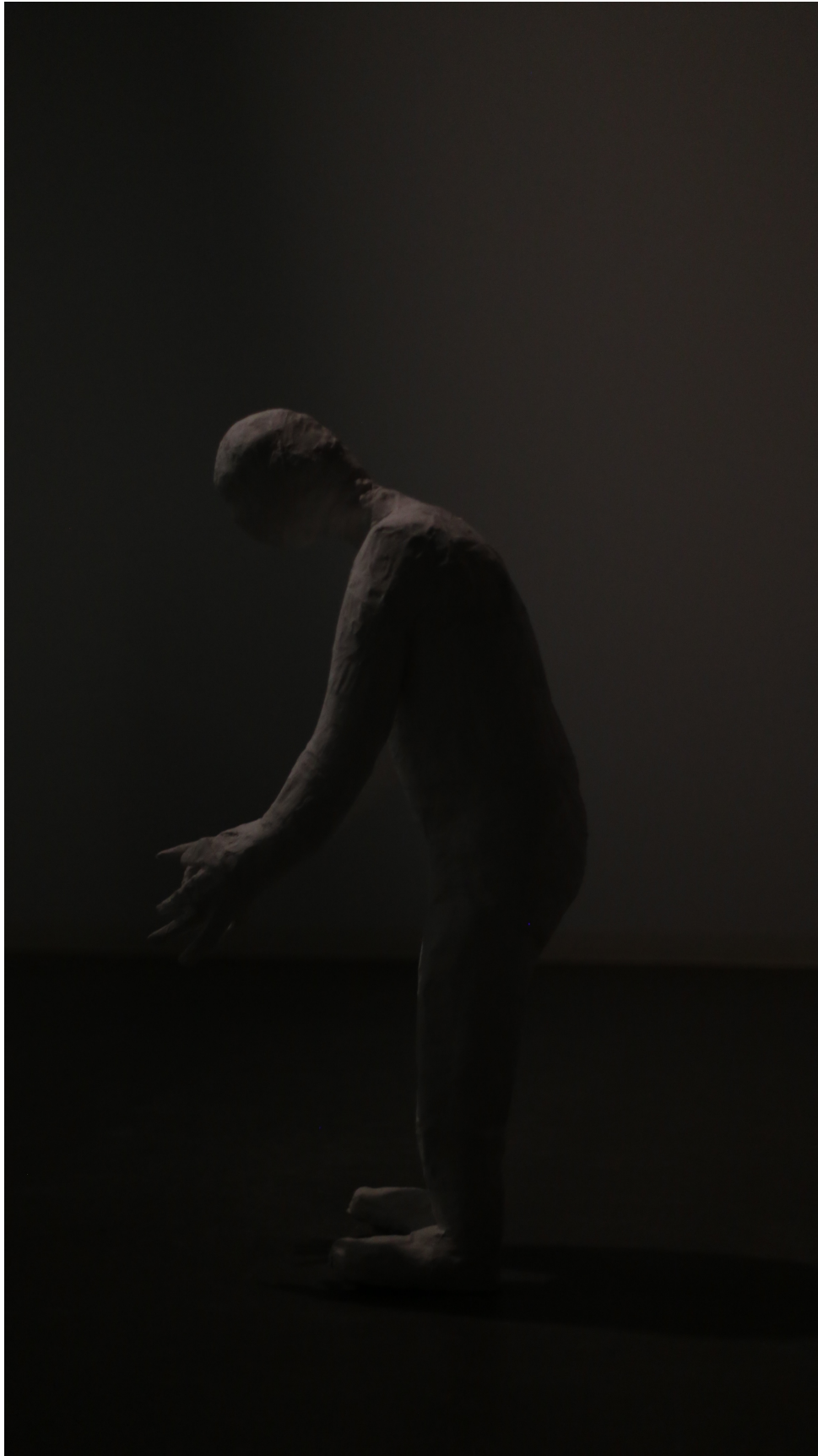


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## IMAGE LIST

1. *LE GRAND SALON I and II*, video still, dimensions variables, 2015.
2. *LE GRAND SALON I and II*, video still, dimensions variables, 2015.
3. *Boîtes votives (sténopés)*, blue card, masking tape, individual box: 14 x 10 cm, pile: dimensions variable, 2015.
4. *Lambert Lepage, Oculiste*, sandbags, wool clothing, plaster bandage, blue ink, coloring pencil leads (yellow), embroidered label (polyester thread on canvas), 31.8 x 50.8 x 61 cm, 2014-2015.
5. *LE GRAND SALON* installation (window right), dimensions variable, 2015.
6. *Les lunettes de l'archevêque*, found objects, 15.2 x 8.9 x 7 cm, 2014.
7. *Bien parler français*, found objects, 9.7 x 10 cm, 2014; *les ciseaux de Mance (étui)*, found object, 24.1 x 12.1 cm, 2014.
8. *LE GRAND SALON* installation (staircase), painted wood panel and objects, 99.1 x 61 x 61 cm, 2015.
9. *Les chiens*, newsprint, black silk velvet, pins, 76.2 x 45,7 x 22.9 cm, 2015.
10. *LE GRAND SALON* installation (windows left), dimensions variable, 2015.
11. *La main de Mme Lepage*, metal structure, newsprint and plaster bandage, 83.8 x 17.8 x 14 cm, 2015.
12. *Le grand œil (œil de Mance)*, light projection, dimensions variable, 2015.
13. *Le grand œil (œil de Mance)* with Oculists statuary, dimensions variable, 2015.
14. Oculists statuary, dimensions variable, 2015.
15. *L'attente* and *l'éveil*, metal structure, newsprint and plaster bandage, painted wood panel, dimensions variable, 2015.

16. *Catabase*, metal structure, newsprint and plaster bandage, 76,2 x 30,5 x 89,9 cm, 2015.
17. *Small fires (burning houses)*, painted wood and vellum flames (vellum, yellow pencil), dimensions variable, 2014.
18. *Mme Lepage endormie*, felt, canvas, polyester thread, 24.1 x 8.9 x 5.1 cm, 2014.
19. *Lambert à la fenêtre (ombres)*, performance with flashlight, 2015.
20. *L'attente*, metal structure, newsprint and plaster bandage, 109,2 x 48,3 x 73,7 cm, 2015.
21. *L'éveil*, metal structure, newsprint and plaster bandage, 104,1 x 50,8 x 87,7 cm, 2015.
22. *Le dénuement*, metal structure, newsprint and plaster bandage, 116,8 x 33 x 22.5 cm, 2015.
23. *Yeux (le feu)*, metal structure, newsprint and plaster bandage, 130.2 x 43.2 x 38.1 cm, 2015.
24. *Béat*, metal structure, newsprint and plaster bandage, 128.3 x 124.5 x 22.9 cm, 2015.
25. In collaboration with Julia Martin: *prop 4*, painted plywood, 91.4 x 121,9 cm, 2015.
26. In collaboration with Julia Martin: *ailleurs*, metal structure, newsprint and plaster bandage, broken ceramic bowl; *boîtes votives (sténopés blancs)*, white card, masking tape. Individual box: 13 x 10 cm, pile: dimensions variables, 2015.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

### *The Secret Society of Montreal Oculists*

1. Our earliest records of their activities date back to the spring of 1898 with the birth of Lambert. Coincidentally, that spring saw the most destructive flood the settlement had ever known. Lambert was immediately inducted into the *Society* by his mother, Mme Lepage, who practiced capnomancy<sup>i</sup> and kept a pair of female Dobermans in the basement of the family home. On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1994, when Lambert was five years old and despite his mother's recommendations, he opened his eyes during the solar eclipse, burning them instantly. From the smoke, Mme Lepage divined a future flood that would engulf the mountain. 2. A narrative device<sup>ii</sup>. 3. *LE GRAND SALON*, wherein the *Society* ritualistically performed Lambert's demise at each partial solar eclipse, staring at the skies until they could see no more. Presented here is the facsimile of such a ritual, including an *Oculists* statuary.

### *LE GRAND SALON*

Upon my arrival in the MFA program, and as soon as I was given the keys to my first studio, I sat on the floor and began to draw what would be the monogram of the Secret Society of Montreal Oculists. The name had occurred to me in late 2012 as a device to frame an installation, which included a desk covered in sketches and a large projection where I could be seen leading a séance in anaglyph 3D.

Putting this operation under the aegis of a secret society, which was named, but not specifically defined, enabled me to set a distinctive, pervasive mood, validated by selected historical evidence. I conceived of the Society as the literal site to house the core of my research: the relationship of narrative to image-making. Using a string of characters which

bore a resemblance to certain members of my family but which were, in essence, collages that tended to approximate archetypes, I set forth to draw, write and build the Society from memories, dreams, historical detail and key concepts derived from early cinema history, feminism, postcolonialism and psychoanalysis.

My objective for the thesis show was then as it is now to anchor the Society in tangible space as an installation, which would evoke a *salon*: a living room as well as the evocation of an intellectual space presided over by a *femme de lettres*. The studio of the artist-run center DAÏMÔN, where the *GRAND SALON* took place, was structured as a theater set with a strong sense of direction and movement. The windows I built in the fall of 2014 framed the space, with plinths introducing changes in levels. The child-sized figures of the Oculists I had been working on since the spring were placed in a linear progression in their respective poses. Finally, the figure of Mme Lepage was the *éminence grise* of the space, half in shadows.

As I worked on the sculptures, which were meant to be renditions of my drawings in three dimensions, I realized anew their hieratic qualities and mannerisms, which led me to consider them as a single character through different stages of its life, in the manner of mediaeval illuminations. It occurred to me that Lambert, who perished in the eclipse that burned his eyes, seemed to go through the stages of martyrdom and beatification of a Catholic hagiography, such as Saint Lucy's, or rites akin to those depicted on the frescoes of the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii. In the context of a secret society, postulant Oculists could ritualistically perform his ordeal and be thus inducted.

The narrative of the Oculists, which in recent works had receded into hints and suggestions, recovers a prominent place in the final presentation of my work. While the

objects in the installation were introduced in the video on the wall leading to the DAÏMÔN studio, the narrative also came through in three distinct performances, each lasting approximately five minutes. The first accounted for the historical context of the Society and provide biographical details of its founding members. The second described the rites depicted in the space. The third dealt with the invention of the scholarship around the Society, which enabled me to discuss its conceptual framework under the guise of historical research. These performances were recorded and the audio was played back in the space as the exhibit continued.

The decisions I have just outlined have come about in the dialogue between my conceptual practice and the images and forms I produce. I realize that there is a rift between thought and its incarnation in my process, which suits the Catholicism-inflected narrative in more ways than one. It also evokes the city that presides over my stories, a missionary settlement conceived in Europe and at perpetual odds with the soil it lives on<sup>iii</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Capnomancy is a form of divination using smoke.

<sup>ii</sup> In his essay on Foucault's key concept, Giorgio Agamben first defines a device or apparatus as a "heterogeneous ensemble that includes virtually everything, whether it be discursive or not: speeches, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions. The device or apparatus in itself is the network established amongst these elements" (my translation). I think of the Secret Society as the device, or framework, which contains and shuffles a range of artistic practices – the textual, performative, material and conceptual work emerging from a form of contemplation of what this Society could entail.

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See Giorgio Agamben, *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?* translated by Martin Rueff (Paris: Rivages poche/Petite Bibliothèque, 2007), 10.

<sup>iii</sup> Rebecca Solnit evokes Eduardo Galeano in her assessment of lost European-Americans: “Eduardo Galeano notes that America was conquered, but not discovered, that the men who arrived with a religion to impose and dreams of gold never really knew where they were... This suggests that most European-Americans remained lost over the centuries, lost not in practical terms but in the most profound sense of apprehending where they truly were”. See Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. (New York: Viking Penguin, 2005), 66.