

# THE ATOMIST / A TRIBUTE TO RICHARD DESCHÊNES

EXHIBITION /  
MAY 18 TO JUNE 17, 2023  
CENTRE D'ART ET DE DIFFUSION CLARK  
MONTRÉAL

OPENING /  
THURSDAY, MAY 18, 6PM  
+ MUSICAL PERFORMANCE  
BY JONATHAN PARANT

CONVERSATION /  
SATURDAY, MAY 27, 3PM

CELEBRATION /  
SUONI PER IL POPOLO  
FRIDAY, JUNE 2, 8PM  
[suoniperilpopolo.org](http://suoniperilpopolo.org)

*Voir*, 2013

We are a group bound together in love, admiration and respect for Richard. We have enjoyed looking closely at his art practice and have cherished this time to explore and dwell in his thinking and making process.

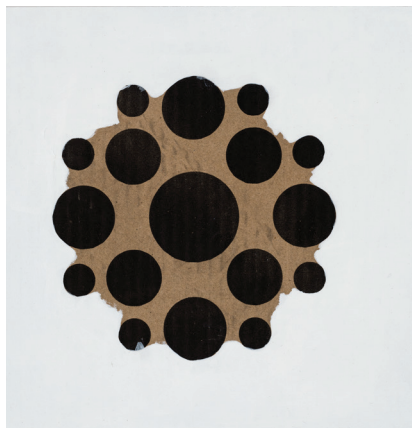
*The Atomist* is a result of our many conversations sparked by his art and life. The exhibition also responds to Richard's wish, expressed before his death, to present the never before shown "Taiwan series", entitled *Les Atomistes 4*. The images in this series are juxtaposed with other works showcased on a wall that we thought of as a reservoir, a kind of hold. It combines many works and from different times, organized together in a way we hope provides an intimate view of how Richard looked at and created art. To look as he did so deeply into an image that outlines and shapes pull apart, the very marks that make them, packed in one moment and then set around the space that compose them in the next. That little bit between each mark, the space that gives the form, pulls in and out of tangibility, creates in his works an interchange of foreground and background, of presence and absence. We've also included some of the intermediate images created by his process — those between spaces, positions, times — because they are compelling in and of themselves, and because they reveal palpably how he brought found images into his own

drawings and paintings. The distance between them, the relevance of one to another, a connection, a way of relation.

Finally, we wanted to witness his deep bond with music by offering a glimpse into his experimental sound project *The Collective* that he has created with three other artists, César Saëz, Aneessa Hashmi and Catherine Bodmer. 100% improvised and experimental, the music that resulted from their weekly jams was rooted in punk and DIY, or as the group defined it: *The Collective is composed of four Sunday musicians who exist solely because of their improvisability; artsy and moody humans who like to dada and believe it is so incredibly pertinent to dada now.*

— Catherine Bodmer, Sarah Greig, Thérèse Mastroiacovo,  
Dominique Pétrin and Bernard Schütze

**Excerpts from a conversation around Richard Deschênes' art practice**



Plateau 1, 2019

**B.** Richard chose *Les Atomistes* as the title for several iterations of his work over the last fifteen years and often talked about his affinity with this ancient Greco-Roman school of thought. It holds that the world is materially made up of atoms, or indivisible particles that are contained in an infinite void in which they are adrift. From a perceptual point of view, appearances of macroscopic things are like aggregates of these atoms. Because these particles coalesce randomly, their resulting clusters are unpredictable.

**S.** I also think of the void as an energy field, with a capacity beyond everything tangible. How Ricky interacted with the negative space of image, the unmarked parts of a drawing, makes me think he considers these spaces as charged. The void as structure for the unfolding and organization of energy and matter. I see this too in how he selects his source images, because they could be almost any image, though often images of study and knowledge, like he's looking past all their separate aspects to an underlying fabric.

**C.** Whenever I asked Richard why he picked this or that image, for example in the Taiwan series, he didn't give a clear answer about the reasons he picked them. He did mention his interest in the poor print quality of images and the visibility of the grain. He then did several rounds of preselection, and the process and end choice seemed very intuitive.

**T.** I appreciate that. Not explaining.

**S.** Yeah, he maintained the unknown/uncertainty around the images he selected. This is equally true of images he selects from a Taiwanese encyclopedia and images he cuts from found cardboard on the street.

**C.** Richard was looking for the extraordinary in the ordinary. When going outside, he always carried a utility knife in his pocket ready to cut out a piece of a cardboard box with a particular sign or a text that caught his eye. He liked the idea of transposing these pieces into an art context, taking them from the realm of the everyday into another field of consideration.



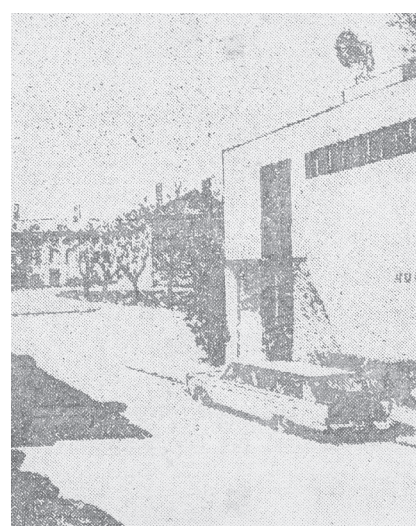
Échelle 1, 2017

**C.** Richard also liked the randomness of things. There is for example a particular relationship between the titles and the work, the naming, the relationship between meaning and image, and how Richard combines these. The title often seems to jump out or jump away from the work, making a sudden turn. Sometimes Richard just pointed to a page of an open book and then he liked the word and took it.

**D.** Isn't it also a sort of "pied de nez" to the art world, playing with the convention of naming a work? Richard goes against any aspiration of wanting to say something savvy or even profound, and maybe he's indirectly unconsciously making a statement.

**T.** I think it's more punk. He liked the anomalies that patterns reveal, the deviations, a kind of non-conformity.

**D.** Yes, it's all punk! It's not about following. He had his own path.



Institut de recherche nucléaire, 2014 (detail)

**D.** I can see the printmaker through his work, a strong influence of printmaking, not only in the dots but also in the transfer of an image into another medium. I am wondering if the action of transferring is not a performance in itself, one that is speaking about a state of mind, like a meditation. Seeing past the dots, it becomes about the action: to push through matter to some other matter.

**S.** For sure, Richard would spend all this time going through this incredible ambiguous materiality in between. The image as it comes out the other side of the process is the same yet very much changed, like a translation. Less contrast, many more shades of grey, the direction of the line changes. An unevenness in the making at every stage enriches the surface with details and texture. The transfer process adds a lot to the resulting image.

**B.** One gets a sense of the temporal factor in many of his works, this sense of a suspended time that retains a memory of the journey through its various phases. Richard actually travels with the images, he physically accompanies and inhabits every picture detail.

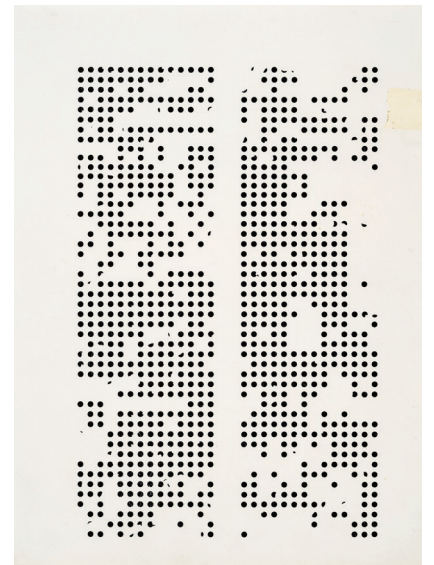
**D.** It was there—small, in the book—and now it is here—big, on the wall. Picking something from here, isolating it, and creating a new kind of constellation of relationships.

**C.** Richard kept all the transfers on vellum paper and was often thinking about their status. Are they works or are they not?

**T.** Yes, the time and space of the transfer itself, it's much like being on the way to getting somewhere. The materials that he used to arrive at the final work, the photocopies, the enlargements, the masking of some elements but not others, adding in new ground, all this generates a kind of liminal space where hierarchies are uncertain. I don't know about their status, I think yeah for sure, and add that I've very much enjoyed contemplating the question.

**S.** There is also this foreground/background interchange. You think that you're looking at the thing that is important but then it slides to the back and the other thing comes to the front. Seeing that which was not present when you first perceived it, there is a little delay, the time it takes for the other thing to come into focus.

**B.** Especially in the Taiwan series, I find there is a stillness in these drawings. As they expand and grow vaguer in their definition, they attain a poetic level in which they are suspended between a vanishing referential anchor and an emerging ethereality.



Motifs 2, 2019

**T.** With the newspaper collages, the ground slowly erases the figure. It's like the context builds up and becomes the action.

**S.** Yeah, he pushes and pulls at the space, like we would in a tone drawing. And he doesn't try to hide it or make it seamless. No, he puts all of it out in plain sight: the poor image, showing all of its seams, bravely exposing its own making. A beautiful fragility.

**B.** There is also the questioning of the image—the press images in this case—as a conveyor of veracity. In making the figure's disappearance the subject of the collages, Richard is foregrounding the fabricated side of mediated images, but he does this in a very ingenious manner by replacing the disappeared figure with the appearance of a made-up ground. In a sense, the images here tell a story about what has happened to them; a kind of whodunnit starring the figure and the ground.

**C.** Something about the unexpected outcome is present here again: he can make things appear and disappear. It's like a quieting down of the world.

**B.** Yes, this quieting down or stilling of the world permeates these works we've discussed. It also speaks to his style, to his gentle inventiveness: guided by rigorous yet playful protocols and meticulous repetitions, gesture after gesture, Richard sought to open spaces for the delightfully unexpected to happen.