LA MAISON
DES ARTISTES VISUELS FRANCOPHONES

Response to *Mi-figue, Mi-raisin*
by Steffie Bélanger and Joannie Boulais
by Natalie Baird

In the exhibition *Mi-figue, mi-raisin*, each sculpture is a piece of a conversation between two artist-friends. Shaped by the material worlds of each artist the pieces start as a call and response, and move toward harmony. Artistic collaboration often requires the externalization of unnamed feelings or motivations encouraging each artist to express clearly their creative intentions – often a vulnerable experience, since these aspects could otherwise remain buried. Meanwhile, this process implies having to let go and to be open to the unexpected. In conversation with Steffie and Joannie, we explored how structure around collaboration is a way to start a conversation.

Natalie: Collaboration, in particular with my friend Toby, is an integral part of my artistic practice; so it's stimulating for me to see how other artists explore ideas and materials. How did your collaboration start?

Steffie: During our MFA, we did projects together.
Joannie: We also made plinths, do you remember, for the MFA gallery?
S: That's funny. Our friendship started with plinths. We already had the idea for our exhibition!
J: We have been wanting to work on a project together for a while. The idea that came up was that each would make sculptures, and give them to the other so that she would make the plinths.
S: Kind of like completing each other's sculptures.

N: That reminds me of a drawing game. There used to be a drawing club in Winnipeg called "Places for Peanuts." I think that's where I learned to work with other artists on the same page, even with Toby. We would all sit around a table and pass the drawings around to each other for the whole night.

S: We set some guidelines for the project to help guide us, and sometimes to be able to derive from it. It was easier than to say that we would create an

artwork together right away, with two sets of hands on the same piece. We worked on the sculptures each in our own studio, by exchanging photos during the process. But there is one sculpture that we fully made here. We went to ReStore – we don't have those in Montreal – where there's a bunch of construction materials on sale. We found some pieces of maple. It's funny because all of my works in the show are made out of maple. The piece looked like something I could have made.

N: I like the constraint of found materials, it can be a starting point, or a way to continue someone else's action.

S: Many artists are collectors. Sometimes, it can be a flaw to accumulate so many objects, but it becomes a quality for Joannie to be able to see the potential of objects.
J: Being an artist means creating problems for yourself: *I'll start a beaver collection*.
S: Yes, once the problems are created, you have to find solutions. The problems and constraints – time, theme, process – also allow us to be more creative.

N: And being able to share the problems helps, too. When I work with Toby, we're constantly bouncing ideas off each other about our issues. It feels like always having a fresh perspective. It's a fluid, liberating dynamic that often surprises me. Are there any works that surprised you in the exhibition?

J: The foot with a long toe is many people's favourite. I liked building a plinth with three branches covered in sequins for it. It highlights its curvy shapes.
S: There's also flocking on the toes. Without Joannie, I don't think I would have done that. It's a whimsical element that I don't have in my practice. Working with Joannie gave me permission to try so many things!

N: We often hold ourselves back from pursuing certain ideas in our projects, simply because they're unfamiliar, or because we start judging them before they even start. Collaboration can create a playful dimension or some ease with uncertainty. The title *Mi-figue, mi-raisin* points to that ambiguity: it's neither good nor bad.

J: Mi-figue, mi-raisin, it's not exactly one or the other.
S:We thought it was fun because this exhibition is not completely Joannie, not completely Steffie. It's in between.

N: Are there pieces in the show that go beyond the call and response of your creative constraints?

S: The roll of fabric, which is also one of our favourite works.
J: Steffie asked permission to make a larger piece, since it's more natural in her practice, compared to small objects that can be laid on a plinth. Afterwards, I could intervene and add other elements… instead of building a pedestal. It was more open, a merger of the two. We chose the fabric together.
S: It was already leaning over in the store, it looked like a person. With the fabric, we can see figuration through something trivial and recognizable. At the store, I really wanted to have the full roll to keep that effect.
J:I said *yes, go for it*.
S: The large roll of fabric is a Joannie-Steffie practice, fully combined.

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Natalie Baird is a visual artist from Winnipeg. She works on art projects with her friend Toby Gillies almost everyday.