

NACELLE (2009), Pierre Blanchette

This is the fourth stop on the Public Art, Nature and the City tour.

A “nacelle” is a small boat or basket that hangs under an airship or hot air balloon. In the case of *Nacelle* the artwork by Montreal artist Pierre Blanchette, the title references a peculiar architectural feature of a conference room. The ‘floating’ conference room is enveloped by the artwork and suspended above the lobby of the John Molson Building. Whether you are entering from the top of the escalators, or from the elevator, make your way around the atrium to view all sides of this work.

Panels of sapele wood are inlaid with ebony and anodized aluminum, creating a crisscross pattern. This pattern was developed in conversation with two masterpieces, *The Battle of San Romano* by Paolo Uccello (c. 1435-1460) and Piet Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943). While you may not immediately catch the reference to the densely populated scenes in these famous paintings, the strong, linear channels that dart through *Nacelle*’s façade gesture to the dense surrounds of Concordia’s downtown campus. Both paintings use linear patterns to direct the viewer’s eye, creating a sense of multidirectional movement. If you can, look at the artwork now or imagine the function of *Nacelle*’s linear motif? How do these graphic elements direct you as you view or imagine the work?

The artist chose sapele, the material used in the background of this work, in consultation with the building’s architects. Sapele is a hardwood from West Africa that the architects have used throughout the atrium’s construction. Can you find this material in other places in this space? The trunk of the sapele tree is commonly up to six feet in diameter, with very straight trunks. Because the tree has no branching under 80 feet, it yields a wide and long lumber with a very straight grain pattern. This grain pattern contributes to the strong graphic element of the work, while also introducing organic form. The mezzanine seems to hover almost weightlessly in the atrium of the John Molson Building.

Sapele trees have a similar kind of presence to this architectural feature. Typically growing in densely forested areas, the grain of the sapele tree remains unusually straight. As the trees grow upright to reach the light, their canopies cloak the forest from as high as two hundred feet. Compositionally, this work fits well into Blanchette’s oeuvre, though he typically works with paint on canvas. Given this departure in medium, how does the material contribute to how you experience the work? Do you imagine that your experience would change if the design was rendered in paint?

Nacelle was developed in accordance with the Politique d’integration des arts a l’architecture, commonly known as “1% for art”. This program ensures the integration of public art in government funded buildings. Blanchette worked very closely with the architects to design the work to suit the space. This effort is evident in the way the artwork is integrated into the architecture *Nacelle* hovers between sculpture, architecture, and ornamentation, defying categorization — an example of the unique opportunity that creating a public artwork can present.

To continue this tour, click on *Lierre sur pierre* by Geneviève Cadieux.