

Chicago Artists Coalition (CAC) is a non-profit organization that supports contemporary Chicago artists and curators by offering residency programs, exhibitions, professional development and resources that enable them to live, work and thrive in the city. CAC is deeply committed to advancing the cause of art and its importance to Chicago's culture and economy by cultivating a wide-reaching civic, philanthropic and public support network.

[chicagoartistscoalition.org](http://chicagoartistscoalition.org)

### Sauver les meubles

In French, *Sauver les meubles* refers to the act of preserving the most important things after a disaster or a difficult time, like saving the furniture from a burning house. French-Canadian artist, Benjamin Larose presents a new body of sculpture work that situates us in the intimacy of the bedroom, a transformative space where difference is depicted as epic and triumphant.

### Artist Bio

Benjamin Larose is a French-Canadian artist born and raised in Montreal, Canada. In 2016, he completed the Master of Design in Fashion, Body and Garment at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he studied under the direction of artist Nick Cave. Upon the completion of his studies, Larose was awarded the distinguished RumChata Foundation Fellowship. He currently teaches in the Contemporary Practices and Fashion departments at SAIC.

### Curator Bio

Anastasia Karpova Tinari is Director of Rhona Hoffman Gallery, has curated exhibitions at ACRE and Goldfinch, Chicago, and writes for Newcity and The Seen. In 2017, she founded Anastasia Tinari Projects, a roaming art gallery that presents exhibitions by emerging and mid-career artists. Previously, Anastasia was a Curatorial Fellow at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Coordinator for UIC's Museum and Education Studies program, and worked at the National Gallery of Art, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy.

### Exhibition Dates

Vernissage: September 27, 6 - 9 pm

General: September 28 + 29, 11 am - 7 pm | September 30, 11 am - 6 pm

### Artist Talk

Sunday, September 30, 2:30 - 3:00 pm at Booth #174

Benjamin Larose in dialogue with Anastasia Karpova Tinari



**EXPO CHICAGO**  
**CHICAGO ARTISTS COALITION**  
**BOOTH #174**



*Sauver les meubles*

*Benjamin Larose*

CAC's mission and programs are funded by the Alphawood Foundation; Art Works Fund; Chicago Community Trust; City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events; Coleman Foundation; Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation; Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation; Illinois Arts Council; Jessica and Timothy Canning Charitable Fund; The Joyce Foundation; John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; National Endowment for the Arts; Prince Charitable Trusts; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; and the generosity of members and supporters.

Benjamin Larose's studio is organized chaos: a bacchanalia of snow globes, Furbies, 3D Puzzles, N\*Sync dolls, toy trucks, pirate ships, Ken dolls, and dollhouse furniture, meticulously organized, color-coded, and filed, awaiting the artist's hand. Larose collects materials from thrift stores, antique malls, and eBay, putting together a palette that reflects a culture of commercial overconsumption. Each object that has made its way to the studio was previously fetishized, hoarded, loved, and discarded. Larose "rescues" these once-revered items and arranges them into large-scale assemblages, indulging in the visual pleasure by celebrating and transforming discarded fragments into epic sculpture.

**Anastasia Karpova Tinari:** The French phrase *Sauver les meubles*, which translates to "save the furniture," refers to preserving the most important things when disaster strikes. In *Swell*, the focal piece of your exhibition, 1950's and 60's miniature dollhouse furniture float in an enormous wave of thousands of puzzle pieces, which culminates in a child's blue headboard embedded with two clashing Titanic puzzles.

**Benjamin Larose:** The Titanic puzzles, as well as the space shuttle puzzle included in this exhibition, depict powerful vessels thrusting forward in all their glory. Even though they belong to different eras, ocean liners and space shuttles generally evoke the same ideas: conquest, performance, technological advancement. In the context of this show though and mainly by juxtaposition, these very same images start to manifest a different sensibility; they become a display of masculinity, romance and a certain eroticism.

More specifically, the Titanic is remembered for its tragic fate, its decadent opulence and its extreme inequality. As James Cameron puts it, the story of the Titanic is a parable of arrogance and hubris, and I personally think of the Edwardian era as a sort of masturbatory point in history; a time when there was such shameless consumption, momentum and power that we failed massively.

The work "*DANGER: This structure is declared unsafe for human occupancy or use*" is directly inspired by another specific moment, this one in my personal history. When I felt my childhood end, I "saved the furniture" and found refuge in an imaginary world, which is what *Swell* represents. The Titanic narrative became a lens through which I could understand my own personal struggle.

**AKT:** Your work is very personal, yet your materials are universal. The Titanic, Céline Dion, Disney movies, and in this exhibition - a NASA space shuttle launch, a dollhouse, Rugrats and Beethoven sleeping bags, and that blue headboard all bring about very nostalgic connotations for a child of the 90's.

**BL:** It is really important for me that my work be accessible. I want everyone to get something from one of my pieces: an aesthetic experience, exploration of material culture, a narrative or perhaps even a call to action. I use common objects in my work because they are easily recognizable but also because they come with a history and meaning attached. The repetition of a given object acts like a magnifying glass to reveal meaning imbedded in that object.

**AKT:** You used puzzles in your Spring 2018 Chicago Artists Coalition exhibition *Dot your i's with Hearts*. Why has this medium proven so fruitful in your studio?

**BL:** In Winter 2016, I came across a 90's Wrebbit 3D puzzle in a thrift store, and I felt I should pick it up because I saw some potential in the material. 3D puzzles were a total fad and that excited me even more. I began collecting puzzles and worked on them through most of my BOLT Residency at CAC. When visitors came into my studio, within minutes of seeing these puzzles, they brought up relationships, especially family relationships.

Puzzles revealed themselves to be a good way for me to speak about family; the very process of making puzzles also started to echo what it feels like to deal with family. The constant negotiation, the struggle to find your place, to make it all fit and stay together. Like a puzzle contained safely in its box, a family can be picture perfect on the outside but messy and fragmented on the inside.

**AKT:** So thrifting and collecting materials, then physically working with them in the studio leads you to unpack these multiple meanings and associations.

**BL:** Exactly. Thrifting and collecting is a form of research for me, and the meaning of an object is something I uncover through the process of making. I systematically acquire multiples of any object I collect and then immerse myself in a deep relationship with those things. To fully investigate and understand the meaning of puzzles, I had to gather millions of puzzle pieces and spend over a year putting them together. I often tell my students that bridging the intimately personal and the universal is one of the artist's biggest challenges. The way I negotiate that is by collecting familiar objects, magnifying their meaning, both personal and universal, and then putting them through a variety of manipulations: assemblage, deconstruction, juxtaposition, repetition, etc., to create epic pieces.

**AKT:** When I think of other artists who create impressive amalgamations from everyday objects, for instance Ai Weiwei or Brian Jungen, your work stands out as distinctly playful or fantastical. The consumer objects you

select relate to childhood compulsion and attachment to things. Tell me more about your relationship to collecting materials and consumer culture.

**BL:** The word "celebration" is very important to me. I am generally not interested in making work that is flat out critical or purely rooted in activism. I am an artist with a social conscience, and my work deals with a variety of issues. But it is also my responsibility to offer the viewer an elevating, inspiring and uplifting experience. To transport the viewer. One of the goals I set is to encourage viewers to cultivate their inner child: to rediscover a sense of whimsy and to marvel at the world I create for them. I seduce the viewer into that world using strategies like epicness, humour, fantasy, nostalgia, playfulness.

On the specific subject of consumption and material culture, I have to admit that I always entertained a pretty intense relationship to things. I grew up collecting all sorts of things, and I always kept them neatly organized in my bedroom, like in my studio. Through adolescence, as I struggled to come to terms with my sexuality, my relationship to objects intensified. Unlike my relationships to people, my relationship to things brought me a sense of comfort and security.

There is such an abundance of stuff out there that, as an object maker, I am committed to using already existing objects as my primary material. I prefer to transform what's already out there instead of creating something completely new and adding to the ever growing pile of stuff humans produce and discard. This is partly why I am based in Chicago. If you've ever lived in an old apartment where the floors are sinking in, you know that if you dropped a marble on the floor, it would roll to the center of the apartment. Well, the Midwest is the equivalent. It's the center of the country, the place where all this stuff seems to pool.

**AKT:** By nature your geographical area reflected in your work, through the second-hand objects available there. These sleeping bags, puzzles, and the dollhouse have outlived their use-life; yet they were so treasured by their previous owners that they need to believe someone will find monetary value in their possessions.

Let's talk a little about "*DANGER: This structure is declared unsafe for human occupancy or use*." Unlike the explosion of color and amalgamation of materials in *Swell* and *Bundles*, the dollhouse is a found object that has been deconstructed. It is also to me the most intimate and tender. An object to be treasured and loved, this dollhouse is in shambles, and the concrete foundation lies in pieces underneath.

**BL:** My Chicago Artists Coalition exhibition *Dot your i's with Hearts* was conceptually rooted in a narrative about boys being in love with other boys, and it begged the questions: How do we raise our boys? Is there room for romance and sentimentality? With *Sauver les meubles*, I am shifting from a conversation about sentimentality to a conversation about the discovery of one's sexuality, in the most intimate space of the bedroom.

I knew right from the start that I wanted to use the dollhouse. I attempted various manipulations until it dawned on me that it had to be destroyed. What better way to evoke a childhood that ended prematurely? I also wanted the piece to break visually from the other two works in the exhibition, that it *not* be an explosion of color. The absence of color reinforces the idea that this childhood had to be vacated, abandoned.

**AKT:** As you worked on this exhibition, the pieces shifted, but you were always clear that the location was the bedroom and the framework was masturbation. Vito Acconci's seminal performance Seedbed forced gallery visitors into intimate engagement with the artist; Frances Stark's *My Best Thing* related studio practice to a masturbatory act; there was even a recent group exhibition *Solitary Pleasures* in London around the topic of masturbation. What drew you to explore this subject?

**BL:** At some point during childhood, you find out how babies are made. Whether it is through a birds & bees animated video, a book or a conversation with a parent, the story is always the same: a mom and a dad make love, a sperm breaks through to the ovum, and nine months later a baby is born. When I started planning this exhibition, I realized no one talks candidly to boys about masturbation. It's a blind spot in our boys' upbringing. We have heard an urgent call to speak about sexual assault and sexual harassment: the #metoo movement being a prime example. But, if we want to affect a change in behavior among grown men, shouldn't we be talking to boys? Shouldn't we talk about the responsibility that comes with the pursuit of pleasure? There is already such anxiety and shame associated with discovering your sexuality, shouldn't we break that silence too?

I definitely wanted to speak of desire and intimacy, but I did not want the reference to masturbation or sexuality to be too explicit or overt. That is why *Sauver les meubles* takes viewers into the bedroom, one's most intimate space. Masturbation is an act that is generally done privately and, during adolescence especially, something that you keep hidden and secret. I wanted to convey that sense of secrecy in the work. The sleeping bags and the taught laces in *Bundles* shield the climax, that ultimate moment of vulnerability. There is a naïveté and a vulnerability to this piece that contrasts with the repression and the secrecy, and I find that quite compelling. That piece is an instigator in this whole exhibition. It's that repressed desire that causes the house to get crushed and creates this need for escape.

\*Cover: Benjamin Larose, *Bundles*, 2018. Detail view. Photo: James Prinz