

Look,  a big purple *rectangle!*

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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

August 14, 2009

Pulp fiction in Contemporary Canadian Art

By Sarah Milroy

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Don't be fooled by the sweetness and light. A new exhibition of 14 emerging and just-emerged artists at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art includes works that are fun but merely fanciful alongside others that deftly question the corporate machine

For the past decade or so, there's been more and more art out there that looks like the funny pages. I'm not talking about an update of the sixties pop art of Roy Lichtenstein, his tearful co-eds swooning beneath banner exclamations ("Oh Jeff... I love you too... but..."); or clones of contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, whose terminally cute, perky toadstools and smiley-faced daisy people express a forced gaiety verging almost on menace. I'm talking about an emerging genre of art one could describe as faux naive, generated by urban bohemians adrift in late capitalism, mindful of the dwindling opportunities afforded by an economy in a downward slide. Alienated from capitalist greed and conformity, they're still connected enough to the mainstream to throw popcorn from the sidelines.

The DNA for this tradition lies in the dissident late-sixties figurative paintings of Philip Guston (with his goonish Klansmen and whiskery, cycloptic vagabonds) and the satirical cartoon strips of R. Crumb, with contributing streams from such pop-cultural influences as SpongeBob SquarePants, *South Park* and the forlornly endearing illustrations of *Ant & Bee*.

In Canada, the most conspicuous florescence of this cartooning phenomenon occurred in the 1990s in Winnipeg, with the emergence of the Royal Art Lodge and its denizens - among them, Marcel Dzama, Neil Farber, Michael Dumontier, Drue Langlois and Jonathan Pylypchuk - all of whom have gone on to rising careers in the United States and Europe. Their appeal lies in their underdog sensibility, tinged with comedy, pathos and the odd dash of depravity. For cartoon art, Winnipeg has been the place to be.

With the exhibition Pulp Fiction at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art this summer, the rest of Canada is finally getting its fair shake. A roundup of 14 emerging and just-emerged artists, the show was organized by MoCCA curator Corinna Ghaznavi. It centres on the work of a group of artists, several of whom are graduates of H.B. Beal Secondary School, an arts high school in London, Ont., that has long been a hatchery of artistic talent, with its own distinguished legacy. (You can see evidence of that legacy here. The late London artist Greg Curnoe was a Beal grad, for example, and his ghost shows up in this exhibition in a found-wood assemblage by James Kirkpatrick, a young artist influenced by mid-career Beal grads Jason McLean, Peter Thompson and Marc Bell, also represented in this show.)

The exhibition has a lot of energy, but walking through it, you come across a number of works that - while charming and fun - seem too light to really hold up in the context of an art exhibition. Thompson's works on paper are colourful and comic, with an alternative vibe, but they don't transmit a distinctive visual personality. Jennie O'Keefe's row of dolls

are endearingly odd (a penguin in a Hudson's Bay jacket, a seal in a yellow rain slicker) but that's as far as it goes. And Vancouver artist Amy Lockhart's 2006 animated film, *Walk for Walk* - about (among other things) a love affair between a Fudgsicle and a strawberry ice-cream cone - could not possibly be more adorable. Fanciful, however, is not enough.

Where things get interesting is where you find traces of the world as you know it, filtered through a distinct artistic sensibility that makes the familiar strange. Marc Bell's mixed-media work *Tim Ho-Ton* ("over five locations worldwide") does just that, imagining a robotic coffee-dispensing creature dripping java. In this send-up of the restaurant chain most associated with the Canadian heartland, Bell, who currently lives in Montreal, conjures a kind of two-legged anti-corporation. The inscription "Roll Up" rings a bell (an abbreviation of Tim Hortons' slogan "Roll up the rim to win"), but it also suggests the comforts of cannabis and an alternative world miles from the squeaky-clean hairnets-and-Wallabees ethos of the coffee-shop chain. He's off the grid.

The high point of the exhibition, though, is the new work in progress by Seth Scriver and Shayne Ehman, a 40-minute DVD titled *Asphalt Watches*. The film offers a hilarious visual account of the pair's Toronto-bound hitchhiking trip from Vancouver, animated in a funky, homespun, *South Park* visual vernacular. At the centre of the action are two protagonists: a soggy snowman with collapsed umbrella and a bushwhacked drifter type in a threadbare baseball cap. They make their way through a quintessentially Canadian landscape ("Welcome to Chilliwack, Home of Chilliwack"), meeting some distinctively Canuck characters along the way: a harmonica-playing hobo, a twitchy-eyed psychotic ex-Santa, a hoodie-clad party dude (complete with Gustonesque facial stubble and a nose like a smoking gun), numerous flying hamburgers (icons of the life of the road) - all set in a landscape of endless highways, mountains and tar sands. (Once they make it to Alberta, giant drinking straws dot the horizon, dripping crude oil. Prosperity is glimpsed ironically, and from afar.)

What lifts this work above the norm, though, is its underlying critique of materialism. In one scene, the two hitchhikers ask to be dropped at a recycling depot, where they dine on tinned kippers beside a bear-proof dumpster. With every bite, they raise a toast "to the chef." In a flight of fancy, Scriver and Ehman take us to the Kursen Kippers factory, where a worker (a kindly dog with long, floppy ears) labours alone in a sterile room with barred windows. Our two heroes, miniaturized, hover in the window, raising another toast. "Hey, thanks guys," he replies. "I never really thought of myself as a chef."

It's a little pit stop in Marxist political thought, a mini-essay on alienated labour, with the hitchhikers and the factory worker communing in solidarity beneath the radar of the corporate machine. The current version of this DVD gets these characters only 696 kilometres east of Vancouver, but conceptually, this trip is a wrap.

Pulp Fiction continues at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 952 Queen St. W., Toronto, until Aug. 23. For more information, call (416) 395-0067.

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