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Sparkling, kinetic surprises at the reopened Power Plant

R.M. VAUGHAN

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Thomas Hirschhorn and *To What Earth Does This Sweet Cold Belong?* at the Power Plant *Until May 29, 231 Queens Quay W., Toronto; www.thepowerplant.org*

Toronto's Power Plant has reopened with a snazzy upgrade to its lobby. Upgrades are always tricky and, to my eyes, the new design would have benefited from a bit less glass and steel in the immediate front. The portal/shield feels more like a bank security gate than a welcoming door.

But once one is inside the new lobby, the redesign makes more sense. The former cubbyhole foyer has been replaced with a spacious, bright and informative (via flat screens) reception area, complete with a generous amount of "gift shop" space to browse the Power Plant's many publications and affordable artist's multiples. Overall, a good job.

The reopening shows are another matter. On your way up the stairs to the North Gallery to see the excellent group show *To What Earth Does This Sweet Cold Belong?*, you will be tempted to wander into Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn's colossal red herring *Das Auge* (*The Eye*). Don't.

Unless, like me, you find it perversely heartening to learn that European art stars are as capable of making juvenile, overly didactic messes as the rest of us, there is nothing (and way too much) to see here.

Besides, Canada's own Istvan Kantor has been making this sort of gritty, bloodied agitprop stunt art (and is far, far better at it) for over 25 years. So, I'm not certain who Hirschhorn's flimsy, overdetermined "the world is crap" message is meant to impress or inform. Sullen, 15-year-old emo boys? As they say in theatre, when it comes to Hirschhorn, you never get the time back.

The real opening show is Power Plant assistant curator Jon Davies's smart, informative and calmly lovely *To What Earth Does This Sweet Cold Belong?* - a collection of works by emerging artists who have chosen to examine the perennial, evergreen subjects of landscape as metaphor, nature versus artifice, and the problematic romances we inflict on the non-human world. Despite its rather solemn presentation - the North Gallery has been painted a flat, bald-tire grey, and the spare layout of the show emphasizes a counterintuitive sparseness (nature is never this tidy) - *To What Earth ...* is full of sparkling, kinetic surprises.

I enjoyed all of the work in this five-artist collection, but two works stood out from the small crowd.

First, Andrea Carlson's vivid, large-scale works on paper; bold, weird multimedia assemblages wherein the artist frames intentionally stilted, paint-by-numbers-like images of frozen tundra and ice-covered mountain ranges with (again, intentionally) clumsy, black and white Op-Art bars, rectangles and cross-hatching. Watching these two familiar art genres collide is somewhat unnerving, as the conflation creates a visual version of a momentary dissociative break from reality.

Nothing in Carlson's murals can be read as a realistic portrayal/recreation, not of nature itself nor of mid-century modernist abstraction, but only as scrappy replications of well-worn forms (vernacular, populist "hobby painter" nature art and 1960-70s Op-Art), forms that both thrived in the previous century. Thus, it would not be a stretch to describe the murals as noisy memento mori - not for lost natural wonders, but rather for a more innocent period in art history, a time when the conceit that nature, and/or the mathematical precision of optics, could be reliably recreated reigned unquestioned.

Jennifer Rose Sciarrino's sculpture series, *Proposal for a Mountain 1-3* and *Mineral Specimens 12-23* mine (pardon the pun) similar real-unreal territories.

The *Proposal* series is a set of delightful miniature mountains, each made from carefully and obsessively layered, finely cut sheets of paper. My inner geek (okay, outer) was entranced by Sciarrino's perfectionist modelling, and the dialogue the mini-Everests create around natural versus manufactured environments. Let's face it, some mountains are ugly and could use a bit of help. Sciarrino makes peaks with more spiralling, cake-icing minarets than any Disney castle.

Sciarrino's *Mineral Specimens* are tiny replicas of semi-precious stones (the pointy, crystalline kind sold in New Age stores), made - or should I say faked? - with resin, apoxie sculpt, plaster and acrylic paint. Again, the artist asks us which is better - unpredictable nature or a copy thereof, a mimic we can not only more easily manage but also design to our liking?

Eco-purists would argue that this is not even a question, that of course nature, the organic, is always supreme, but I've never been one to fetishize the (allegedly) real over the organic. It's all on a continuum of cultural production, because even when we are faced with unadorned nature, lost in the woods, we are still reading our environment through the filters created by our own particular acculturation and tastes.

My only problem with *To What Earth ...* is that it is not the opening number for the Power Plant's revival. I guess European junk, no matter how unworthy, still trumps local art in our supposedly postcolonial culture.

Paul Jackson, Maggie Curtis and Xan Hawes at G Gallery Until April 9, 234 Queen St. E., Toronto;
www.sidecentre.com

Tiny G Gallery is hosting two perfect, unassuming shows that ask only to be liked. And like them I did.

Paul Jackson's *In This Desert* is a quiet but resonant observation/meditation on the strangeness of the American Southwest. Monster trucks and mystical "shoe trees" - the right/left pull of U.S. culture - are given equal space, and weight.

In the back gallery, Maggie Curtis and Xan Hawes offer a trio of misshapen cardboard periscopes. You are encouraged to pick them up and revel in the lopsided disorientation the toys provoke. Don't worry, it's only art.

-Vaughan, R. M. "Sparkling, kinetic surprises at the reopened Power Plant," *Globe & Mail*, April 1, 2011