

» TORONTO STAR «

“trans/FORM” at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art: Review

How long have I been harping about the dearth of substantial museum shows representing the dynamic hodgepodge of local artistic production? Long enough, it would appear, at least to judge by “trans/FORM,” the brand-new exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art.



At MOCCA's new show "trans/FORM," Jaime Angelopoulos's bright pink sculpture "Unconditional Love" sits next to Derrick Pien's "Still Silent," a skewered wooden hulk. The show is focused on the use of common materials in art made by a group of eight young Toronto artists.

By: Murray Whyte Visual arts, Published on Tue Jul 03 2012

How long have I been harping about the dearth of substantial museum shows representing the dynamic hodgepodge of local artistic production? Long enough, it would appear, at least to judge by “trans/FORM,” the brand-new exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art.

Director and curator David Liss groups together eight Toronto artists — the oldest among them 34, for heaven's sake — for a tightly-focused, thoroughly engaging show that's among the best in MOCCA's seven-year history on Queen Street. There's no accounting for taste, and Liss's conceit of identifying a loose movement among young artists here to embrace workaday materials and cast-offs as the raw material of art-making is bang-on with my own.

Echoes of the 20th century's great "isms" abound: Georgia Dickie's playful ingenuity with material and proportion — an iron rod lies propped by a tangle of chain link, a perforated brass cylinder dangling from the end; a rusted iron hoop balances precariously on a ridged plinth of wood that surely served some useful light-industrial purpose at some point — gathers up the best impulses of Minimalism and Dadaism. Prosaic materials? Check. Readymade objects? Check. But here's the best part: Dickie's conceptual borrowings are overshadowed by an innate gift for composition that's entirely her own.

"trans/FORM," to give the necessary explainer, is Liss's way of putting a set of semi-like practices under a unifying rubric — that's what curators do — and while group shows typically end up stretched thin to find a fit, this one's loose and relaxed in its easy associations. Maybe it's something in the water: With the exception of one, Sasha Pierce, who's a short shot down Lansdowne Avenue in Parkdale, every artist here works out of studios on the west end's patchwork Sterling Road near the Nestle chocolate factory.

Nestle is its last semi-industrial resident. Sterling is in a pregnant state of becoming: Rubblefields where old factories once stood bear now-familiar development applications for mixed-use "communities;" a 10-storey art-deco heap of a building that was once the headquarters of the Northern Aluminum Company awaits its makeover into loft-style condos, its historical designation protecting it from the wrecking ball.

All around, mid-century brick boxes house "trans/FORM" artists like Dickie, Hugh Scott-Douglas, Niall McClelland, Jaime Angelopoulos, Aleksander Hardashnakov, Derrick Piens and Jennifer Rose Sciarrino. Here, "trans/FORM" takes on its intentional double-entendre: using everyday stuff for art is one thing, but in the midst of an urban wasteland seized by a fast-forward gentrification process, the term takes on broader meaning. Work like Dickie's in particular becomes vaguely archaeological, as the decks are cleared to make way for the new. Whether she means to or not, Dickie's salvaged materials are as much monument to a city soon to be no more as they are personal material explorations.

"trans/FORM" is a snapshot of both a city and its cultural production; it captures a moment in real time. This kind of pulse-taking is exactly the kind of thing this city needs more of in its art scene. These are fragile ecosystems, sustained by interaction, exchange and a market dynamic that seems to finally be finding its feet. Scott-Douglas in particular emerges from the pack here; still in his early 20s, he seems forever on a place from one place to another, his work in high demand in centres like New York and Los Angeles.

Inventively cheeky with his appropriative techniques, Scott-Douglas is self-consciously unprecious. His works here, amorphous wisps of blue screened onto thin aluminum panels are made by a commercial sign manufacturer, underscoring with a knowing wink both Liss's thesis of prosaic production, and the arbitrary value system art imposes. But he takes it one step too far: Bolting the works self-consciously to the wall and affixing a chain and padlock, Scott-Douglas does less to steer art-making into the workaday than to comment on his own growing stardom: Steal these paintings, it seems to say. I dare you.

Similarly hot properties can be found here in Niall McClelland and Aleksander Hardashnakov, Scott-Douglas's partner in the Tomorrow Gallery, an ad hoc space on Sterling. Like Dickie, Hardashnakov's paintings are rooted in pre-conceptual practices. His abstractions are Rothko-esque, but with a twist, using a combination of gesso and — in line with theme — unconventional colourizers like concrete dye.

McClelland's signature pieces are his tapestries: Large sheafs of paper layered thick with black toner from multiple photocopying. McClelland used to fold them up tight and stick them in his pocket for days or weeks, letting the toner fade on the fold lines, revealing the flaws in the humble low-fi technology while embracing old conceptual ideas of process-based art-making, where a final piece was ultimately a reflection of everyday activity.

As McClelland's reputation grew, so did the tapestries, and the three huge ones here may not have spent any time in his pocket, but their austere beauty engulfs nonetheless. Installing them here alongside

Angelopoulos's tactile, ridiculously engaging pink anemone-like sculpture *Stand Up For Yourself* and Pien's *Still Silent*, a roughly-made wooden husk skewered by a thick orange column, Liss's point is nicely made: Transformation can be achieved by gestures both aggressive and subtle, and in the right hands, the effect is undiminished.

Speaking of hands, on a facing wall, Pierce's dizzying canvases await. Even on close inspection, their geometric abstraction appears to be the product of dense thread-weaving. It's not. Using a fine spout like a cake decorator, Pierce exactly dabs razor-thin lines of oil paint to make her works. These are intensely hand-made things, taking months at a time to construct even 8-inch by 12-inch works. How this fits the greater theme I'm not entirely sure – Pierce's work was more at home, maybe, at the recent "60 Painters" exhibition — but it's one of the most inventive takes on painting I've seen.

Rounding the final corner of "trans/FORM," a row of concrete supports in a progressive state of reclining are arrayed in front of four corrugated panels with varying sheens. I felt for a moment I'd stepped through a wormhole and into 1964 New York, into the John Daniels Gallery, where Dan Graham put on shows by seminal minimalists like Dan Flavin, Sol Lewitt and Donald Judd. So workaday were most installations, as per the Minimalist edict, their parts were returned to the hardware store after the show ended.

This deliberate echo is the work of Sciarrino, and the subtle quotation is the root of her work here, but only its beginning. The apparent supports are carefully-cast cement sculpture; the panels are off-the-shelf fibreglass roofing, but scraped and scored by the points of a variety of base metals — gold, platinum, copper — engraving their humble synthetic surface with the elemental. Sciarrino's subtle subversion of value — by any reasonable measure, art's pretty worthless, and that's exactly why we value it so much — is as old as the hills, or at least conceptualism. But as she and her "trans/FORM" cohort make so engagingly clear, its inexhaustible ideas are always ripe for renewal.

"trans/FORM" continues at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art to August 12.

-Whyte, Murray. "trans/FORM" at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art: Review," *Toronto Star*, July 3, 2012.