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Everywhere and anywhere, Douglas Coupland takes over Toronto



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Is there a better-known, bigger, more zeitgeisty guy in contemporary Canadian art than Douglas Coupland, OC, OBC? I won't even bother suggesting the names of possible contenders because the answer is . . . no. It's a Coupland Coupland Coupland Coupland World, more omnipresent now than ever. And, really, wasn't the fix in at that moment in 2000 when the then-38-year-old Vancouverite decided to return in earnest to the design- and art-making activities for which he'd been trained at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in the early 1980s?

Coupland already had colonized the culture, Canadian and otherwise, in the 1990s via books such as *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, *Polaroids from the Dead* and *Shampoo Planet* – books that, for all their mixed critical reception, popularized a plethora of pitch-perfect, pop-sage terms that seemed to encapsulate the current condition. “McJobs.” “Veal-fattening pens.” “Air family.” “Generation Y.” “Microserfs.” “Obscurism.”

Today, his return to art seems at once inevitable and so *fin-de-siècle* savvy. As Meeka Walsh, the astute editor of *Border Crossings*, recently mentioned to me: “[Coupland] switched from text to visual art just at the same time that people seemed to be looking more and reading

less." While Coupland often is touted as a futurist of sorts, mapping the contours of Tomorrowland, Walsh, by contrast, doesn't think "he speaks so much about the future as the present. He does just such a perfect assessment of where we are at the moment, whatever the moment is."

Nowhere is Coupland's domination more evident than in Toronto. This weekend is the launch of a retrospective of his multi-themed/multi-platformed art-making, spread between two prominent cultural institutions – the Royal Ontario Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art. Scheduled to run for almost three months, Douglas Coupland: everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything is a slightly smaller version of the three-month showcase of the same name that the Vancouver Art Gallery unveiled last year. That event drew 80,000 visitors and produced an astonishing hardcover catalogue with contributions from, among others, three-time Pulitzer Prize nominee James Gleick, ex-REM singer Michael Stipe, authors Pico Iyer and William Gibson, and the influential curator/gallery co-director Hans Ulrich Obrist. Recently profiled in *The New Yorker*, Obrist for the last decade has consistently ranked in the top 10 of ArtReview's annual Most Important Persons in the International Art World.

As an appetizer of sorts for the Toronto gig, Coupland a few weeks ago installed seven tableaux in the display windows of Holt Renfrew's flagship store on Bloor Street's "Mink Mile." Up through Feb. 10, each tableau is simplicity itself: one, sometimes two mannequins in designer garb positioned against a grid of Coupland-designed rectangles, the window affixed with a blistered colour posters bearing the artist's "slogans for the 21st century": "I miss my pre-Internet brain;" "Pluto was my favourite planet;" "Remember nothing you don't have to."

A block to the west, in the main window of the recently opened Holt Renfrew Men, you'll find *Gumhead*, a black, two-metre-high sculpture of Coupland's head made of resin, polyester and steel. Looking like a remnant from the V.I. Lenin Museum in Minsk, it's the same "social sculpture" Coupland erected outside the VAG last year to which passersby were invited to stick wads of chewed gum. So far *Gumhead* Toronto is nowhere near the viscous mess/mass Vancouver's became. Still, it's early days – the head's around until Mar. 9 – and Holt's has helpfully installed three bubble-gum dispensers to encourage defacement. Meanwhile, should you be hankering to have your very own Doug, the artist's Toronto gallerist, Daniel Faria, has just mounted an exhibition/sale of new and recent Couplands. The works, divided into three categories – *Deep Face* (obscured photographic portraits), *Trash Vortex* (paint-covered vintage globes) and *The Montecristos* (collages) – are at Faria until Mar. 21. Buy one (why not three?) and you're counting Coups with such collectors as Gerry Schwartz and Heather Reisman, Rosamond Ivey, Sarah Keenlyside, Canadian Tire, RBC and TD Bank Group (the last the main presenter of the ROM/MoCCA retro). And on Wednesday, Google, in association with the VAG, launched a Google Art Project virtual tour of last year's VAG installation plus a display of high-resolution reproductions of 74 artifacts from that show.

Of course, with such great popularity comes great scrutiny. Why Coupland? you may ask. Why, of all the artists, in all the cities, in all of Canada, has this Vancouverite, the third son of a Canadian air force pilot/medical officer and homemaker/McGill religion graduate, become such a phenomenon, a darling of art institutions, collectors and the media? What accounts for his privileged position?

The Globe and Mail recently asked these questions of four art-smart Canucks. Of the four, only one – Robin Laurence, Vancouver art critic and writer – had seen the Coupland retrospective, but no matter. We weren't after an anatomy of everything is anything etc.; we wanted ruminations of the Phenomenon of Douglas Coupland. Besides Meeka Walsh and Laurence, the other contributors are Andrew Kear, curator, historical Canadian art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and John Kissick, painter, writer and director of the School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph. Their comments have been edited and condensed.

Andrew Kear I'm looking forward to seeing the show. Coupland summarizes things nicely. His objects become these really concise propositions. There's not a lot of muddling around or options for you as a viewer. Something like *Secret Handshake* (Coupland's artfully arranged display of Canadiana, from old Saskatchewan licence plates and the purple Crown Royal bag to a transistor radio in the shape of a Kraft Dinner box and goalie masks) – you feel part of a special club; its exclusivity is such that you expect people from other countries won't get it. Yet accessibility is what drives it.

We expect art to draw you in, to be about this metaphorical idea of depth. But it was Andy Warhol who said, "No, no, the challenge is to be as surface as possible." It's about trying *not* to make things look too metaphorical or poetic. It's about using the every day and not mining some mysterious or mystical or unknown kind of thing.

I haven't seen *Gumhead* but I think it's pretty great. It's great not only because it's interactive, it's like this Socialist Realist riff. Also, [as Coupland is gay], it references what General Idea did [in 1989] with that big AIDS sculpture outdoors at the Art Gallery of Ontario, which was made to be defaced and which itself was a riff on Robert Indiana's famous LOVE image from the mid-1960s. Then there are Coupland's digital manipulations of Group of Seven paintings and the Sampson-Matthews screenprints – they're riffs off Michael Snow's *Plus Tard* series from the late-1970s when Snow went to the National Gallery and did these long-exposure photographs of Group masterworks, then moved the camera ever-so slightly.

[Coupland's international appeal] seems a bit "loud" to me. And he always seems to have had that. There was never any Early Coupland Period except perhaps when he was in art school. I guess part of it can be explained by the fact he was kind of a big name in literature first. I don't want to be one of those visual arts purists who resents it when someone else from another discipline comes in and tries something, [although] there is a bit of that. More than any other fine art – architecture, theatre, music even – the visual arts are where you can do it with abandon. The parameters of what constitutes visual art, what enables you to get a show at VAG or ROM – they're pretty permeable, pretty broad. Visual arts in the 20th century broke down the barrier between fine arts and everyday life more insistently than other art form.

Meeka Walsh We're so involved with consumerism and display culture, and Coupland presents his work so thoroughly well in that regard. The ready response to his images has to be, in part, because the materials he uses and the images he draws on have such firmly placed recognition. You don't have to explain what Lego is or, thanks to Roy Lichtenstein, what the Ben-Day dot technique is. He's giving us back, really, what we're already seeing. He's a kind of mirror, and an affirming one. He's saying what you're looking at is fine, terrific; in fact, it's art. *Gumhead* reminds me of Jeff Koons' *Puppies*. Chewed gum is distasteful; the flowers on a Koons are beautiful. But they're both linked by this notion of covering the surface with another material.

Limitations? I hesitate to say "facile" because clearly he's prodigious. And yet there's this manufactured, uninflected palette, this coolness. And the intention to be so clever makes me uneasy. He shuts me out of the conversation even though I'm saying that one of the reasons for his popularity is the way he appears to be inclusive and generous, and the objects and the materials are easy to recognize. At the same time, he's not letting you anywhere near any kind of passionate source.

Those "pop heads" he's done [a 2010 series of four large black-and-white portraits, their faces defaced with bright acrylic paint] are so tidy. There's no gradation of colour, no splashes, no shadows; there's simply no entrance. He's clever, though. He's there ahead of you in probably acknowledging all of the issues you'd raise, all the criticisms you might level. That fleetness of foot makes for someone who doesn't hold my attention, except to admire his productivity.

John Kissick Coupland is a bit slippery to get a handle on. One thing that really strikes me, though, in looking at his work is that he is a man of his age and seems to be speaking from and through that context – meaning he really feels like a guy born in 1961. And I should know, as I was born in 1962. His use of Lego, quoting from pop, being enamoured of the visual look of technologies – his use of QR digital bar codes as the basis for abstract paintings, for example,

are in many ways a rehash of the look and thinking of the 1980s and people like Peter Halley. They all feel not so much nostalgic as the work of a middle-aged guy in thrall to investing everything according to the pervasive logic of "Wow, technology really is changing everything." Most the the critical inputs are pretty obvious, even populist at heart: I can't count how many times I've seen university undergrads "grain-out" images of 9/11 scenes, let alone do Lego sculpture and pop versions of Group of Seven paintings. This stuff is neither original nor particularly incisive from a contemporary art point of view.

Robin Laurence [Are Coupland's fascination with technology and displaying what he collects decidedly "guy-ish" and does his art as a consequence have greater appeal to men?] I don't see Douglas Coupland's art as gendered, have never read his many aspirations and accomplishments as masculine rather than feminine. My understanding is that he's always been a multi-disciplinarian – artist, writer and designer – even from childhood. What is most notable for me is that he is a keen observer of the present day, one of our leading social commentators. He has pop art's alertness to everyday items of consumerism, to the forms and idioms of media culture.

While extreme collecting both informs and forms his visual art, I don't construe that as a guy thing. I think it's an anxiety thing, mirroring the wider social conditions of commercialization and over-consumption, the conditions that are destroying our planet.

Douglas Coupland: everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything *is at the Royal Ontario Museum (Jan. 31-Apr. 26) and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Jan. 31-Apr. 19), Toronto. Details at www.couplandto.ca.*

-Adams, James. "Everywhere and anywhere, Douglas Coupland takes over Toronto", Globe and Mail, January 30, 2015.