

MACLEAN'S

Douglas Coupland: God of small things

With a new book and his first survey show in the offing, a peek into the author/artist/designer's world



By Ken MacQueen on Thursday, October 10, 2013

We are sitting in a temporary studio space on Vancouver's North Shore looking at a brain. Well, part of a brain; part of Douglas Coupland's very busy brain. Or at least how he imagines it. It would be the part of the brain that collects things, which he does rather compulsively, never quite knowing, sometimes until years later, the utility of, say, the toy soldier, or horseshoe magnet or piece of plastic poo he has gathered.

These thousands of things — part of 165 boxfuls he keeps in storage containers — are arrayed on the studio floor, starting with a row of old Penguin paperbacks by our feet and ending 10 m later with a collection of dartboards on the end wall. It's a brain as represented by a very neat flea market — yard-sale things that fire his synapses, spur his imagination or simply give him pleasure. It's hard to know if it's the part of the Coupland brain that inspired some 23 books, or the part that designs furniture, clothing and outdoor spaces, or the part that fires the visual artist whose works range from whimsical pop to biting social commentary, to the four outsized bronze statues at Vancouver's B.C. Place that magnificently capture the spirit of the late Terry Fox — one of Coupland's heroes.

One assumes this stuff, and much more, nourishes all of Coupland's endeavours — and currently the 51-year-old is on quite a tear. He has just released his 14th novel, *Worst. Person. Ever.* And he is at work on a solo exhibition of his visual work that will take up the entire ground floor of the Vancouver Art Gallery for three months, starting May 31. "The Brain," or at least the sample that is spread here on the floor, is part of his attempt at "assessing the early 21st-century condition," as Daina Augaitis, the museum's chief curator and associate director, puts it. "That's a pretty broad thing," she concedes.

The dismal state of the century looms large in Coupland's very swearsy new book. It is the rudest thing he has published, crude enough to have a warning on the dust jacket: "This novel contains much talk of bodily functions, improbable sexual content, violent death, nuclear crisis and elaborately inventive profanity:

viewer discretion is advised.” Actually, it’s more of a dare than a warning. Coupland himself calls it “a deeply unworthy book about a dreadful human being with absolutely no redeeming value.”

It involves the misdeeds of one Raymond Gunt, a freelance television cameraman living a hard-luck existence in the London suburb of East Acton—a man whose accounts, both financial and karmic, are in desperate arrears. If Gunt has a gift, other than talent for self-sabotage, it’s his ability to string together toxic trainloads of profanity, links of insult so vile that to quote an example here would have you, dear reader, marching on *Maclean’s* headquarters with torch and pitchfork.

Gunt is coerced by his ex-wife, Fiona—a successful casting director and “an atomic bomb of pain,” in one of Gunt’s kinder assessments—into taking a job as a B-unit cameraman for an American network shooting a *Survivor*-style TV series on a South Pacific Island. “I don’t like having you in the same city as me,” she explains. Gunt, having no friends, recruits as an assistant a homeless man, Neal, “a verminous, panhandling dole-rat.” Chaos ensues, for Coupland has chosen two target-rich environments: American culture in general and reality shows in particular. You will look in vain for deep meaning, moralizing or lofty purpose, but there is black humour in abundance. “I think I said somewhere that it not only has no redeeming value, it might actually be bad for you,” he says.

As to why he would write such a book, he blames the angst of the post-9/11, post-recession era. The shelves are overfull of worthy, earnest, seriously correct books. “There’s just such a priggishness out there about everything these days. I’m kind of sick of that. The Americans have turned it into a national art form,” he says. “I just wanted an antidote to the spirit of the age.”

It was great fun to write when the words were flowing, he says. He’d sometimes look up from his labours, amazed at the profanity he’d typed. “Technically I said that,” he says. “But is Agatha Christie an axe murderer? No. Am I Raymond? No. But it’s kind of weird what came out.”

It’s a bit of a paradox: Coupland mercilessly skewers the cynical fakery of the reality show concept in the book while admitting to being a huge fan of *Survivor*. “Oh, the things it reveals about human nature and how incredibly political life is,” he says. “How one micro-political decision can tank everything.”

The book, and to an extent his forthcoming gallery exhibition, reflect concerns about the perceived decay of American society. “[It worked much better when there were a few million of us instead of 350 million,” says Sarah, an American character in the book. “There’s not much left to consume. In 15 years we turn into India. We’re a catastrophe in the making.”

As we’re speaking, the U.S. government is in shutdown due to a Republican-led revolt on health care reforms. It stopped the work and pay of 800,000 public servants, suspended medical research, security and intelligence analysis, and closed national parks and facilities. “I used to think I understood that country,” says Coupland. “Now they’re determined to chop off all their feet and all their hands. Nothing short of total destruction will make them happy.” Is he worried Americans will find the novel offensive? “I don’t have to answer to anybody, so let ’em,” he says. “It’s just a nation of sourpusses,” he says. “Censorious, busybody sourpusses.”

Coupland has never lacked for opinions, but his outlets for expression have expanded to embrace his art school and design roots. He exploded into public consciousness in 1991 as the young hipster who defined a generation with his international bestseller, *Generation X: Tales For an Accelerated Culture*. Some 22 years later, bearded and greying, he more physically resembles a semifinalist in an Ernest Hemingway look-alike contest. He’s shed what he calls his “protective coating of youthful cluelessness.” Simultaneously, he loosened the reins on his manic creativity, allowing it to ride off in all directions. Books, he says, “are just one aspect of my life now.”

It was his visual output that caused the Vancouver Art Gallery to come calling. “He’s been working very prolifically over the last 12 years, I would say, and has produced a huge body of work,” says Augaitis, the curator. “There’s enough work now to assess it, find a narrative through it, and present it to a larger public.” Enough work that it will take some serious culling to squeeze it into the main floor. As for finding a narrative focus, when the exhibition title is *Douglas Coupland: everywhere is anywhere is anything is everything*, well, that will be a challenge.

The work fits into five loose thematic sections. It starts with a reflection on Canada and nationhood. Lego is involved, a favourite of Coupland’s. Back in May he advertised for a “Lego gatherer” to assist in acquiring just the right shape and colour of blocks. He now has 250,000 pieces on order, which, through an interactive public process, will fill a gallery room with 144 free-form towers. “I know what it looks like,” he says with confidence. “I just don’t know what it looks like.”

There’s a section on “words into objects,” which will include wasp nests Coupland crafted by masticating the pages of his own books, and some 100 hand-painted slogans (sample: “Poverty with no Internet would be truly dreadful”). There’s an homage to pop-art heroes like Roy Lichtenstein, then works inspired by politics and the impact of 9/11. It ends with “The Brain.” Says Augaitis: “It will give us some insights into how Doug’s brain functions.”

That remains a work in progress. Coupland points to the left of the studio to a collection of vividly coloured plastic bottles that once held cleaning products. He’d gathered them on a trip to Tokyo in 2000, because that’s what a collector does. Now, look, he says, as he walks to a cardboard box across the room. It’s full of weather-beaten flotsam—debris from the 2011 Japanese tsunami he gathered this summer on the east coast of Haida Gwaii. He grabs a turquoise plastic bottle, dented but otherwise identical to some in his collection. “All of the products I went to Toyko to get have now floated to British Columbia,” he says with a tinge of awe. “It’s candy-coloured and it looks so happy, but it’s all about death and environmental degradation.”

There’s whimsy in all he collects, but often a darker element, too. Plastic waste also bobs to the surface in his latest book, when a rogue element uses a nuclear warhead to bust up the vast real-life mat of floating ocean garbage known as the Pacific Trash Vortex.

And there it is, the artistic brain explained. “If you collect something,” he says, “it will eventually be revealed why.”

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