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Douglas Coupland: Welcome to the 21st Century

Review of a show by Douglas Coupland, who, yes, does art on top of all that other stuff.



Douglas Coupland's painting Arctic Landscape Fuelled by Memory, part of his show "Welcome to the 21st Century."

By: Murray Whyte Visual arts, Published on Fri Jan 27 2012

I had to double check the name of the most striking work at Douglas Coupland's show of new art — *Generation X, Microserfs, Jpod*; yes, *that* Douglas Coupland — at the Daniel Faria Gallery. It's called, as it turns out, *Arctic Landscape Fuelled By Memories*. On first pass, I thought it was called *Arctic Dreams*, hence the double take. To dream, one would have to sleep, and when would Coupland have time for that?

On top of being a bestselling, remarkably prolific author, Coupland designs furniture, writes plays, produces television, performs onstage, pens the more-than-occasional newspaper and magazine column and, last year, added clothing designer to his resumé with a much-hyped collaboration with celebrated Canadiana label Roots.

The confluence of Coupland's constant cultural output is such that, not long before I received notice of Coupland's show (called "Welcome to the 21st Century," an implication, I suppose, that the icebergs that the aforementioned *Arctic Landscape* depicts will soon be little more than the memories it suggests), a slim little book called *Highly Inappropriate Tales for Young People* landed on my desk. On the cover were

drawings by Graham Roumieu (author, most famously, of *Me Write Book: It Bigfoot Memoir*), depicting such things as a weeping child in a bunny costume, a knock-kneed boy in short pants spewing a geyser of vomit and another with soiled trousers of the worst kind.

The wordsmith crafting prose for Roumieu's images? None other than Coupland. Right around the same time, he released another, slightly different book: his personal ruminations on Canadian icon Marshall McLuhan.

How does Coupland separate his ever-broadening creative pursuits? Does it even matter? The last question answers the first: No. Coupland's big splash in the cultural pond was his zeitgeist-defining *Generation X*, a bleakly hilarious paean to the randomly bleak life options ("McJob" is a Coupland-ism) presented to his cohort in the late '80s (he's 50), when industrialization's downward spiral started wiping away any hope of the middle-class aspirations previous generations took to be a given.

Coupland's canny identifications in that novel — that focus, dedication and hard work weren't worth much if there was nothing to apply them to — have been the lifeblood sustaining much of his cultural inquiry ever since, as his playful anxieties have embraced the ensuing massive change as a moving, unknowable and absurdly fascinating target.

Without change there would be nothing to lament, of course, and Coupland has always gamely (and sincerely) played the role of nostalgist, particularly for weirdly mass-culture versions of Canadiana.

"Welcome to the 21st Century" puts these priorities on display in ways both obvious — *Arctic Landscapes*, with its grey-scale colour palette, is a neo-tech tribute to the much-loved iceberg paintings by Group of Seven icon Lawren Harris; *Thomson Pine Experiment* is a hard-edged treatment of Tom Thomson's *Jack Pine* — and not.

The Group of Seven works read both as homage and displacement, an obvious nod to the vast distance the artist, in a high-tech world, feels himself to be from the naturalist painters' woodsy pursuits. Another group of works shows just how far: Coupland has painted great big QR barcodes embedded with anxious aphorisms appropriate to our disjointed times: "You Must Choose Between the Future and Eternity," one parses to, through the lens of my iPhone; and, maybe a little more tellingly, "I Hope Humanity Changes Quickly and That We Become Able to Protect Ourselves From What We Are Now."

Change, and quickly? Into what, who knows, though I can make a pretty fair guess that whatever it might be, it makes its way into the Coupland oeuvre.

Douglas Coupland, *Welcome To The 21st Century*, continues at the Daniel Faria Gallery to April 7, 188 St. Helens Ave.

-Whyte, Murray. "Douglas Coupland: Welcome to the 21st Century," Toronto Star, Friday January 27, 2012