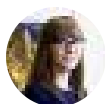


ART

A New Vancouver Triennial Contends with Making Art in a Gentrified City

The ability of the Vancouver Art Gallery to maintain its commitment to local artists will be the true test of the triennial's success.



Erin Langner

March 7, 2017 — 6 min read



Kim Dorland, "Egress" (2016), oil on polyester (courtesy of the artist and Equinox Gallery; photo by Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery)

VANCOUVER — A mass-produced, boxlike house seems like a curious namesake for a museum triennial. But given that it's the reference behind *Vancouver Special: Ambivalent Pleasures*, the title for a survey of 40 local artists that the Vancouver Art Gallery launched this year, I felt compelled to investigate further. Visiting the exhibition from across the border, I was unfamiliar with the term, which describes a style of two-level, single-family residences topped with a low-lying roof and banded by a balcony that stretches straight across the façade like braces — a structure that seemed at first to be too simple to afford a framework for taking the pulse of a city. Vancouver's history of art-making spans the traditions of First Nations peoples who began there thousands of years ago to the photo-conceptualism, defined by artists like Jeff Wall, Ken Lum, and Rodney Graham, that has garnered the art world's attention in more recent years. What could an average-seeming architectural style reveal about contemporary art in Vancouver now?

It turns out the Vancouver Special has its own complicated history, as I learned from a project by Ken Lum concurrently on view through artist-run space 221A. Lum's 1/3-scale recreation of a house sits in a quiet alley in Vancouver's Chinatown, dwarfed by brick commercial buildings on either side. The dollhouse-sized residence is overly picturesque. The smile of its balcony mirrors the friendly white fence that surrounds the Astroturf at its base. A side window reveals a bedroom lit by the warm glow of a miniature lamp with a landscape painting on the wall. Meanwhile, Lum's loaded title introduces the darker reality that lives within this simple façade: "Vancouver Especially (A Vancouver Special scaled to its property value in 1973, then increased by 8 fold)" (2015).

Tamara Henderson's sculpture "The Scarecrow's Holiday" (2015) confronted me with a sense of dystopia the moment I entered *Vancouver Special*. The towering figure of wood, metallic half-moons, textured fabrics, dried palm leaves, and rope appeared like a faceless robot made from scavenged materials. Behind it, a curtain of fabric pieces sewn together into tower-like forms evoked a ravaged skyline. Titled "Dreamstep, Drownedstep, Droughtstep, Fogstep" (2016) and set to an accompanying soundtrack of ominous steps and sounds composed by artist Dan Riley, it felt as if Henderson had set a physical stage for a pending apocalypse — a bold curatorial choice to frame the exhibition that occupies a full floor of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Beginning in such a dark place primed me to find similar themes among the works that followed.

In a show dominated by textiles, paintings, installations, and sculpture, tangibility felt especially urgent, signaling a moment when physical evidence — of objects in the flesh, of promises made good, of ideas turned into actions — is necessary. Maya Beaudry's bulbous blanket sculptures made of bright fabrics and pillow stuffing balloon out from the walls and corners of one gallery, reaching into our physical and emotional space. "Soft Place in a Soft Room (A Couch Is Like a Friend)" (2016) was warm enough to feel inviting yet disheveled in such a way that it appeared left behind. I couldn't decide whether I wanted to curl up inside its blankets or leave them alone in hopes that their owners would be back to claim them someday. Matt Browning's wall-mounted grid sculptures made of dowels the artist whittled from single pieces of wood to create interlocking grid structures adhered to a minimalist aesthetic, but the artist's labor-intensive process is subtly indicated by the dowels' lightly rigid textures: hard evidence of an ideal that resides behind the creation process and takes precedence over producing a flawless result.