

VISUAL ARTS

A blast at our disposable culture



MURRAY WHYTE

An Te Liu steps gingerly around a homely array of mechanical conveniences and distractions — humidifiers, dust-busters, an archaic PlayStation, an Easy-Bake Oven, at least one facial vaporizer — arranged in careful groupings on the gallery floor.

“There are 51 hanging points that need to be precisely located,” he says, turning his gaze to the reinforced plywood ceiling he’s installed at MKG127, where “Blast,” his new installation, opens tonight. A critical squint, then a shrug. “I tend to look up a lot.”

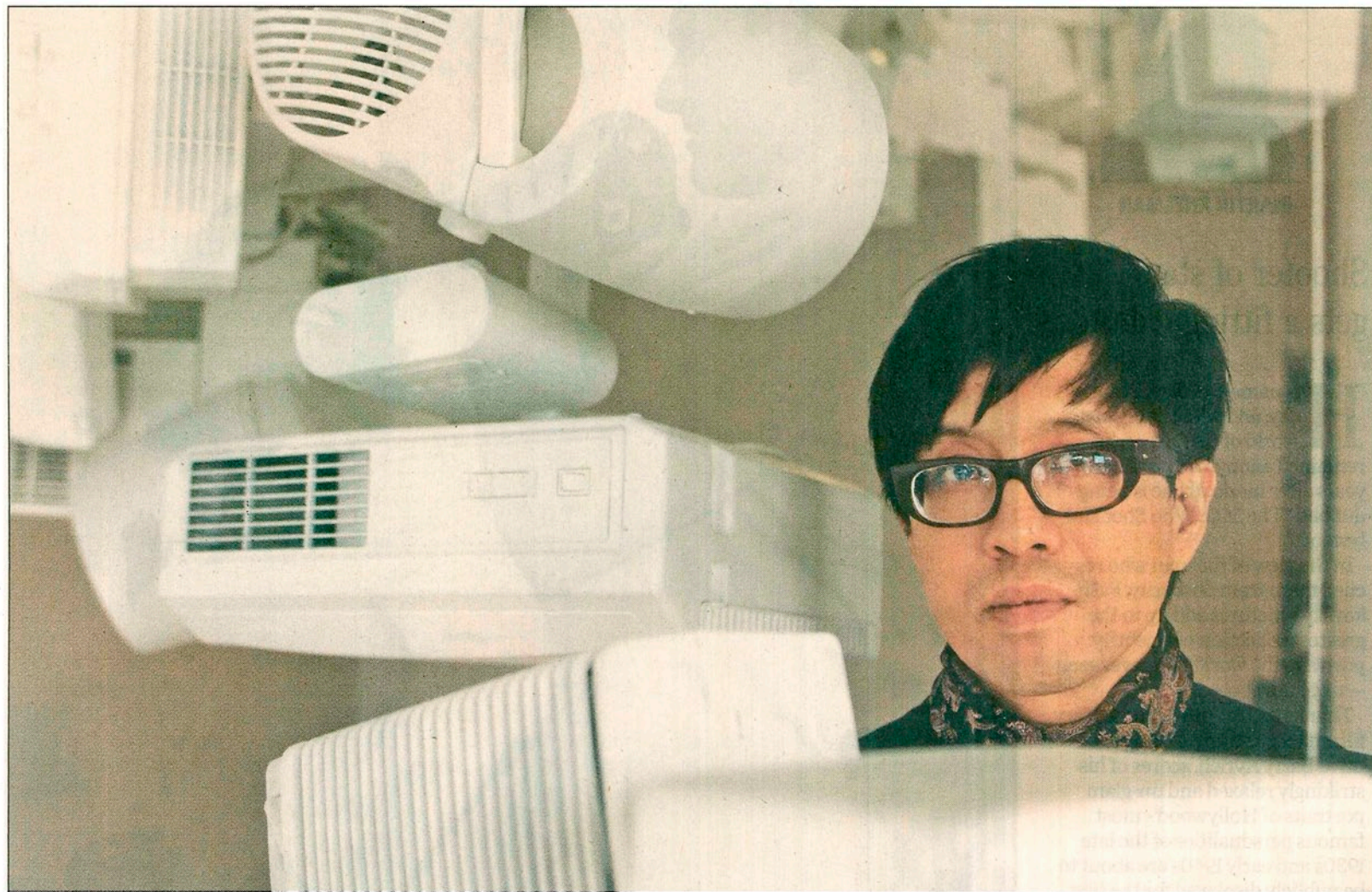
Last summer, Liu’s 2008 piece “Cloud” — a dangling cluster of air purifiers arranged to evoke a blocky, cubist version of its namesake — showed at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art on Queen Street. “Cloud” has covered some distance since then. Acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, it’s on display there as part of a group show called *Paradesign*.

In no uncertain terms, “Cloud” embodied a clever critique about our cheap-and-easy, mechanically aided reality. A stand-in for a natural world, its constituent parts were built to protect us from the damage we’ve done to it.

Installed, “Cloud” was both eerily gorgeous — lit from below, it glowed with almost unearthly purity — and unnervingly active: Suspended above, the purifiers were switched on, breathing their grim duty to the last.

It is precisely the kind of complex puzzle in a simple, tightly-wrapped package for which Liu has since become well known. In 2009, “Tittle Deed,” a simple postwar bungalow in North York that Liu painted top to bottom in Monopoly-game green, became an international meme.

Part of the Leona Drive Project, in



JAYME POISSON/TORONTO STAR

Toronto artist An Te Liu poses Thursday in the middle of assembling his installation “Blast,” which opens tonight at MKG127 on Ossington Ave.

which a gang of artists staged interventions in a cluster of soon-to-be-demolished bungalows, “Tittle Deed” was alarmingly simple yet potentially symbolic: Reduced from home to economic unit in the ongoing game of urban policy and commercial development in the ever-gentrifying urban landscape, Liu’s green house, with the slightest of gestures, spoke volumes.

The building blocks of “Blast” may be more eclectic, but it shares a root concern.

“Everybody has a stuff fascination, and a stuff problem,” says Liu, pausing from the tedium of screwing his plastic menagerie to sturdy wooden frames. “What to keep, what to get rid of, what to store in boxes and put away. And the whole time, we’re just accumulating more and more.”

The accumulation of “Blast” was,

of course, fully intentional. Liu spent four solid days on the road — “from Burlington to Markham,” he smiles — culling Salvation Armies and Value Villages for his collection. What’s striking about the mix is the prevalence of objects once deemed to be on the proverbial cutting edge: The original Nintendo gaming system, a PlayStation of similar vintage, an iconic Braun food processor, a George Foreman grill.

Stripped of function and context here, these objects and dozens like them are spray-painted a pure, almost-saintly white. Destined to be suspended in a clunky tornado-like swirl, the effect is elevation in more ways than one. Once innovative, now obsolete, his menagerie of the obsolete evades the landfill in becoming a work of art. It’s a cheeky transformation,

trading one form of uselessness for another, but it’s just a minor part of the greater whole. “Blast,” Liu explains, was the name of the journal of the early 20th-century Vorticist movement. Edited by Wyndham Lewis, it revolved around a group of artists whose associates included such literary heavyweights as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Running alongside such Modernist revolutions as Futurism and Cubism, the Vorticists took a decidedly less sunny view of the gross upheavals of modernity’s dawn. Eliot was particularly gloomy about the prospects of a nascent world of faster, cheaper, mechanically better, as evidenced by the title of his most famous poem, *The Wasteland*.

If Liu’s “Blast” has any such revolutionary propositions, they’re

kept close to the chest. One thing is certain: His entropic swirl of obsolescence conjures all sorts of complex reactions, from the warmly nostalgic — I remember coveting that Nintendo as a teen — to mild disgust at the volume of waste it suggests.

Is it a eulogy, then, a canonizing of our once-coveted objects, now shuffled off to the dustbin of consumer history? Liu demurs.

“There’s a critique built in,” he says.

“Sure, waste is bad, obsolescence is bad; it’s so much a part of our makeup to want new things, to acquire new things and move on to the next.

“But I have a loving relationship with these things. To be honest, I’ll kind of miss them.”

An Te Liu: Blast opens at MKG127, 127 Ossington Ave., Saturday at 6 p.m.