

VISUAL ARTS

A vision of the city, warts and all

The theme is dreams, but many works border on the nightmarish

MURRAY WHYTE
VISUAL ART CRITIC

If Toronto is remarkable for one thing, it's the uncanny ability to be everywhere and nowhere at once. There's a reason Hollywood has flocked here over the years; physically, we've managed to function almost perfectly as an urban backlot, the perfect, pan-urban nowhere. What, you thought it was the weather?

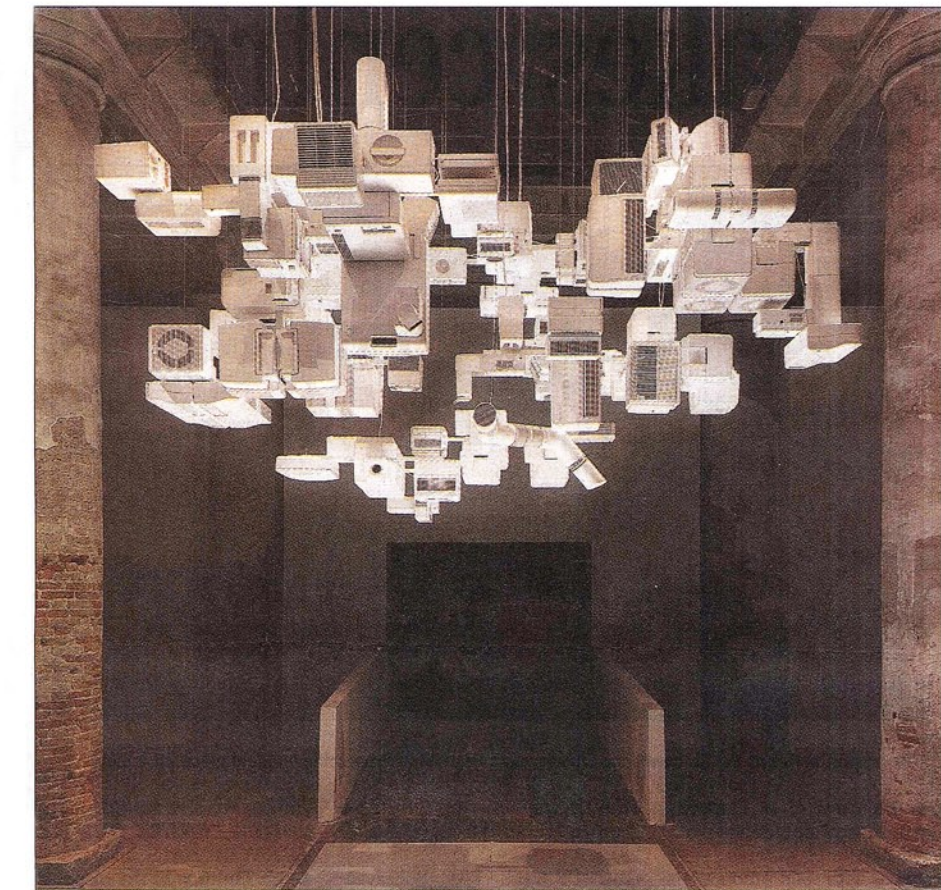
Meanwhile, we're a city of people who, in any other circumstance, would likely never cross paths, let alone share subway cars. With our wildly divergent backgrounds, experiences, languages, we all end up lumped together and simmered in a wildly eclectic brew that, one way or another, always seems to come out perfectly palatable and, once in a while, even something to truly savour.

At the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, it's the more-than-slightly-against-the-odds spirit that director David Liss is trying to capture with his summer show, "Empire of Dreams: Phenomenology of the Built Environment," and the mix indicates as much — young, old, established, newbie, longtime Toronto-ites, fresh arrivals.

There's something refreshing about not trying to be definitive about an art scene so much as the place in which it — and everyone else — operates, and that's also part of the goal here. The title is a mouthful, so let's just say it's a group of artists working out a set of urban realities, along with some distant-but-imaginable dreams.

Yet mostly they look an awful lot more like nightmares. Samina Mansuri's piece seems to be the place where all of this city's ever-greening dreams of diversity and sustainability go to die; a scale-model urbanscape, it has all the hope of a *Mad Max* movie. It reminded me of a bleak, cartoonish version of Fritz Lang's dystopic masterpiece, *Metropolis*. Pallid, oblique projections — of clouds, lightning, barely readable aerial city views — intensify the desolation.

Across the room, Alex McLeod's computer-generated cityscapes give us a candy-coated urban apocalypse in bright orange, black and grey. McLeod's technique has the remarkable ability to render exceedingly gruesome vision-enticing and friendly, but that's the spoonful of sugar for a still-grim



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MKG127

Artful air purifiers in An Te Liu's *Cloud* (2008): when the weather comes with Energy Star ratings.

dose of pessimism. Ditto David Trautrimas, whose digitally rendered images of fantastical brutalist military architecture contain an implied threat of authoritarian aggression.

That's one way to build an empire. But as empires go, Toronto's polyglot version, if you can call it that, is built on input, not output, colonized, not colonizer. David Han offers an endearing take with "Margaret Learns to Drive from There to Here," a piece he made for The Leona Drive Project last fall. Here, a mid-'80s Oldsmobile wagon sits parked in the gallery, its windshield obscured with a projection of a car moving through various Toronto neighbourhoods — squat bungalows and condo towers, light industrial space, vacant lots. Along one side, a separate video shows the same cityscape in passing, but with noticeable inflections of difference — ethnic strip malls, those same bungalows in the process of demolition.

It starts with the audio recording of Jim Anderson, the patriarch of the '50s radio and TV series *Father Knows Best*, trying to teach wife Margaret to drive. As a send-up of

suburbia's outdated ideals, it is hilariously chauvinistic (if that's possible). But Han translates the script to various foreign languages — Korean, Cantonese, Arabic — that make it ring with new meaning.

There's so much work here — 20 artists — and such a breadth, I couldn't possibly mention it all. Some we've seen before, like Dan Bergeron's recreations of defunct Toronto storefronts, from his "A City Renewal Project" of last year. Some we've been deprived of, like An Te Liu's "Cloud," showing in Toronto for the first time. A suspended cluster of artfully arranged air purifiers, it's a clear comment on our mechanically mediated urban lives — when clouds come with Energy Star ratings, it's gone too far — while its rectilinear shapes and ordered composition formally evokes Modernist sculpture and architecture.

But if there's one piece here that best fits the exhibition's premise, it's a video work by senior Toronto artists Kim Tomczak and Lisa Steele. It's called "Becoming," and there are three distinct videos — B for Berlin, V for Vancouver and, of course, T for — well, you get the idea. Each is a quietly observational

recording of cities in progress.

After watching Berlin a while, a curiously compelling, entirely emotional sense forced me in front of the Toronto screen. A creature of the west, Alberta and B.C., I'm not from here and, like many of us, I grew up with a cultivated resentment of the Big Smoke that, over time, I ground down to ambivalence and, in recent years, a touch of actual appreciation.

But sitting there staring at uniquely Toronto built forms — squat, postwar bungalows, condo towers rising over weary-looking Victorian row houses — I felt something I hadn't before: a sense of place.

Given the choices, I wanted to be with Toronto, warts and all. It's pretty simple, really. Tomczak and Steele give us a vision of the city that is neither bleak nightmare nor idealized utopia, but simply what it is. The title says it all: all cities, not just ours, are in the constant process of becoming, without end. Our empire, that dream of permanence and place, lives only in endless potential: We are not what we will be, forever. A pair of longtime Toronto artists delivering the piece that defines it? Funny, that.

VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW

The future is dystopian, but the buildings have modern feelings



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EMPIRE OF DREAMS AT MOCCA
 Until Aug. 15, 952 Queen St. W.,
 Toronto; www.mocca.ca

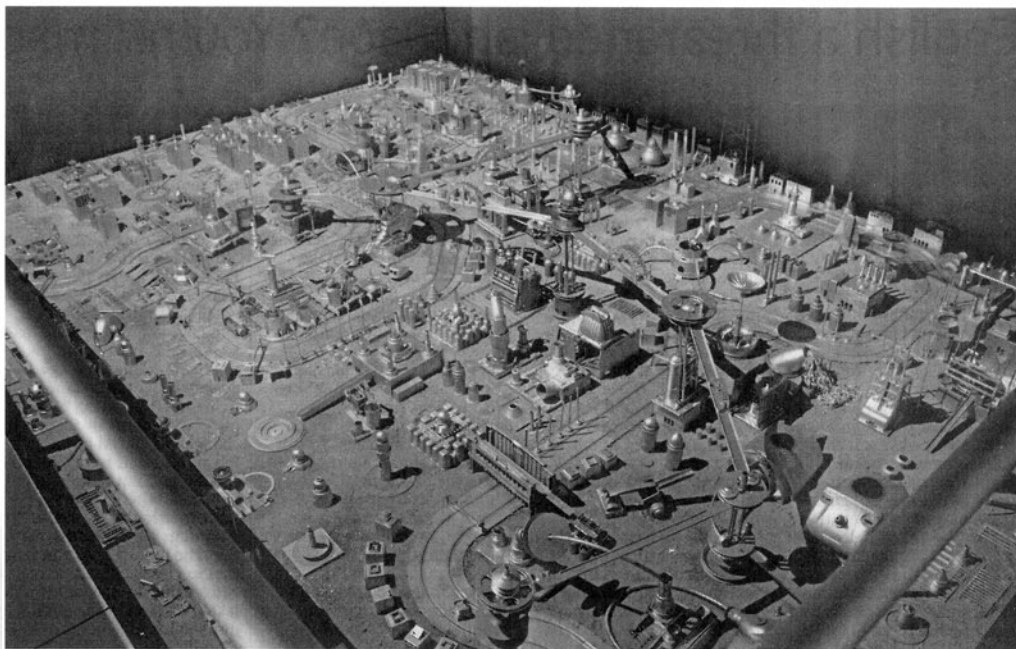
In keeping with all the Hollywood sequels on offer this summer, I'll dub this column Summer Blockbusters 2.

While the Power Plant's blow-out show, *Adaptation: Between Species* (covered last week), explores the e/devolving relationship between humans and animals, the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art's *Empire of Dreams* ponders the equally brain straining topic of, as the show's subtitle puts it, the "Phenomenology of the built environment" – which is art-speak for "Do buildings have feelings too?"

Curated by MOCCA artistic director David Liss (whose penchant for rock 'n' roll pyrotechnics is well known) *Empire of Dreams*, a show that sounds about as exciting as a midterm paper on joists and load bearing, explodes with the signature Liss flair.

As per last week's big summer roundup, there is way too much art in *Empire of Dreams* for this humble column. But *Empire of Dreams* never feels repetitive or cluttered. Rather, it is the tightest exhibition I've seen at MOCCA in two years. In the interests of transparency, my own work was featured in a much-despised MOCCA summer show in 2007 – so I know what I'm talking about.

Entering the MOCCA, the first thing you encounter is a gentle whirring sound, the purr of motorized fans. Overhead, An Te Liu's gorgeous



Samina Mansuri's enormous, sparkling model city is made from film reels, food tins and discarded building materials.

sculpture *Cloud*, comprised of dozens of interlocked air purifiers, putters and puffs, continually spewing out fresh, dust-free breezes. Limiting his collection of gizmos only to those fabricated in gleaming industrial white, An Te Liu neatly melds innocence and health with trepidation and post-industrial panic. What, after all, is his cloud doing? It's removing all the little bits and mites that take our breath away. Don't be fooled by the hospital-clean shine.

Continuing with the sci-fi theme, Samina Mansuri revisits the optimistic futurism of the 1950s with an enormous, sparkling model city made from film reels, food tins, and discarded building materials. Like Liu, Mansuri sticks to one colour – in her case, a matte silver grey that is occasionally illuminated by a flickering video projected directly on top of the toy town. And while some may view Mansuri's lead-toned Jetsons-themed playground as more funereal than celebratory (the matte silver

does remind one of headstones), I found the sculpture joyful. The future does not wait in new materials and gadgets, Mansuri argues, but in the reinvention of existing materials.

For outright anti-utopianism, turn around and gaze at Alex McLeod's chaotic, wall-sized digital collages.

Blending hard, sharp architectural forms with luridly coloured blobs and dripping masses that resemble chewed gum, McLeod's cities are alarming Babels, places where human manipulations of the organic and the inorganic have sped along at an equal pace, uninterrupted by environmental or ethical concerns. The result: cities turned nightmarish by their own sprawl and a host of bio-mechanical entities that have festered to monstrous proportions. The *Matrix* meets *The Blob*, and neither new reality appears to be winning.

After all that hubbub, calm yourself with Sara Graham's mustard-yellow blueprint fan-

tasias and Janet Jones's pulsing paintings of particles in slow motion.

Graham's madcap diagrams look like Frank Lloyd Wright sketches on crystal meth. Yet, her impossible proposals are weirdly comforting, in the same way that preposterously large churches and Baroque decor are comforting – because there is too much to consider, you decide instead to absorb, not decode, the drawings.

Jones, meanwhile, combines dusk black striated spaces with neon dots and dashes, replicating the calming sensation of watching distant traffic at night.

In an exhibition full of noisy inquiries into how we will inhabit the coming century, Graham and Jones present meditative pools.

Empire of Dreams is certainly full of firecrackers and fog machines, a KISS concert for eggheads. But if you overlook the subtler works, the buzz won't last as long.

Toronto

Empire of Dreams at MOCCA

Terence Dick - July 14th, 2010.



An Te Liu, *Cloud*, 2008, air purifiers, ionizers, sterilizers, washers, humidifiers, ozone air cleaners

Back in the city, my first stop was **MOCCA**'s summer group show *Empire of Dreams*. This annual extravaganza (matched by The Power Plant's summer smorgasbord which I plan to cover next report) is traditionally mix-and-match in the way that any attempt to please everyone is. It started off on a high with **Dan Bergeron**'s trompe l'oeil storefronts fronting the gallery. These temporary monuments to the transitioning shops that mark shifts in a neighbourhood's fortunes are perfect for the ever-changing strip of Queen Street the gallery sits on and a great use of their courtyard space. The work also sets a high watermark for the exploration of "the built environment" that is promised within. Hovering over the front desk, **An Te Liu**'s *Cloud* knocks it out of the park with a Brian Jungen-esque appropriation of consumer goods to self-reflective ends that is also simply aesthetically stunning. And then **Josh Thorpe**'s initially unidentified incursions onto (actually, through) the surface of the gallery itself got my heart beating pitter-patter with giddiness. Unfortunately, the rest of the exhibition doesn't sustain this level of excitement, though I did enjoy **Tyler Brett** and **Tony Romano**'s updating of Kim Adams' future primitive proposals for the computer age and **Tristram Lansdowne**'s drawings of abandoned buildings and their dreamlike bowels.

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This article was first published online on July 22, 2010.

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Review

Empire of Dreams: City Sounds

MOCCA, TORONTO JUN 19 TO AUG 15 2010

by SKY GOODDEN



An Te Liu *Cloud* 2008 Installation view Courtesy the artist and MKG127

The work of [Lisa Steele](#) and [Kim Tomczak](#) hides out in a dim gallery of the museum, making jokes. "How many city planners does it take to change a lightbulb?" Answer: "None but it takes 15 to prepare the plan for coping in the dark." City sounds wash up and around their three video projections, *Becoming V...*, *Becoming T...* and *Becoming B...*, all of which quietly issue quips between images of historic buildings enmeshed in urban architecture. It is an alcove of quiet reflection and gentle ribbing.

This summer, the [Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art](#) exhibition "Empire of Dreams" presents a survey of Toronto artists centering on Steele and Tomczak's joke resonates as one moves through this show's darker corners. How much of our urban experience consists of coping? How much of it is unseeing? "Empire of Dreams" provides its greatest insights when revealing the spaces between. We are our history, our foundations, it reminds us. We are improvising between them.

[Dan Bergeron](#) shrouds the museum's exterior entrance with a series of dilapidated Parkdale storefronts, introducing the exhibition's pervasive trompe l'oeil. His *Defunct Front* invents a façade of faded adverts and latched doors. Similarly, [Samina Mansuri](#) opens the main gallery space with a winking architectural elevation. A metallic city is made virtually phosphorescent beneath an ominous projection that rolls over it like nuclear cloud cover. These, rounded out by [David Han's](#) *Margaret Learns to Drive from There to Here*—a parked car enveloped in moving images—promote the urban experience as illusion and tableau.

Where works like these build on figuration, others demonstrate a retiring quality, more ruminative than emblematic. Between [Josh Thorpe's](#) *Subtractive Mural for MOCCA (after Asher and Huyghe)*, a stunning exercise in production through removal, and [Yvonne Lammerich's](#) white cube constructivism, a tiny hole marks a shared wall between the artists. Labelled *Hole in the Wall*, with its media listed as removed paint, drywall, steel and particleboard, Thorpe and Lammerich's shared aperture alerts us to a deconstruction site. The hole, like Thorpe's mural, for which he eroded various layers of gallery-wall paint to create a recessed image, is the most incidental and yet needling of this show's works. It calls attention to the ruin, the architectural palimpsest and the city's own chasms which, like so many keyholes, provide entrance.

Steele and Tomczak's joke resonates as one moves through this show's darker corners. How much of our urban experience consists of coping? How much of it is unseeing? "Empire of Dreams" provides its greatest insights when revealing the spaces between. We are our history, our foundations, it reminds us. We are improvising between them.