

View of Urbanization Is a Breath of Fresh Air

VISUAL ARTS

An Te Liu

Pathology

At the Contemporary Art Gallery until August 26

• BY ROBIN LAURENCE

August is such a paradox: so glorious outside, so dispiriting inside—especially inside the city's art galleries. Most of the artist-run centres close for the month; most of the commercial galleries show their artists in incoherent group shows (aggregations, really, of what's left over from last season); and most of the larger public galleries' programming seems to be the visual equivalent of summer reading: lots of vacation sensation and very little perceptual or intellectual provocation. It's refreshing, then, to walk into the Contemporary Art Gallery and have my brain cells nudged a little—even if they're nudged by yet another bleak assessment of the failures of modernism. Let's say it's refreshing in a dispiriting kind of way.

An Te Liu is described in the show's introductory panel as "a young Vancouver artist and architect whose dual practices find a meeting ground in his art". He has been teaching in the architecture program at the University of British Columbia and is about to depart the city for an academic position in Toronto. This makes his first solo show, which is also his first Vancouver show (he has participated in group exhibitions in Los Angeles and New York City), both a debut and an adieu.

Airborne, the principal work on view at the CAG, is an installation comprising some 60 air purifiers, ionizers, and humidifiers, set out in geometrical groupings on a low, white platform. Thus configured, the little machines—painted a uniform off-white colour, turned on and humming in a quietly reassuring way—establish an architectural metaphor. Their streamlined, orderly, clustered forms, with pleasing expanses of space around them, seem to constitute a model of an idealized modernist city. The machines read as windowless buildings (who needs air when you have air conditioning?) and the spaces read as plazas, courtyards, streets, and promenades. Toronto art critic Sarah Milroy, who happened to be passing through the gallery when I was there, described the installation as an "ionizer Brasília". CAG curator Keith Wallace analogizes the appearance of the work to just such postwar utopian urban-design projects. But *Airborne* is also reminiscent of early modernist design ideas, especially Hannes Meyer's 1925 displays of "Co-operative Standard Products". These were mass-produced goods in boxes, cartons, cans, and bottles arranged to look like futurist cities.

The air-improving function of Liu's machines folds an element of "wellness" into the retro-futuristic architectural model, but this notion of wellness is paradoxical. Ideally—

utopianly—modernist architecture and postwar urban planning were supposed to guarantee our physical and emotional well-being. Our late-20th-century subscription to ionizers, humidifiers, and air purifiers is a small-scale, domestic-realm acknowledgment that the cities we've created are not healthy places in which to live and work.

In a strikingly articulate interview accompanying the exhibition, Liu talks about danger and safety, hygiene and sterility, and about blurring the distinctions between home and hospital. He elaborates on the particular phenomenon of individuals attempting to control their environments, purifying their air and water with small, expensive devices. He talks, too, about the element of faith we must possess to believe in the efficacy of such devices in ridding our lives of unseen microscopic threats, and the triumph of the marketplace in generating these consumable objects to assuage our anxieties. "Gadget lust, clean living, self preservation. These are pretty strong motives," Liu says. "I think the will to feel good, or at least better, is both satisfied and fuelled by a world of consumer products." Ironically, it's the manufacture of that world of consumer products that contributes to the lousy state of our air and water. (If we didn't make so many objects like these, we wouldn't need so many objects like these.)

In addition to being an installation of subtly altered found objects that deploys a number of visual metaphors and cerebral musings, *Airborne* is an environment that plays upon our psychic and physical beings. Liu wonders if viewers will experience a sensation of well-being in the superpurified, super-humidified, superionized gallery. Without consciously engaging this question at the outset of my note-taking, I was quite certain I felt better after half an hour of being in the gallery space. But I was not at all certain whether my reaction was psychological or somatic.

Less successful than *Airborne* are the small works that accompany it and that comment again on modernist urban planning and contemporary domestic technologies. (These works include a couple of scrolls of "wall paper" that make Rorschach tests out of aerial images of suburban tract housing, and a couple of personal shiatsu units.) Still, this show is an introduction to a subtle and erudite mind.

Airborne is minimal in form and sterile in appearance, but that sterility speaks of a larger social condition. It's a condition defined by a desire to adjust immediate circumstances, to create a safe place within the home, without addressing the global impact that industrialization, overconsumption, and urbanization have had on our environment.

But who wants to think these rattling thoughts in the mindless month of August, especially while being washed over with euphoria-inducing streams of pure, moist air and negative ions? ■