

# Curatorial celebrations? Try inventory stockpiles

Two shows that aim to honour painting do little to deepen our understanding of the medium, writes **Sarah Milroy**

Here I was, on my way to take a look at two survey exhibitions of contemporary Canadian painting in Toronto earlier this week, when I realized the assignment had a strangely old-fashioned feeling about it. All-painting exhibitions seem, today, like hackneyed holdovers from the “painting is dead” debates of decades ago.

Having survived conceptual art, the advent of electronic media, and the seductive allure of the supersized Cibachrome photograph, it seems clear that painting – the practice of smearing coloured mud on a supporting surface, whether it be a cave wall, a wooden board or a piece of stretched canvas – will be with us to stay, a deep and enduring compulsion of humanity championed still by such international front-runners as Gerhard Richter, Lucian Freud, Tomma Abts, Luc Tuymans, Marlene Dumas and sometime-Canadian Peter Doig. Do we really still need to keep acting as if this is a beleaguered medium, struggling on life support?

Clearly, some people think so. Both shows aim, simply, to celebrate the medium, surely a defensive stance. And, as usual, when a show is mounted as a celebration, that tends to be code for brain-dead; i.e. not curatorial premise, just an inventory stockpile.

To a certain extent, that’s the case here. *Carte Blanche, Volume 2: Painting*, an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, culls from the pages of the just-published Magenta Foundation book of the same name, a compendious national roundup of fled-



Shelly Adler's *Profile* stands apart at MoCCA. NICHOLAS METVIER GALLERY

gling, mid-career and established Canadian artists working from coast to coast. (Magenta’s president, Mary-Ann Camilleri describes her modest mandate thus: “I just wanted people to get beyond the Group of Seven, Alex Colville, Bateman and whatnot.”)

At the Power Plant, the exhibition of shortlist winners for the 2008 RBC Painting Competition, on view until the end of this weekend before touring across Canada, similarly serves as a cross-country checkup of sorts, this one celebrating new

talent in a market-savvy format. (Wall labels give people the co-ordinates to contact artists and their dealers.)

Now, I like a glass of champagne as well as the next person, but would we be mounting an exhibition to celebrate video art, simply on the basis of medium? Or how about sculptures made out of metal? How are you supposed to respond to such a show? Just go and have fun?

So I put on my party hat and gave it a whirl, settling in for an afternoon of old-fashioned

connoisseurship. The Magenta Foundation’s book, whose publication serves as the occasion for the MoCCA show, is lavish and impressive in its production values – but less so in its curatorial discriminations (though the short introductory essay, by Toronto art dealer Clint Roenisch, is both graceful and informative).

Instead of just going out there and separating the sheep from the goats, the foundation made an open call for painters to apply for inclusion, requiring them to submit \$50 with their applications. When that failed to provoke applications from the country’s leading artists (no surprise there), the jury, led by Roenisch and under the direction of Camilleri, waived the entry fee to attract bigger names.

As a process, this sucks, and it has produced a weird outcome, with some striking omissions – Ron Moppett from Calgary, for example, or leading Quebec painters such as Betty Goodwin and the much younger Pierre Dorion or Chris Kline, or Winnipeg’s Karel Funk and the Royal Art Lodge gang, or those old Maritime chestnuts Colville and the Pratts, whom one would think would be prime candidates for this coffee-table extravaganza. You’ve gotta wonder, particularly when five slots in the show have gone to artists from Roenisch’s commercial stable. This is not good practice.

Still, the MoCCA show, curated by Roenisch and MoCCA artistic director David Liss, has lots of range. I enjoyed the little urban studies of Monica Tap (loosely brushed little paintings of suburbia that

seem glimpsed from a passing car), Dan Kennedy's kaleidoscopic Technicolor painting *The Voice Mansion* (a synthetic miasma of Disneyfied Deep South iconography that feels particularly pertinent these days), and Kim Dorland's painting of his wife (*Her # 6*), which sports a volcanic-seeming eruption in its surface, bulging at the core with great sticky hunks of gunk. (It smells fabulous.) Astonishing, too, is Mike Bayne's concise, high-realist painting of two shipping containers in a barren back lot, which reads like a handcrafted riposte to Vancouver grunge photography.

Too many of the artists here, though, were not shown to best advantage. It's impossible, I think, for Toronto's Shirley Wiitasalo to make a bad painting, but her loosely calligraphic *Gesture* seemed relentlessly uningratiating for the context. (Her painting *Figure with Blue Arms*, in the Magenta book, is, however, ravishing.) Likewise the works by Graham Gillmore, Carol Wainio and Ben Reeves – all extremely gifted artists. And I have never taken to the antique TV sets with landscape paintings on their screens by Iain Baxter & Co. He shines most

as a photographer and sculptor; his inclusion here seems eccentric.

These are curatorial gaffes, and I think one has to go back to the organizational roots of the project, which are based in the discernment of a team of dealers, corporate collectors, auctioneers and art consultants. The show is about pleasure and the marketplace more than it is about ideas, and that seems to do a disservice to the subject. Have we really learned anything here?

Shelly Adler's larger-than-life-size profile portrait seems to stand above the fray at MoCCA like a beacon of intelligent and consummate skill. Painting, with its deep roots in the past, can still take our breath away, a charged site where physical material and intellectual intent magically fuse. Coming upon her painting here was like finding a luminous angel adrift in the aisles of Honest Ed's.

At the Power Plant, the atmosphere is similarly promotional, but that's okay. The RBC Painting Competition has no pretensions to be otherwise. I found some great new (to me) artists here, including a second painting by Wil Murray

(he's also in the MoCCA show – a riotous, brilliantly coloured disembowelment of the painting surface aptly titled *Sexe Maniac Maniac Maniac Maniac*; the deftly asymmetrical hyperrealist painting of a shoe box by Lorenzo Pepito; and a rambunctious abstraction by Jeanie Riddle (who works as the director of Parisian Laundry in Montreal when she isn't hitting it out of the park in her studio): a giant apparently friendly black blot consuming a dazzling canary-yellow pictorial field.

The RBC's first prize went to the deserving Vancouver artist Jeremy Hof, whose layered plaster-and-paint work is incised with concentric squares revealing the archeology of its making to the careful eye. It's a picture that relies on some revered Canadian precedents: Garry Neill Kennedy's conceptually based diagonal-layer paintings of the seventies, and also the *Thick Paintings* of Eric Cameron, begun later in the same decade.

There's a history here, and once the confetti is all swept up and the party rentals packed away, it would be nice to settle down and start looking carefully at the pictures w

make, tracing those connections and deepening our understanding of where we sit today. This, after all, is what museums are for.

» The 2008 RBC Painting Competition is at the Power Plant in Toronto through tomorrow. Carl Blanche, Volume 2: Painting continues at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art until Dec. 1