

VISUAL ARTS REVIEWS »

## Vancouver Special: Ambivalent Pleasures sparks delight in dark times

by Robin Laurence on December 7th, 2016 at 11:52 AM



The exhibit's pleasures include Charlene Vickers's painting *Accumulations of Moments Spent Underwater With the Sun and Moon*.

© TREVOR MILLS

### Vancouver Special: Ambivalent Pleasures

At the Vancouver Art Gallery until April 17

There's such an exuberance of colour, texture, and form in Vancouver Special that the overall impression is one of delight.

Yes, there may be sombre subthemes swimming beneath the surface of the Vancouver Art Gallery's ambitious new survey exhibition. And flickering shadows may be cast behind the paintings and sculptures, the installations and assemblages, the films, textiles, and text works on view.

Still, despite these intimations of the dark times in which we live, the overall mood is life-affirming.

So I thought as I was making notes on the show, following the media preview and before I read the accompanying catalogue. How illuminating it was, then, to come across an interview in that publication between co-curator Jesse McKee and the acclaimed sci-fi writer William Gibson. When McKee mentions that the subtitle of the exhibition is *Ambivalent Pleasures*, Gibson responds by alluding to a fellow writer, the late J.G. Ballard, whose work, he observes, is dark and yet somehow still "life-affirming".

Ballard, Gibson says, introduced him to the idea of "enjoying things that might not be that pleasant, or the possibility of there being modalities that were simultaneously pleasant and unpleasant".

Vancouver Special: *Ambivalent Pleasures* is the inaugural exhibition of what is to be a series of triennial surveys of this city's contemporary art. Curated by the VAG's Daina Augaitis and McKee, head of strategy at the artist-run centre 221A, it features 40 local artists. Many of them are young and emerging, but a significant few, including Lyse Lemieux, Glenn Lewis, and Mina Totino, are more established.

Until now, however, they have been working mostly outside the mainstream: Lemieux uses textiles as her drawing medium; Lewis (who was a founding member of the Western Front) messes with ceramics traditions; and Totino continues to deeply explore the nature of abstract painting.

Their presence in the exhibition signals that they have been influential, even "prescient", Augaitis says, in anticipating new trends in the art of this place. Other acclaimed artists, such as Raymond Boisjoly, Kim Dorland, Colleen Heslin, Elizabeth McIntosh, and Ron Tran, spotlight paths taken from the emerging to the established.

As a collective enterprise, the exhibition describes a further pendulum swing away from the theory-driven, photo-based art that put Vancouver on the international art map 25 years ago. Instead, we encounter materiality, tactility, and handmade-ness.

A surprising number of young artists, including Maya Beaudry, Tamara Henderson, Anne Low, and Brent Wadden, employ textiles in ways that challenge gender stereotypes and dismantle hierarchies of fine art and craft. Low, for instance, hand-weaves fabrics that are suggestive of the usefully domestic, then places her subtly textured lengths of cloth in deep frames, behind glass, asserting their value as fine-art objects. Still, she leaves the tops of the frames open to imply the ambiguous status of her works.

Painting is enjoying another energetic comeback, as seen in the work of Tiziana La Melia, Angela Teng, Tristan Unrau, Charlene Vickers, and Alison Yip. Teng's small oil paintings, thickly impasted and dusted with flocking, again smudge the line between high art and low craft.

Their small scale also redresses the gendered history of abstract expressionism, with its male-dominated monumentality. Vickers, a multidisciplinary artist, presents watercolour and gouache paintings whose geometric patterns allude to the porcupine quillwork of her Anishinaabe forebears.

Some of the paintings here are mated to sculpture, as seen in the work of Eli Bornowsky and Colleen Brown, or to sound, in the work of Jordan Milner. Bornowsky has created some of the most energetic and engaging art of his career, a series of painted and embellished constructions that riff on the geometric (or perhaps primordial) form of the circle within the larger project of abstraction.

A recurring strategy here is the use of found or discarded materials, folding ideas of production, consumption, and waste into reinvented forms. Matt Browning weaves homely fabrics out of the innards of baseballs. Mark DeLong creates collages and assemblages out of produce boxes salvaged in Chinatown, where he lives.

His cut-out, stitched, and glued forms are colourful and energetic—a kind of celebratory revisiting of pop art.

Although my focus here is on materials and processes, the show's curators have organized the show thematically. Their categories are based on the relationship of the exhibited artworks to three historical precedents: surrealism, abstraction, and conceptualism.

In his interview with Gibson, McKee talks about "atemporality", "semiotic ghosts", the "fizzing out" of postmodernism, and the considerable use of "historical references, styles and perceptions" in the art he and Augaitis encountered while researching Vancouver Special. Gibson expresses his skepticism about the entire project of postmodernism and suggests that "history itself is a highly speculative discipline.

"One can imagine," he continues, "that the future's idea of what we're about will have nothing to do with anything we might think we're about."

I'm not sure, even in the present, Vancouver Special has completely formulated what Vancouver artists are about, either—there are conspicuous gaps where digital and new media art should be—but the attempt is thoroughly engaging. And, yup, life-affirming.