

**upArt Contemporary Art Fair
The Gladstone Hotel, Toronto
2-5 October 2008**

By virtue of its very novelty, this first installment of the upArt Contemporary Art Fair deftly dodges the world-weary proceedings of the coinciding Toronto International Art Fair, making for a welcome respite from the usual mercantile mindset. This stimulating shift is owed to the Gladstone Hotel's unique cultural setting as well as its emphasis on site-specific installations in the Hotel's second floor rooms, augmented by works displayed in the open corridors as road markers from place to place.

Francois Morelli subtly engages with the Gladstone's historical purpose via the estrangement of a skeletal flying machine hovering from the room's ceiling, its suggestion of travel undercut by the cascade of hand-painted dinner plates scattered like bombs in its wake. Combined with the provisional quality of Morrelli's prints-as-wallpaper, the plates unpacking themselves across the floor render this a transient domestic space, a home away from home.

For all that upArt eschews salon conventions, some exhibitors fail to stretch the use of space beyond those terms, with two rooms favouring a rotation of four artists exhibiting on each of the four days in a performance that cannot be perceived in a single visit, leaving the impression of a dissatisfying conservatism. By contrast, Catherine Lane's *Narrative 2* mounts a successful defense of two-dimensional media as an installation strategy by constructing a lively experience of ink on paper that is anything but staid. Her images, precisely cut from their white grounds and sometimes folded as three-dimensional objects, engage the viewer in a game of reality and representation by generating a life-scaled environment that eases down into the familiar comfort of small-drawn houses and the surprise of a miniature wolf leaping over a drop of blood blown back to the scale of life.

With its depictions of northerly logging operations, Lane's drawn narrative points a child's toy gun at its own urban space as a consequence of ecological waste, a notion carried to resplendent extremes in Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby's *Reanimating the Universe with Basic Breathing Exercises*. Duke and Battersby's hotel room is not the only one to employ spectacular manipulations of light and movement, but whereas Rui Pimenta and Kal Mansur's *Module Existence* reduces their projections of

cellular biology to the level of a tired discotheque, Duke and Battersby employ tawdry aesthetics with substantial critical verve, their decorative dressings-up of taxidermied animals lending new meaning to the notion of environmental stewardship.

This uneasy ceasefire between natural and urban living is elegantly realized in the TH&B Collective's sculptural work; the central totem of a utility pole, wood-rough bastion of modern communications, is swarmed by a prickly paranoia of burrs that cling and cluster along the steel cables slicing through the space, charged with the tense ambient thrum vibrating along those wires. Evoking the drone of bees or else the conspiracy of chatter in cleaner spaces than this, the transformation of site achieved here rings anticipatory notes for further installments of this new event, of even curiouser things to come.

Stephanie Vegh
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