

**MAP Magazine Report:
Queen Street West District**

Even on a humid summer's day, Toronto's Queen West gallery district thrives in the aftermath of Canada Day celebrations and on Quebec City's 400th anniversary, commemorated on the Plains of Abraham by a Van Halen concert that bids an incongruous sort of nod to the battle for identity in a country still so democratically young. One wonders if Pierre Trudeau, most famous of Canadian Prime Ministers, knew the reality of the quandary he created when declaring Canada a nation with 'no official culture,' favouring wild diversity over safe shelter.

Given the ambiguous legacy of this ostensibly multicultural citizenry, Toronto's notion of the local has become international in its interpretation. *Grizzly Proof*, a group show at Trinity Square Video, made in response to Troy Hurtubise's quest to confront the grizzly bear that attacked him during a 1984 excursion in the Rocky Mountains, has a whiff of Canadiana lingering around the works featured, in spite of its New York origins at the Flux Factory collective and a far-flung range of participants.

Hurtubise's obsession with overcoming the 'Old Man' (putting one in mind of Ahab and his great leviathan) casts a neurotic shadow over man's relationship with nature, exiling basic humanity to an uncertain place between the feral threat of the bear and Hurtubise's recourse to an armoured suit and masochistic trials to test its strength. This ursine obsession tellingly connects to Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, especially when curling into

Lisa Dillin's *Bear Hug Sleeping Unit* (2007) – the weight of a bear's head resting on your own is both reassuring and mildly unnerving.

A return to the human is enacted in Paul Burn's video *Grizzly Quest* (2008), which plucks the 'proof' of the show's title away from defensive strategies and towards an engagement with the bear's traces in the snowy woods. The banter shared between the video's two male protagonists reveals skepticism equally matched with hope in their preparations to confront the grizzly, culminating in an intense staring contest between men and camera – in turn between men and viewer – explaining how to behold the bestial Other in a relaxed state, emptied of fear, wide-eyed and unflinching as a child.

With such identifications as *Self-Portrait in Obvious Wolf Getup With New Lady Friend* (2007), Thrush Holmes confronts the wilderness of his fiercely independent practice, one wrought in Ontario's northerly reaches, into the convoluted myth that has built his reputation as one of the most unusual players inhabiting Queen West.

A young painter operating his own gallery, his work is unabashedly hung in the space which also acts as his studio. Open for a year and a half, Thrush Holmes Empire is a work in its own right, a gallery functioning as an overtly egoist performance that belies the artist's modest personality. For all the brash commercialism of this enterprise, manifest in the shining resin surfaces and neon tube lighting, Holmes' pastoral imagery and Twombly-like handling of paint and text aligns him more closely with a nineteenth-century Romantic than to the likes of Andy Warhol. Financial success aside, Holmes remains an outsider in the Toronto scene – he displays an honesty

that disavows both cynicism and naivety in favour of a stubborn negotiation of one's place in the world.

Holmes will be forced to move once the lease on his Empire gives way to condominium development in 2010 – a transitional necessity in keeping with the evolving nature of Queen West's rising affluence, out of an area with a significant immigrant population, whose stories evident in the environs of MKG127, a gallery even younger than Thrush Holmes Empire. Cuarted by gallerist Michael Klein, An Te Liu's solo show *Style and Epoch* makes aspirational playthings of the Danish prefabricated furniture kits that defined the artist/architect's childhood relocation from Taiwan to Toronto.

The appropriation of IKEA sensibilities is not uncommon in contemporary art – a wander down to Diaz Contemporary will reveal how fellow Torontonians Christian Giroux and Daniel Young have reassembled these familiar furnishings into the brightly coloured structures of an optimistic modernism – but An Te Liu brings these forms to bear upon a more complex dialogue surrounding modernity's promises and shortcomings. His architectural manipulations of these raw materials convey a futurist's longing for the sort of detached, clean-edged splendour that recalls his sprawling panorama *Ether* (2004) at last year's Toronto International Art Fair. Unlike that sci-fi spectacle, these images are rooted in a sad realm of outmoded carpet, in some cases supported by convenient books and plants. These dreams hover, but they refuse to fly in such a small world as this.

By contrast, Rosana Simonessi's *Afuerras* opens out the dark interior of Gallery TPW with her projected slides of the Uruguayan Pampas, depicted

as ephemeral passages of heat-burned grasses and leafless trees in monochrome stained by the wash of the slide projector's light bulb. That incidental smoked-gold light, a colour like lager drunk on the decades-old back porches of a pre-electric age, evokes the sultry-slow boil of a changing climate in images framed for desolation, the occasional traces of civilization serving as unsettling signifiers in this otherwise natural steppe.

The sound of the projector's whirr, magnified times eight, heightens the physicality of this installation – viewers are acutely conscious of their place between the projectors as the steady beams are quick to capture visitors' shadows. The rare awareness of where one literally stands in relation to this work is emblematic of the secure knowledge of these nations with histories enough to feed the ambivalence of Toronto in the lapse of Trudeau's open question, allowing for this fleeting specificity of all other things.

Stephanie Vegh

July 2008