

NATIONAL POST

Saturday, January 26, 2008

Bricks and motion

Leah Sandals, National Post

Published: Saturday, January 26, 2008



For a set of old factories parked next to an expressway, the Distillery District can be surprisingly inviting on a cold January afternoon. Sure, wind gusts accelerated by its fashionably worn brick walls can be chilly, but there's plenty of warmth and colour to be found in the nabe's many galleries. There are also hot culinary treats on offer, from succulent espresso-laced sustenance at Balzac's Coffee Roastery to tippie-laced toddies at the Mill Street Brewpub (taking a wee dram is just respecting the site's history, don't ya know?). Whatever your warm-up, here are the sights to ponder between sips.

1. MONTE CLARK GALLERY

55 Mill St., Building No. 2

While Monte Clark's strong group show on portraiture includes big Canuck names like Douglas Coupland and Roy Arden, it's up-and-comers who impress most on this outing. Owen Kydd's Mission Sketches is one of the most beautiful things I've seen in months. Kydd turns his video camera on the residents of Mission, B.C., taping locals, from window washers to newspaper readers, as they each remain still for a minute or so. Viewers take in the fragile, breeze-blown details of Kydd's sitters over time, evoking the tenderness of a Rembrandt with the technology of a surveillance cam. It's strangely hopeful and terrific.

Karin Bubas's precise, snapshot-like watercolours of women from 1980s prime-time soap operas are great in a different way: They're the perfect mix of campy irony and deadpan seriousness.

2. ENGINE GALLERY

55 Mill St., Building No. 55

Over at the smaller, more eclectic Engine Gallery, choice pieces can be found, with some patience and space-shuffling, in the second floor stockroom-cum-viewing space.

Susan Szenes's colourful montages of maps, carvings and childlike drawings on plywood get a lot of attention. They're compelling not only for their alterna-scene, silkscreenedhoodie stylings, but also for

their attention to questions of rural and urban, stasis and movement.

Christopher Hayes' 65 Parliament, hung nearby, takes on related concerns in a shinier, more cleanly designed way. Hayes, who redesigned a Liberty Village bench to resemble a TTC transfer in '06, takes the transportation love further with a glossy, lacquered "portrait" of a classic east-end streetcar mounted on an enlarged plywood copy of a transfer from its route. Public art consultants, take note.

3. CORKIN GALLERY

55 MILL ST., BUILDING NO. 61

Walking through the vast, light-filled Corkin Gallery offers a pleasant artistic experience in itself. Similarly, its best works reframe art in a fresh, delightful way. For Sharon Switzer's A New Song, viewers must stand on a footstool and peer into a raised wooden table to be treated to a looped video view of bright-yellow toy birds and their chirpy songs. The imagery, sound and posture of childish curiosity add up to a puzzling, smiley feeling of discovery amid limited circumstances.

FrankMadler's Polaroids echo that focused, condensed vision in small squares of bright colour and action, like a bubblegum sphere basking in sunshine and a red tulip blazing against a white background. They're a little shot in the arm of spring-ness much appreciated by those frosty of mitt and slushy of boot.

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