

ON ON

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WHAT'S ON

VISUAL ARTS

A vision of the city, warts and all

The theme is dreams, but many works border on the nightmarish

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VISUAL ART CRITIC

If Toronto is remarkable for one thing, it's the uncanny ability to be everywhere and nowhere at once. There's a reason Hollywood has flocked here over the years: physically, we've managed to function almost perfectly as an urban backlot, the perfect, pan-urban nowhere. What, you thought it was the weather?

Meanwhile, we're a city of people who, in any other circumstance, would likely never cross paths, let alone share subway cars. With our wildly divergent backgrounds, experiences, languages, we all end up lumped together and simmered in a wildly eclectic brew that, one way or another, always seems to come out perfectly palatable and, once in a while, even something to truly savour.

At the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, it's the more-than-slightly-against-the-odds spirit that director David Liss is trying to capture with his summer show, "Empire of Dreams: Phenomenology of the Built Environment," and the mix indicates as much — young, old, established, newbie, longtime Toronto-ites, fresh arrivals.

There's something refreshing about not trying to be definitive about an art scene so much as the place in which it — and everyone else — operates, and that's also part of the goal here. The title is a mouthful, so let's just say it's a group of artists working out a set of urban realities, along with some distant-but-imaginable dreams.

Yet mostly they look an awful lot more like nightmares. Samina Mansuri's piece seems to be the place where all of this city's ever-greening dreams of diversity and sustainability go to die; a scale-model urbanscape, it has all the hope of a *Mad Max* movie. It reminded me of a bleak, cartoonish version of Fritz Lang's dystopic masterpiece, *Metropolis*. Pallid, oblique projections — of clouds, lightning, barely-readable aerial city views — intensify the desolation.

Across the room, Alex McLeod's computer-generated cityscapes give us a candy-coated urban apocalypse in bright orange, black and grey. McLeod's technique has the remarkable ability to render exceedingly gruesome vision-enticing and friendly, but that's the spoonful of sugar for a still-grim dose of pessimism. Ditto David Trautrimas, whose digitally rendered images of fantastical brutalist military architecture contain an implied threat of authoritarian aggression.

That's one way to build an empire. But as empires go, Toronto's polyglot version, if you can call it that, is built on input, not output, colonized, not colonizer. David Han offers an endearing take with "Margaret Learns to Drive from There to



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ANGELL GALLERY

Alex McLeod's *Twilight Terror* (2010): candy-coated urban apocalypse. At MOCCA, a wide assortment of artists provide a largely bleak message.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MKQ127

Air purifiers in An Te Liu's *Cloud* (2008): when the weather comes with Energy Star ratings.

Here," a piece he made for The Leona Drive Project last fall. Here, a mid-'80s Oldsmobile wagon sits parked in the gallery, its windshield obscured with a projection of a car moving through various Toronto neighbourhoods — squat bungalows and condo towers, light industrial space, vacant lots. Along one side, a separate video shows the same cityscape in passing, but with noticeable inflections of difference — ethnic strip malls, those same bungalows in the process of demo-

lition.

It starts with the audio recording of Jim Anderson, the patriarch of the '50s radio and TV series *Father Knows Best*, trying to teach wife Margaret to drive. As a send-up of suburbia's outdated ideals, it is hilariously chauvinistic (if that's possible). But Han translates the script to various foreign languages — Korean, Cantonese, Arabic — that make it ring with new meaning.

There's so much work here — 20 artists — and such a breadth, I

couldn't possibly mention it all. Some we've seen before, like Dan Bergeron's recreations of defunct Toronto storefronts, from his "A City Renewal Project" of last year. Some we've been deprived of, like An Te Liu's "Cloud," showing in Toronto for the first time. A suspended cluster of artfully arranged air purifiers, it's a clear comment on our mechanically mediated urban lives — when clouds come with Energy Star ratings, it's gone too far — while its rectilinear shapes and ordered

JUST THE FACTS

WHAT: Empire of Dreams: Phenomenology of the Built Environment

WHERE: MOCCA, 952 Queen St. W.

WHEN: To Aug. 15

composition formally evokes Modernist sculpture and architecture.

But if there's one piece here that best fits the exhibition's premise, it's a video work by senior Toronto artists Kim Tomczak and Lisa Steele. It's called "Becoming" and there are three distinct videos — B for Berlin, V for Vancouver and, of course, T for — well, you get the idea. Each is a quietly observational recording of cities in progress.

After watching Berlin a while, a curiously compelling, entirely emotional sense forced me in front of the Toronto screen. A creature of the west, Alberta and BC, I'm not from here and, like many of us, I grew up with a cultivated resentment of the Big Smoke that, over time, I ground down to ambivalence and, in recent years, a touch of actual appreciation.

But sitting there staring at uniquely Toronto built forms — squat, postwar bungalows, condo towers rising over weary-looking Victorian row houses — I felt something I hadn't before: a sense of place.

Given the choices, I wanted to be with Toronto, warts and all. It's pretty simple, really. Tomczak and Steele give us a vision of the city that is neither bleak nightmare nor idealized utopia, but simply what it is. The title says it all: all cities, not just ours, are in the constant process of becoming, without end. Our empire, that dream of permanence and place, lives only in endless potential: We are not what we will be, forever. A pair of longtime Toronto artists delivering the piece that defines it? Funny, that.