

Pushing film's frontiers to Venice

Mark Lewis, who will represent Canada at the Venice Biennale, is inspired by "modest modernism"

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Austerity and modesty are buzzwords already circulating to describe the prospects of this year's Venice Biennale as the art market hunkers down in recession mode.

This hardly makes the 53rd International Art Exhibition, from June 7 to Nov. 22, seem particularly tourist-friendly, even if a record-setting 300,000 visitors were on hand two years back. But muted expectations are a perfect fit for Mark Lewis, the Hamilton-born artist representing Canada in the Canadian Pavilion located in the Giardini, the large public park in Venice's east end. Now based in London, England, the photographer-turned-filmmaker is a poet of the future-in-past-tense, and the disappearing promises found in aging modernism.

Further proof of this might have been found this week near the skating rink facing Toronto City Hall, where Lewis and crew were filming during the utterly frigid hours from midnight to dawn.

"Modest modernist" is how he describes the space he visited as a kid when his family lived in Toronto, and where he used to go for a skate. "I don't think of the film as being specifically about Toronto, or Canadian. Many of the places I like to film in – although this is something I don't particularly look for – have a kind of generic, international look. The world is full of these modest modernistic buildings, although there are less and less of them as they get torn down. I think they are very beautiful and speak about a place's ambition to be international, to be modern.

"Nathan Phillips Square is part of the unbelievable expression of the modernism that happened in inconsequential towns in the late '50s and early '60s, which imagined themselves as being part of the world," he continues over his early-morning coffee. "That's what I love about Toronto architecture of that period, like the old Terminal 1 at (Pearson) airport. It's gone now. I'm not sure that moment will ever come again."

The title of Lewis's Biennale-bound short silent film, *Romance*, is disliked by both the filmmaker and the project's curator, Barbara Fischer of the University of Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery. But they both know the title won't go away until a better one is found.

"*Romance*" is too touchy-feely for an artist whose interest in film technology – Lewis also lectures at London's Central St. Martins College of Art and Design – has led him to make a documentary on the history of rear projection in collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada. In 2007, he won the \$25,000 Gershon Iskowitz Prize from the Art Gallery of Ontario for his contribution to visual arts in Canada.

Romance combines the latest in digital technology with rear projection, a process favoured in old Hollywood, whereby actors, positioned in front of a screen, were filmed surrounded by an image from a projector placed behind the screen. Thus high-priced studio stars could be shown in hugely dangerous car chases, when in fact they did little more than sit on a set as the action played out.

Among Lewis's best-known works is *Rear Projection*, in which actor Molly Parker is shown standing nearly motionless in front of an abandoned Howlin' Wolf gas station as the seasons change.

Lewis's investigation of film technologies runs parallel to his continuing interest in how film fiddles with our perception of time passing and creates the illusion of movement. Questions of time also crop up in his thinking about contemporary culture. As he has written in *Documenta Magazine*, "Our modern forms are rapidly accruing a sense of 'pastness.'" (Lewis is also editor of the London-based *Afterall Journal*, which frequently frames its discussion of contemporary art in theoretical terms.)

Time is also the subject of two works Lewis is selling to help fund his Biennale project. *122 Leadenhall Street*, depicting the recent demolition of a modern London office building, comes in an edition of nine. Each individual copy sells for \$20,000, a price that includes a \$5,000 tax receipt along with four tickets to the Biennale Vernissage preview (among other Venice-related bonuses).

5262 Washington Boulevard, in which black and white footage of a cheap Hollywood motel morphs slowly into colour, is available in an edition of 20, each costing \$10,000. The price includes a \$2,500 tax receipt, a pair of Biennale Vernissage tickets and other fun stuff. The names of purchasers of either title will be included in the Canada Pavilion catalogue.

The time required for all this necessary fundraising is also very much on Lewis's mind. "I'm not saying I don't want to do it," he says, "but I think an artist shouldn't *have* to do it. The plan is to get \$250,000 by June. That's as much money as the Canada Council is also giving. There are only two countries which don't fund their pavilion, Germany and Canada. But Germany has a big corporate sponsor in Hugo Boss.

"(In Canada) it's impossible to get a corporate sponsor," he says. "Nobody wants to do it. 'A recession' has always been the excuse."

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