

SIGNS OF LIFE

A&E Editor **EMILY KELLOGG** explores Ron Terada's latest exhibit and finds beanbag chairs and Vampire Weekend

PHOTOS BY DAVID PIKE



of whatever gallery put on his last exhibit, or it is an elusive reference to self-representation. The piece in the next room seems to be more explicitly autobiographical. A series of black canvases inscribed with white text narrates the tale of a New York artist's haunting account of the nature of art, art-world snobbery, self-destruction, and crippling isolation.

"In a way, I ruined my life, but I did a body of work, and for that body of work it was worth ruining my life," the piece concludes, leaving the last

canvas a mass of black space with only a few lines of white text. It's clear this isn't Terada's own autobiography. Everything about the exhibit exudes a sense of play, a light-hearted tongue-in-cheek in juxtaposing a piece called "Big Star" with a purportedly self-identifying exhibit. He listens to Vampire Weekend. He hardly seems like the self-destructive artist who wrote: "And the only way I can make art is by taking drugs to ease the pain of the emptiness in my stomach, the emptiness of my life." Yet, here are the words, neatly config-

ured against the white wall, in an exhibit entitled *Who I Think I Am*.

Reading the text-based piece is almost an uncanny experience. Reading is a familiar and comforting process for me, something I like to do in the fetal position, in bed, with a cat curled up beside me and maybe some hot chocolate. This exhibit requires you to stand, physically move across the room, crane your neck and hurt your eyes if you endeavour to read it. It's physically demanding to read, and reading white on black text is difficult. After a while, it's almost dizzying. You can't just look at this piece; you have to engage with it for it to make any sense at all.

I find out later that the excerpted text is a chapter from the biography of Jack Goldstein, a conceptual artist who achieved fame in the 1980s until secluding himself well beneath the poverty line in Southern California. In true artistic form, his works weren't really included in any kind of artistic cannon until after his death in 2003. He is, as such, the quintessential tortured artist, who romantically sacrificed everything for his body of work, and never saw the fruits of his labour.

What Terada has assembled in this exhibit is a collection of signs. Deviating from his representation of street signs, he's given us a collection of the kind of signs that we all use to represent our own identity. Terada chose an excerpt from the autobiography of a tortured artist, a tongue-in-cheek neon sign, an installation of his favourite music, and advertisements for his art exhibits. I would probably choose an excerpt from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and my Facebook profile pictures.

I'm sitting in a black beanbag chair, watching the projection of a record spin one of my favourite Vampire Weekend songs, and thinking about myself. The record is entitled *Sounds For An Exhibit* and is featured in a glass case next to the video installation. But when I close my eyes and lean back in the moderately comfortable bean bag chair, it's easy to forget that I'm in an art gallery.

My narcissism is (kind of) justified. The most recent exhibit in the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Ron Terada's *Who I Think I Am*, is all about identity. Ron Terada is a 42-year-old Vancouver-based artist, known mainly for his appropriation of street signs and word-for-word recreations or representations of these found objects. This particular exhibit easily blurs the lines of the-shit-you-see-on-the-street-next-to-highways and "high" art.

The first room is filled with baffling signage: most notably, a poster for a previous exhibition, *Universal Pictures*, which features a photo of a "Welcome to Vancouver" sign. A glossy photo across from the video installation shows a large sign next to what looks like a construction site with the fluorescent words: "See Other Side of Sign." In the adjoining room is a neon sign in the shape of a star. It says "BIG" in the middle of the star. The star isn't big. It's moderately-sized, at best.

I'm starting to wonder about Ron Terada's idea of self-conception. There is no explicit reference to the artist — but in the other room his favourite songs play next to a poster for his own exhibit — that either references his own confidence in his music taste and a celebration of the design team