Signs of life: The Hart House collection at the University of Toronto

University art centre goes to the vaults while Justina M. Barnicke Gallery exhibits a very public art form.

Ken Lum's Michael Hasson, Leaving Law, at the University of Toronto show Sign, Sign, Everywhere A Sign.

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts
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People collect for a lot of reasons: passion, duty, obsessive-compulsive disorder. When it comes time to make sense of the accumulation, the real work begins. The getting is relatively easy; it's the having that confounds.

This is no less true for institutions, whose collections grow typically by the good graces of either artists themselves or their patrons, kicking in works and/or dollars to keep their holdings fresh. But fresh is in the eye of the beholder. Take the Art Gallery of Ontario, now in the throes of a basement-clearing as it looks to deaccession works that in hindsight don't merit a place in its cold storage. A few generations of an overly permissive donation policy can overstuff the vaults, and fast.

So at Hart House, a venerable part of the University of Toronto, the current airing of works from its own cellar is engaging and instructive. Hart House has been collecting art for almost a century, much of it rendered iconic in retrospect: works by Lawren Harris, a long-time adviser to its collections committee, or Tom Thomson, David Milne and Bertram Brooker are among the few dozen at the University of Toronto Art Centre until March 7.

Equally impressive is the upkeep. More recently, through the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, the collection has become an enviable, tightly focused storehouse of important contemporary art. Here, we achieve equilibrium: sharing floor space with the historical hits of yesteryear is a clear-eyed, clever exhibition of the collection's more current activities.

Called Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign, the show contains an array of modest gems. But the gallery's ambitions don't end with a display of unassuming greatest hits. Instead, curator Sarah Robayo Sheridan combs through the catalogue looking for synergies.

She makes it easy on herself, grabbing hold of the idea of both art in the public, or about being public, in a form so familiar as to be nearly invisible. Signs advertise and instruct, direct or protest; they coerce, convince or sell as much as they regulate and control.

Works range from the slyly subversive to the documentary to the political, and they share less a point of view than a public sensibility. Berenice Abbott appears here in a selection of pictures from her Changing New York project, commissioned by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s.

Abbott's pictures foretell an era of mass commercialism and the flashing lights that go along with it (see: Times Square). In one, a butcher shop is papered over in signage; in another, a ghost image, faded but present, adorns a brick wall. Abbott parallels the work of Walker Evans, who much more famously photographed the dawn of the mass-signage era.

Here, though, she's cannily set opposite images by Robin Collyer, who in 2000 made a memorable series of pictures in the early Photoshop era, wiping clean corporate logos and leaving behind only colour and shape.

Collyer's point isn't hard to grasp: 7-Eleven is 7-Eleven, logo or not, and years of relentless conditioning to those familiar orange and green bars make it so. It's an easy leap from there across the quad to UTAC, where Kelly Mark's sly video *Demonstration* is playing. In it, a crowd of protestors stomp in mock outrage, holding blank signs. “What do we want? Nothing?” they chant, or “Hell, no, we don't know,” to bewildered passersby.

Mark's less interested than Collyer in the game of corporate-symbol mind control, but it's there: using protest, a theatrical convention for public communication, she turns things upside down in her own absurdist way. Just outside, you see a little more: using white neon, Mark writes, “I really should . . . ”

Search your own head for an echo of that thought and if you're like 99 per cent of us, you needn't look long. But the turnaround makes the play: Mark deflates the form's expectedly bald-faced sales pitch with homespun comic futility.

Ken Lum gives us a similar reversal with *Michael Hasson, Leaving Law*, subverting the expected predatory impulse of a retail lawyer's sign with an emotional farewell (“Leaving law. There is no love left. Mike”). In the same distant lineage are the heraldic crests of General Idea's *Fear Management*.

Coats of arms mean something — something historic, royal even — so the slick graphics of the piece's oblique symbols convey significance, even where there is none. They pair up nicely with Will Kwan's *Flame Test*, an array of national flags — no more weighty signs could there be — printed engulfed by fire, as Kwan found them in media images.

About that title: you may know it comes from the famous 1971 protest song by the Five Man Electrical Band, a clunky ode of dissent aimed at the strictures laid down by The Man. Ineloquent but to the point, it fits the show well enough. Signs may instruct, command, convince or compel, but you know what they say: Rules are made to be broken.