



TORONTO

TERENCE DICK

BLUE CLOUD AT JUSTINA M. BARNICKE GALLERY | EVAN PENNY &amp; THE GRANGE

PRIZE AT THE AGO

September 25, 2012

Like 6

Completing her hat-trick of North-South Canadian artist duets at the **Justina M. Barnicke Gallery**, curator **Nancy Campbell** has handily accomplished a serious re-think of our national art history over the past three years. The first two pairings (Shuvinai Ashoona + Shary Boyle and Samonie Toonoo + Ed Pien) used a contemporary context to shatter any assumed cultural walls between the folks in Toronto and those in Cape Dorset. With her current combination of **Ohotaq Mikkigak**, an older artist who has developed a new drawing practice in common with his younger peers, and mid-twentieth century abstract painter **Jack Bush**, Campbell invites a longer look into the past for further points of synchronicity.



[Left] Ohotaq Mikkigak, *Composition (Landscape with Island)*, 2011, pencil crayon on paper. (courtesy Fehleley Fine Arts) [Right] Jack Bush, *Paris #5*, 1962 (collection of the Varley Art Gallery, © Estate of Jack Bush / SODRAC (2012))

Bush's paintings are rooted in varying degrees to the landscape, from slightly out there but recognizable trees to seemingly non-representational plains of colour. His expressive departures from the objective world are echoed in Mikkigak's found abstraction and reduction of detail in favour of arrangements of solid fields. Moving through the exhibition becomes a game of mix-and-match as connections reveal themselves, and paintings, despite originating as distant neighbours, sit harmoniously beside one another.

I was sitting with a group of friends this past Saturday, when I suggested to one of them – who happened to have done time as an art critic – that we wander over to the **AGO** to check out the recently opened **Evan Penny** exhibition. I usually conduct my gallery jaunts solo, but because we were in mixed company and Penny's sculptures are renownedly crowd-pleasing, I thought it would be as good an excuse as any to make my little art world more inclusive. I thought I'd at least have my fellow critic on side, but her response was less than enthusiastic. "I find his sculptures interesting in a... phenomenological kind of way," she said. So everyone ended up strolling through Kensington Market and I spent Sunday on my own in the presence of Penny's people.



Evan Penny, *Back of Kelly #1*, 2005, silicon, pigment, hair, aluminum

The curbside appeal of the work is the artist's undeniable technical craftsmanship in reproducing human flesh and features. The conceptual feint is his shifting of one medium (photography, specifically manipulated photographic images) into another (hyper-realistic sculpture). The resulting confusion is the payoff. The stretched heads are the most obvious version of this tactic and, like seeing your own stretched head in a funhouse, only so intriguing, hence my friend's cursory meh. Certain heads and Penny's *L.Faux* series push the phenomenological response to such eye-rattling levels that it's hard to maintain focus on these purportedly solid forms. In these instances, I'd argue that they reach an optical sublime. However, it's the rearview busts – heads facing the wall – that, despite the obtrusive set-up (i.e. barriers blocking you from craning around to where the face should be), manage to finally evoke an aesthetic response.

While I was at the AGO, I took a swing through *The Grange Prize 2012* exhibition. Voting doesn't close until October 30, but I'm going to make an early prediction with **Jason Evans** coming out ahead. My reasoning is thus: **Annie MacDonnell** is too dry and heady, and the piecemeal installation of her work doesn't do it any favours; **Emmanuelle Léonard**'s riot cops have a certain timely appeal and her inarticulate students are endearing, but once again, the totalizing link is missing; and **Jo Longhurst**'s series of gymnasts in action engages the viewers but there's not enough evidence of her as an artist, and not enough of a justification for how the photos are arranged to win over the punters. Which leaves us with Evans' playful, eye-catching, interactive, multimedia practice, handily stationed right at the gallery entrance. The Grange is a vote from the masses, so I'm making my bets based on populism. Evans' art is for the people.

**Justina M. Barnicke Gallery:** <http://www.jmbgallery.ca/>

Blue Cloud continues until October 28.

**Art Gallery of Ontario:** <http://www.ago.net/>

Evan Penny: *Re-Figured* continues until January 6.

The Grange Prize 2012 continues until January 6.



**Terence Dick** is a freelance writer living in Toronto. His art criticism has appeared in Canadian Art, BorderCrossings, Prefix Photo, Camera Austria, Fuse, Mix, C Magazine, Azure, and The Globe and Mail. He is the editor of Akimblog. You can follow his quickie reviews and art news announcements on Twitter [@TerenceDick](https://twitter.com/TerenceDick).

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