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At the Galleries: Around Queen's Park



Marc Courtemanche's *The Studio* on display at the Gardiner Museum.

Courtesy of the artist

Maryam Siddiqi November 19, 2010 – 2:13 pm

By Leah Sandals, National Post

The current fall shows at Toronto's big institutions are some of the strongest of the year. Treat yourself to one, two or three in a stroll around the Queen's Park area.

1. **Breaking Boundaries at the Gardiner Museum**

111 Queen's Park Circ., to Jan. 30

This striking exhibition highlights four youngish Canucks who use ceramics to address manga, mayhem, monsters and other Nickelodeon-friendly themes. As a result, the show seems specially designed to attract "kids" — both toddlers or twentysomethings. But in reality, *Breaking Boundaries* is a terrific exhibition for all ages and stages: Its pop themes tempt the masses while its new works impress art stalwarts. B.C.'s Brendan Tang, known for mashing up sci-fi gadgetry and Ming-period vases, appears in video as an Indiana Jones-style swashbuckler. Ontario's Shary Boyle surprises with ceramics that are bigger and rawer than ever before; these don't just tolerate cracks, but highlight them in gold. Saskatchewan's Marc Courtemanche offers a massive installation that looks like a woodshop but is largely crafted out of clay; it combines blue-collar workbenches and highfalutin' art studios to pleasing effect. Finally, Quebec's Carmela Laganse contributes fantastical vampire furnishings — regally upholstered objects that'd be right at home in *True Blood's* vampire-king-of-Mississippi mansion. Check the show's comment book, too; it traces viewer debates and demonstrates that when museums set out to engage "kids," they might just engage the kid at heart in all of us.

2. **Traffic at University of Toronto Downtown Campus (UTAC) and Barnicke Gallery**

15 Kings College Circ., to Nov. 28

Traffic, the first major exhibition to document the 1965-to-1980 period of conceptual art in Canada, is a great example of a show that plumbs the overlooked inner suburbs of art history — periods and movements that aren't young-and-downtown enough to seem sexy and aren't distant-and-ancient enough to seem exotic. The result isn't just a rote lesson on times and places; certain parts also feel fresh, relevant and entertaining. For instance, a newsreel of Vincent Trasov's 1974 Vancouver mayoral run — conducted in the guise of Mr. Peanut, a cartoon mascot who would rather tap dance than deliver terse policy statements — reads as particularly hilarious and hopeful, given Toronto's dreary election year. And overall, despite conceptual art's inevitably knowing edge, there's an unexpected earnestness and optimism that comes through — feelings absent from much of today's artmaking, which is steeped in our era's tendencies to irony, cynicism and disappointment. Attention to regional differences coexists with instances of poignant nationalism, such as Bill Vazan and Ian Wallace's *Canada in Parenthesis*, which temporarily embraced the upper 49th in massive parentheses. Though I've played hooky from *Traffic's* outposts at UT Scarborough and UT Mississauga, I'm still left impressed: Why can't more history lessons be as cohesive and compelling?

3. El Anatsui and Position As Desired at the Royal Ontario Museum

100 Queen's Park Circ., to Feb. 27

El Anatsui's survey at the ROM contains many beautiful, must-see works that demonstrate the artist's talent for spinning small, throwaway objects — such as bottlecaps and boxes — into hugely impressive sculptures. Unfortunately, many may miss the best work in the show, *Straying Continents*, which isn't in the main fourth-floor exhibition space, but on the third floor, just to the right of the Crystal's stairway. Placement problems also dog Anatsui's *Crumbling Wall*, which is uncouthly shoved into a dark corner of the ground floor's Chen courtyard. Layout issues also shadow an important show of contemporary African-Canadian photography, *Position as Desired*, bizarrely installed in a far corner of the museum's pre-Confederation Canadiana galleries. That hard-to-find locale is a shame, because Dawit Petros's portraits and curator Kenneth Montague's evocative family snapshots are worthy of wide attention. Though Anatsui and Montague are generously open to contingency, the ROM must pay more heed to navigation if it wants its renewed commitment to strong programming to actually be seen.

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