

Skating in the city of gondolas

Leah Sandals, National Post

Presented by



You won't hear about it on TSN or ESPN, but the Olympics started this weekend -- the art Olympics, that is. Yes, on Sunday, the Venice Biennale opened to the public, with Ontario-born, U. K.-based artist Mark Lewis tearing out of the starting blocks for Canada. Here, Lewis talks to Leah Sandals about competition, Canuck settings and the unlikely, anonymous star behind his Venice debut.

Q You're repping Canada at the Venice Biennale. Do you feel any pressure?

A Yes and no. It's an exhibition, and as such I should take it as seriously. Still, it comes with an enormous amount of competitive baggage. And it's interesting that nationhood is still attached. Many of my friends don't consider themselves national representatives; they consider themselves connected to the cities where they live and work, like London. This year, Britain and Germany chose artists living elsewhere to represent them. This mixing up is all good.

Q At the Biennale, you're showing films focused on Nathan Phillips Square and Bay Street in Toronto. Why bring these Canadian settings to international audiences?

A A lot has to do with serendipity and having always wanted to make films of these locations. I had in the back of my head [the idea] to make a skating film for a long time, because I love winter scenes in the history of art, and the way rivers become a social space when they freeze over, particularly for children. I've enjoyed skating ever since I was a kid and whenever I'm in Toronto I lace up my skates and go to Nathan Phillips Square. That said, I also think of these places as kind of generic, which is the kind of place I return to over and over in my work.

Q Sometimes your films focus on overlooked people in public, like the homeless or dog walkers. Why?

A I think I work intuitively, and it just feels sometimes like there should be people like that in the scene. Or sometimes, I've witnessed a situation very similar to the one I'm trying to depict. For example, I've been to High Park many times with friends who walk their dogs, and I'm fascinated with the complex way people move through that space.

One film I'm showing in Venice, *Cold Morning*, is actually shot at the corner of Bay and Queen Streets. It was something that I saw one day and I just got a camera and came back and shot it. It's seven minutes of real time unfolding as a homeless person cleans up his spot where he slept on a grate. That's a document -- no one's being directed to do anything, as happens in most of my films.

Q A number of Canadian artists, such as Roy Arden or Germaine Koh, have looked at homelessness. Why did you?

A Well, I don't know anything about this guy, and I don't think that my film reveals much about him. But I think it does reveal that at some level he's a human being who displays a very normal human characteristic, which is basic housekeeping -- looking after the place you're in and trying to bring a certain kind of order to a very limited domain.

I think people like that are often invisible; you walk by them and give them a dollar. But maybe, in this film, you're forced to look at

him and not see not a "homeless person" but a person. That would be an ideal reading.

There's a lot of criticism of this subject matter for making art, and I think that's total bull---t-- any subject matter should be open. When I shot the video, some people said, "That's wrong, you shouldn't be doing that." And I thought, "How is this wrong? How am I helping him by not shooting him?"

I don't think I have an explicitly social message. What I'm interested in is revealing the detail in life, so you can slow down and think about it.

Q You live in London, England. What do you miss about Canada?

A I miss Canada a lot, because my daughter lives there. I'm still Canadian, and have a Canadian passport. When I land in Vancouver, I love to go to Stanley Park, I love swimming in the ocean, I love cycling the ravines in Toronto. I feel like I'm at home there. I miss the winter, I miss the snow. I miss the sense of openness, the friendliness, that cliched sense that anything could happen. But that also applies to North America in general and to Los Angeles, one of my favourite cities. - The Venice Biennale continues in Italy to Nov. 22. Visit labiennale.org for details.