

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2009

VISUAL ARTS » MARK LEWIS

The accidental Torontonion

The video artist says he never set out to film the city, and his themes – the hopeful project of modernity, the inequities of urban living – speak to metropolises everywhere

BY SARAH MILROY

Cinematically speaking, it has long been the fate of Toronto to serve as the surrogate city. For decades now, Canada's largest metropolis has graced the silver screen, but surreptitiously, subbing in for Chicago (in *Chicago* and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*), New York (*Factory Girl*, *American Psycho*, *Cinderella Man*) and Boston (*Good Will Hunting*), even, somewhat improbably, for the North Pole (*The Santa Clause*).

In the realm of fine art, too, Toronto's uncanny universality has come in handy, or such has been the discovery of one of her former native sons – the 51-year-old London-based artist Mark Lewis, who represented Canada at the Venice Biennale this summer. Over the past decade, among his other endeavours, he has produced a small body of short, two to seven-minute films shot in Toronto that explore aspects of city life, with observations that could be applicable in any major Western metropolis. Six of these are being shown here this fall in a show at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, amid a flurry of other exhibitions, including two Toronto International Film Festival screenings of his recent documentary work.

What does he find compelling about Toronto? Nothing really. "That's what CBC Radio



Nathan Phillips Square, *A Winter's Night, Skating* (2009) creates a dreamy skating scene.

was asking me this morning," he said, laughing, when we met to talk in an uptown pizzeria on a sunny, breezy afternoon earlier this week. "I didn't know what to say." Though he lived in the city until he was 14 (his father was an editor, his mother a primary-school teacher, and he attended John Ross Robertson Public School and Upper Canada College), he confesses he has never particularly warmed to the place. The films he has made here, he says, have been more or less an accident: Because he happened to see things while working here on occasional stints, or

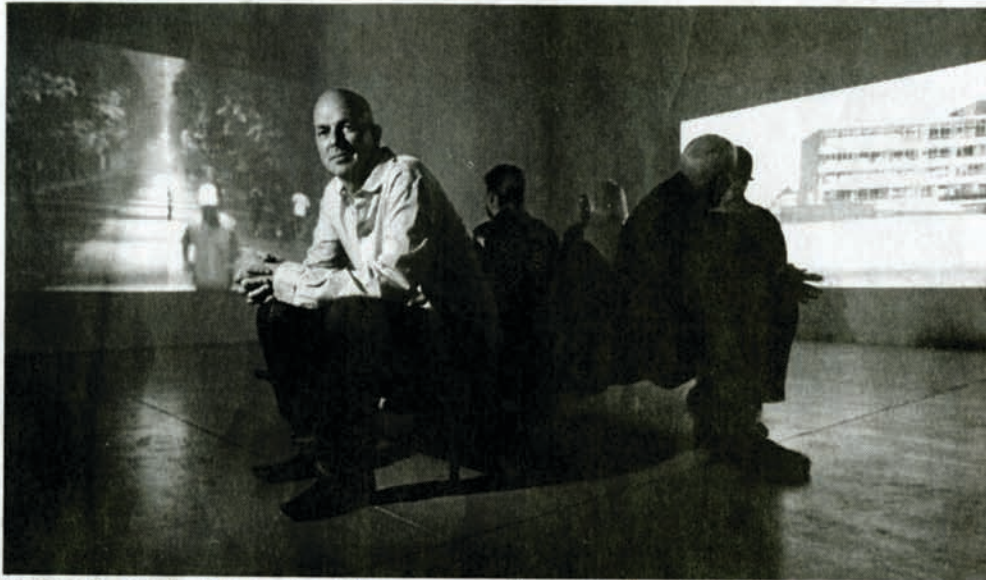
was just passing through, visiting family. Mostly, he lives in London, where he makes his work, teaches at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design and co-edits the critical journal *Afterall*. He has never set out to be Toronto's chronicler.

"I did find myself walking through the University of Toronto the other day, though," he adds affably, "and thinking, 'Okay, I get this.' But then it could have been the sunshine and the fact that people are wearing less clothing. That helps. But there is also this new sense of the people on the

street having a kind of relaxed confidence. Things don't seem so stylized."

For all his bemused equivocation, the city has embraced him. In addition to the Barnicke show, TIFF has screened his two new 40-minute documentaries about the film industry: *Backstory* (2009) and *Cinema Museum* (2008). The Art Gallery of Ontario is mounting three older works from their permanent collection, and his Toronto dealer, Clark & Faria, is showing new and newish works in a commercial setting in the Distillery District.

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Mark Lewis, who lived in Toronto until he was 14, says he shot his films of the city as he was visiting.

TIM FRASER FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

» "I know, it's kind of odd. I feel like I am taking over the city," he says with a laugh, when I ask him to confirm the lineup. "I may never be able to come back here again. Everyone will be sick of me."

This is unlikely. Known increasingly for his short films, which explore – in equal measure – the apparatus of cinema and the sociology of urban public space – Lewis is one of Canada's most respected mid-career artists. What is exceptional about the moment, though, is the chance to see his Toronto works in the city in which they were made.

Lewis's earlier works, like *Downtown: Tilt, Zoom, Pan* (2005), test-drove the cinematic capacities of the film camera, moving in and out and gliding forward and back, up, down and sideways in a descriptive tour of one of the city's fringe areas – a litter-strewn dead zone just east of the gleaming commercial skyscrapers. (In the distance we glimpse the CN Tower and all her towering kin.) *Airport*

winian view of the city from the vantage point of privilege. Up here, we are untouchable.

As a trio, the films worry at the subject of urban modernity, and what Lewis calls the "various motives of city building." How do human beings come together in cities? What kind of inequities and aberrations does the compression of rich and poor create? Who wins and who loses when the city itself is planned as spectacle? Who controls the process?

"There's this archeological layer of the city I am looking at," he says of the Toronto films. New City Hall, Terminal One and the TD Tower were all part of a moment of civic high hopes in Toronto, coincident with his childhood and early youth in the city. "There was an ambition here in relation to the project of modernity," he says. "The subway stations were built in that same spirit. All of these subjects carry with them that sense of promise."

In its modernist growth

spurt, of course, Toronto shares similarities with other cities, he says. "The apartment building that I shot in *North Circular* [a film he made in London back in 2000] could easily have been in Toronto."

"It's not geographically specific," he says, "but it's specific to a moment when there was a belief in the possibility of the future, the naive, utopian, sixties idea that poverty was going to be eradicated, that everyone was going to have appliances and air conditioning, that everyone was going to have beautiful public spaces where they could grow up and be happy." Likewise his cinematic tour of the Corbusier-inspired modern brick working-class housing complex Heygate Estate, which he filmed in London back in 2002. It looks an awful lot like Toronto's Regent Park, teetering similarly on the cusp of demolition.

If Toronto looks like anywhere, it seems like anywhere looks like Toronto too.

Video work at TIFF

Other TIFF Future Projections highlights:

» The art of editing can make or break the best of films, or it can be the basis for a whole new art form, as South-African artist Candice Breitz demonstrates in her brilliant and exacting work for DVD projection. Breitz's multi-monitored pieces are often built from Hollywood film clips artfully excised and rearranged for the extrusion of their deeper cultural meanings. This fall, she has brought her razor-sharp wit and keen sense of timing to her new work titled *Factum*, premiering at The Power Plant (opening Friday, Sept. 18, 8 p.m. to 11 p.m.). Her subject this time: identical twins and their often tortuous quest for autonomy. Breitz will discuss and show clips from her new work on Monday at 5 p.m. (Varsity 7).

» *Nights in White Satin* never had a more ghostly cover than in the lonely, whistled refrain underpinning the film projection *A Vicious Undertow*. A 10-minute projection piece by Danish artist Jesper Just, it is on view nightly at the Drake Hotel until Sept. 19, where it will cast a sexy and sepulchral spell. The lustrous black and white film reveals a cast of male and female mid-life characters adrift in a near-empty bar. Suspended in a kind of lounge lizard eternity, they while away their moments in obscure courtship rituals without consummation. Could this be the Drake at closing time? It gives you the shivers.

» S.M.

(2003) consists simply of a fixed view out of a plate-glass window onto the tarmac at Lester B. Pearson Airport's Terminal One (the lately demolished modernist period-piece designed by Toronto architect John Parkin in 1964). Harsh winter sunlight reveals the scurrying vehicles of the refuelling crews and baggage handlers with ruthless clarity, unmasking the working mechanics that underpin the dream of effortless transcontinental mobility. And *Off Leash*, *High Park* (2004) records a hectic moment in a busy dog park in the city's west end, with Lewis's downward-looking camera climbing and spiralling in the bare midwinter treetops – a backward, glancing look to the 19th-century ideal of recreational public space carved from nature.

Lewis is showing these at the Barmicke in combination with the three new works he premiered at Venice. *Nathan Phillips Square*, *A Winter's Night*, *Skating* relies on the technique of rear projection (one of Lewis's fascinations) to create a dreamy skating scene that unfolds in front of the city's modernist new City Hall complex (designed by the Finnish architect Viljo Revell and built between 1958 and 1972). Weirdly synthetic as a visual experience (the two skaters in the foreground were shot on a sound stage in Los Angeles), the film immerses us in a recreational space created to meet the ideal of the livable modern city – a place in which the harsher truths of urban life are systematically obscured.

Cold Morning documents the behaviours of a homeless man on the winter streets of the city's downtown business district as he performs his compulsive early-morning rituals. Lewis came upon his subject by accident, he says, while he was shooting *Nathan Phillips Square*. Recorded in less than

20 minutes and then edited, it is a cinematic haiku revealing the human impulse to create order and domesticity, even in the most improbable, impossible, of circumstances. We never see the man's face. "I felt that if you saw his face he would become a character," says Lewis. This way, we confront not an individual but a condition. At 7½ minutes, "the film forces you to take something in over time," he says – a mere fragment of a day that we come to understand as interminably drawn-out and desolate.

TD Centre, 54th Floor, meanwhile, consists of a long, downward-focused tracking shot from a high floor of the landmark Mies van der Rohe designed tower (completed in 1967), one of the city's prized architectural jewels. His camera moves slowly from right to left and then back again, taking the building's vertical girders in its elegant, magisterial stride. We see the rooftops of adjacent buildings and the sidewalks below – a starkly Dar-