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At Justina M. Barnicke: In A City

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Mark Lewis, Canada's representative to the Venice Biennale, brings his Toronto-centric work to Hart House

Brigit Katz

A homeless man, Nathan Phillips Square, and the busy street below the TD Centre are hardly obvious subjects for a gallery representing Canada at one of the world's most prestigious exhibitions of contemporary art in the world. They are, however, several of the unusual subjects featured in *Cold Morning*, a collection of short, silent films by renowned Canadian artist Mark Lewis, currently on display at the 53rd Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition.

Founded in 1895, the Venice Biennale is the world's oldest venue for the display of international modern art. Over the years, it has become highly revered as an important cultural institution. The artists featured in its exhibitions and festivals hail from an array of nationalities and employ a diverse range of artistic mediums in their work, including film, painting, sculpture, and theatrical performances. In keeping with the Biennale's multicultural tradition, the principal display of this year's exhibition, entitled "Making Worlds," showcases the multi-disciplinary work of some 90 artists from around the globe. In addition to "Making Worlds," the exhibition features galleries in 77 pavilions scattered throughout Venice, with each pavilion containing the artistic exports of a different country. Mark Lewis' *Cold Morning* is representing Canada.

It is both fitting and ironic that Lewis' work is being showcased in one of the world's most avant-garde venues of modern art. It is fitting because the *Cold Morning* exhibit features short films that are original portrayals of Toronto's urban life and architecture, and ironic because much of what makes Lewis' films so refreshing is his use of simple film techniques, some of which hearken back to an earlier era.

Lewis grew up in Hamilton, Ontario. He spent much of his youth and early career as a photographer in Toronto before relocating to London, England, where he is currently a research professor at the Central St. Martin's College of Art and Design of the University of Arts. His solo exhibitions have been featured in galleries worldwide, including P.S.1 (New York), BFI Southbank (London), and the Vancouver Art Gallery. His work is also part of group collections at the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, the Museum of Modern Art New York, and the Centre Pompidou (Paris).

In the late 1990s, Lewis began to experiment with filming ostensibly mundane urban locations using only the simplest of techniques. The resulting short films reveal both the exciting nature of overlooked urban spaces, and the way in which very basic techniques can be used to portray them in a dramatic manner. For example, in “TD Canada Centre, 54th Floor” (2009), one of the films on display at *Cold Morning*, the camera slowly moves along the 54th floor of the TD Centre, filming the street below through the building’s windows. Despite its simple execution, the film offers a striking perspective of the surrounding buildings, traffic, and pedestrians from a vantage point not normally experienced—or appreciated—by the average person. For Lewis, the exploration of modern architecture and its effects on urban landscape are of particular interest. “The wonder of a city is when you can be immersed in its architectural flux,” he says. “In those moments, you feel alive.”

Lewis has also experimented with rear projection, a technique in which foreground performances are combined with pre-filmed footage projected behind the foreground action. This technique first came into use in the 1930s, and was employed in instances when sound quality would have been compromised had the scene been filmed on location. With the advent of digital technology, rear projection is rapidly fading into obscurity, but for Lewis, it is a fascinating method of representing space on camera. “What I like about [rear projection] is the way in which it flattens the world,” he says. The appeal of rear projection is evident in “Nathan Phillips Square, a Winter Night Skating” (2009). In the film, a couple skates in the foreground over a projection of the Nathan Phillips Square skating rink; the background does appear to be flat, making the skaters look particularly life-like and vibrant in contrast.

For those who cannot make it to the Venice Biennale, the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, which commissioned three of Lewis’ films for the Canada Pavilion, is hosting *In a City*, Toronto’s first major exhibition of his work. Besides “Nathan Phillips Square” and “TD Canada Centre,” the exhibit features several others of Lewis’ silent shorts, most notably “Cold Morning,” from which the exhibit at the Biennale gets its name. For this film, Lewis set his camera a few feet above street level on a busy corner in downtown Toronto and focused on a homeless man methodically packing up his belongings as pedestrians and traffic went by. True to the artist’s form, “Cold Morning” reveals just how fascinating an overlooked space in a busy city can be. There is a particularly wonderful moment when a pedestrian hands the homeless man a plastic bag and appears to converse with him before walking away. The contents of the bag are never revealed, creating a poignant mysteriousness that can only be the product of real life. As Lewis himself coyly put in his self-professed best line, “Anything I do that’s any good is always by accident.”

Mark Lewis’ In a City continues at Hart House’s Justina M. Barnicke Gallery (7 Hart House Circle)



Cold Morning at the Canada Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2009;



The artist, Mark Lewis, whose works are on show at Barnicke Gallery.