

VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW

Bursts of light and fury



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SANDY PLOTNIKOFF
AT HUNTER AND COOK
Until May 16, 15 Ossington Ave.,
www.hunterandcook.com

Fans of Toronto artist Sandy Plotnikoff's intentional wardrobe malfunctions – textile sculptures and photos of dress-up play that take ordinary articles of clothing (hoodies, ball caps) and turn them into mischievous commentaries on mass assembly versus intimacy – will be surprised by his sumptuous new show at Hunter and Cook. While certainly sprightly, *Foil Problem* is a departure from Plotnikoff's famed boyish games. Who knew that under all that goofiness lurked an aesthete?

Foil Problem is a collection of largish works on paper that combine ink, shiny Mylar, photocopied paper and, of course, glittering foil, into collages that sparkle and dazzle, refract and reflect light. Imagine walking through a dark field with a flashlight and suddenly stumbling on a peacock's fan tail in full, shimmering spread, and you have some idea of the luminous power of these collages. Plotnikoff layers solarized, prismatic foils over each other to create a kind of scaly tapestry, a bejewelled surface that is both decadent and eerily transcendent.

This is art that aggressively sets out to bring pleasure to the viewer, and succeeds with excess. An apt opener for the clear, blindingly hot days of summer to come, *Foil Problem* should come with a UV level warning.

MODERN CANADIAN INTERIORS
AT HOTSHOT GALLERY
Until May 15, 18 Augusta Ave.,
www.hotshotkensington.com

My crankiness with the annual Contact festival of photography is a matter of public record. It's not that there's anything wrong with sponsoring hundreds of shows of photography – it's just that, well, there are hundreds of shows of photography. Careful calculation is the best approach.

To wit, find *Modern Canadian Interiors*, a group show tucked into one of Kensington Market's many homey coffee houses. A focused and concise collection of photographs of abandoned spaces within Toronto and the GTA, *Modern Canadian Interiors* is meant to be haunting, but also draws attention to an unexpected question – namely, once a space is left to its own devices, what happens to all the decorative trappings once so lovingly installed by the occupants? They rot, in the most attractive ways.

In every photograph, evidence of the human impulse to ornament lingers, defiantly staring down the wrecking ball and bulldozer that await. Deep, forest green wallpaper hugs tight to the top of a room, as if resisting the loosening that has already begun



Volker Seding's *Black Rhinoceros*, Brookfield Zoo, top, is a photo of the animal trapped in a 'jungle room.'

Richelle Forsey's *Reserved Madness*, above, shows the red velvet chairs from Toronto's now demolished Workman Theatre.

Sandy Plotnikoff layers materials into collages that sparkle, refract and reflect light, art that brings pleasure to the viewer.

at floor level. A multicoloured stack of used bricks, flecked with successive layers of house paint, look as inviting as a fresh box of Crayolas. A scuffed blue floor maintains a few clean inches of sky hues. In every photograph, fragility and resilience collide, creating a palpable tension. Photography that depicts desolation can be metaphorically obvious, but these works are more interested in quiet ruin

than operatic chaos, and are better served by such modesty.

If I had to pick a favourite image, it would be Richelle Forsey's sad, half-lit photo of faded red velvet seats from the now-destroyed Workman Theatre on Queen West, a place I'm sad to see knocked down. All lined up with (literally) no place to go, the upright but empty seats are as poignant and stoic as any

horde of terra cotta soldiers.

NATURAL HISTORY AT THE JUSTINA M. BARNICKE GALLERY
Until May 29, Hart House, 7 Hart House Circle, www.jmbgallery.ca

You could take a course at the University of Toronto on post-colonial discourses, and perhaps you should, or you could simply walk into the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery's new show,

Natural History, and get the same information without having to read Frantz Fanon (or pay a tuition fee).

Neatly curated by Jennifer Rudder, *Natural History* explores the problematic topic of museology, a.k.a. museum studies – in particular its relationship to peoples and places considered "exotic" by Western cultures.

If all that sounds terribly heavy and academic, relax;

Natural History is as visually vibrant as it is culturally informed.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is Trevor Gould's beautiful but dolorous sculpture of a giraffe, which itself is based on an early 19th-century painting. Eyes downcast and neck bent, the giraffe is a milk-coloured waif, a creature that looks as if it was made of ice cream and talcum, and is just as vulnerable. This is what we do in the West when we become overly curious about the other, the far-away – we weaken the object of our curiosity, in order to own it, and then recast it as helpless.

Equally revealing is Volker Seding's photograph of a rhinoceros trapped in a tiny "jungle room" in a Chicago zoo. Surrounded by cheesy representations (fake rocks, a ghastly mural) of a generalized, *Lion King* Africa, the once powerful animal is dwarfed by misperceptions, figurative and literal.

There is so much righteous anger in this photograph, so much wrongness on display, that it is difficult to view without increasing one's blood pressure.

End your tour with Mircea Cantor's looped video of a wolf and a deer pacing around each other inside a typical "white cube" gallery. Obviously tame, the animals, filmed in dramatic angles and Hollywood-style close-ups, refuse to enact the game of hunter and hunted. If anything, they look bored. And perhaps that's the cruellest cut.