

Collaborations

A match made in Venice

Designer Jeremy Laing and artist Mark Lewis join creative forces at this year's Biennale

Tiyana Grulovic

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The art buffs who flock to this year's Venice Biennale will be going for the installations, but they'll also be getting a glimpse of cutting-edge Canadian fashion in the process.

When the exhibition kicks off on June 7, the Canadian Pavilion will be featuring a film project by artist Mark Lewis – as well as a stylish staff bedecked in fellow Torontonians Jeremy Laing's fall 2009 designs.

The flirtation between fashion and art is nothing new – think Prada's comic book team-up with artist James Jean or Takashi Murakami's cartoony take on Louis Vuitton – but what's surprising about the Laing/Lewis collaboration is its uncommon cohesion.

"The synergy was completely fortuitous," Barbara Fischer, the curator of this year's exhibit, says of the happy meeting of the minds. "Jeremy brings an interest in the avant-garde, an interest in the modern art world, architecture and angles. It was a good fit with the cold, industrial landscapes of Mark's work. It's a compelling collection."

Lewis's work, *Cold Morning*, uses a rear-projection technique composed of several short, silent films to follow a chilly wind as it moves through Toronto. Sweeping views of the concrete jungle were taken from the city's landmark buildings; the filmmaker also blends documentary footage with scenes shot in a studio.

The film, however, is less about grand gestures than it is about small details. It is the artist's calculated approach and meticulous attention to detail that Laing relates to.

"Mark's work is really monumental, but there are so many subtleties to it," he said by phone this week. "It's a very Canadian way of thinking and working. There's this cold, precise, almost Calvinist feel to the work that ties into northern and even northern European traditions."

Laing describes the stark and industrial shades of grey in Lewis's project as a sober aesthetic that is perfectly in sync with the designer's fall collection, which features an industrial palette of black and grey and a series of photo prints featuring a detail of a brushed steel subway column.

A steel-print gown for the Biennale's curator is one of three outfits for the Canadian Pavilion's predominantly female staff. (The males are, sadly, designer-less this time around.) The other two designs are an architectural funnel-neck tunic for the deputy commissioner and a traffic-stopping orange "pylon" mini-dress for the remaining staffers.

"We wanted something to complement the work that would still be functional in the gallery space," Laing explains. "Without it looking like a uniform, we wanted to create a cohesive front."

It was Fischer's colleague, Eileen Sommerman, who pointed out the connection between Lewis and Laing. Fischer, who had been long aware of Laing's work, relished an opportunity to collaborate with and showcase another Canadian talent.

"There are a lot of creative connections between art and design, especially when it comes to innovation," Fischer says.

“And we want to bring attention to people doing innovative things.”