



## Toronto streets, with added fantasy

**Mark Lewis' fascination with T.O. landscapes shows in his film project now called *Cold Morning***

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Like almost nothing in his burgeoning career thus far, it happened completely by accident: Mark Lewis skittered across the frozen blacktop at Queen and Bay Streets one —21C morning last January. He was in Nathan Philips Square, shooting one of the four films that would comprise his project *Cold Morning* for this year's Venice Biennale to be held next weekend, and was trotting to Starbucks for a warm-up.

Once inside, fingers tingling as sensation returned, he spotted him: A homeless man rising to greet the day, bundling his blankets from the sidewalk grate, the heat from which almost surely keeping him from freezing to death while he slept.

Lewis was compelled. With the man's permission, Lewis shot him in his daily ritual, creating the film that would give his entire Venice project its name. It also liberated him from the project's working title, *Romance*, which made him squirm.

"It was purely accidental. It's a completely straight film, the kind of thing you've probably seen 1,000 times," said Lewis. "And it was an unusual way of working for me. I've never done that before. But there was a sense of humanity about this person, and I forced myself to watch. That's what all my films are really about – me trying to understand what it is about these situations, or places, that make me stop."

Lewis, 51, is from Hamilton; since 1997, he has lived in London, England. Still, many of those places are right here.

"About 40 per cent of his work is shot in Toronto, and 40 per cent in London," says Barbara Fischer, director of the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto. She proposed Lewis as the official Venice entrant, and was awarded the commission.

"And it's unusual, in a way, for someone who is abroad to come back specifically to engage with the Toronto landscape."

Lewis's *Cold Morning* suite engages Toronto almost exclusively, from the homeless

piece to a film in which two actors skate and twirl in front of the rear-projected backdrop of Nathan Philips Square that Lewis was shooting that freezing-cold day, revealing the artist's fascination with the outdated Hollywood illusory technique. The final film, of an almost-brawl that never fully sparks, has a rear-projected set that puts it in nominally in Vienna.

But Lewis's best-known work can seem extremely remote, a view of the world as though from 30,000 feet above the ground. This is almost literally true in the last of the *Cold Morning* films, in which Lewis slowly tracks a view of the city's bustling downtown from the 54th floor of the TD Centre.

The camera rolls, slow and meditative, along the building's glass curtain wall, the black steel mullions – signatures of the architect, Mies Van Der Rohe – framing the shot in an inexorably slow progression, the only real clue of motion at all.

The film embodies what has been Lewis's principle fascination in his works on film: casting art not as an object, but an experience, while somehow sticking to the pictorial tradition.

Not an easy task. Art liberated from the age-old practice of picture-making – paintings, for ages, and then photography – is largely a late-20th century phenomenon as performance, installation and text came to fore in the conceptual era. Lewis engages old traditions with modern technology, bringing the element of time to the contemplation of image and space.

The result it is a meditative oeuvre so oblique and subtle that time sometimes seems to stand still, but significantly, not quite: In his film *Algonquin Park, Early March*, Lewis sets his camera at a gauzy horizon, oh-so-slowly pulling back to reveal the treeline, a lake, and a cleared patch of ice where a group of children, reduced to flyspecks, skate and tumble in the snow. The scene recalls romantic landscape painting of a bygone era, cast, slow motion, into the present and future.

"The slowing down is the way in which I can better understand (these places), by giving them a temporality, space to breathe," he says. "One of the things that happens when you slow down and contemplate these things is you can start to have these experiences."

Lewis is careful in his work not to suggest anything prescriptive. "I take a lot of positions in life. We all do," he said. "But I don't think of them as opportunities to express my opinion on the world."

But the languorous pace, particularly in this era of hurry-up culture and rapid image and information churn, seems elegiac, an almost-anachronistic longing for a culture less consumptive and more contemplative.

Lewis's fascination with the naive-seeming innocence of the rear-projection technique, with its almost-intentional lack of verisimilitude, seems to suggest the same. Lewis cannily demurs. When he first saw it, crudely applied in a film from the '30s, "I just thought 'That's so beautiful; I'd like to do that – create an illusion that basically doesn't work.'"

"If something interests me, then I'll do it. I'm not inhibited by any kind of rule."