

## A Curator's Top Ten Art Encounters in 2007

(from **David Moos** ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Moos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Moos)))

1.

### **Kent Monkman: The Triumph of Mischief**

This summer the superb local exhibition was at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, and now in a slightly enhanced format, is currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art. Sitting in Monkman's teepee to screen his films which narrate a rustic, imaginary Old West is a pinnacle achievement of recent Canadian art. Monkman has become well-known for his flawless renditions of Albert Bierstadt's operatically-scaled Yosemite paintings peopled with transgendered and recoded art protagonists, but his film work affirms the comprehensive scope of his enterprise. Monkman's vision is totalizing, transforming every medium he touches (from painting, photography, film, sculpture and installation) into a glittery Disco stage upon which he struts his alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle.

2.

### **RAMP: Come Into Knowledge**

Acronym for Roy Ayers Music Project, the legendary, presumed lost recording from 1977 was issued as a CD in 2007. The fluttering vocals over layers of slowed funk offer sublime purview into a secret session of prior musical magic. Ayers produced the 9 tracks that fly under the mystic/psychic/spiritual banner Come into Knowledge. The mellowed version of "Everybody Loves the Sunshine" is a syrupy sonic trip and "Look into the Sky" is the great discovery—soaring into love.

3.

### **Julian Schnabel**

You don't need David Denby to reel off superlatives in The New Yorker ("Imperially free and generous as Schnabel's work is, the imagery—medical, erotic, religious—hangs together with enormous power" or, even better, "...some of the freest and most creative uses of the camera and some of the most daring, cruel, and heartbreaking emotional explorations that have appeared in recent movies") about The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, to figure out that this film is destined to be etched in the communal visual imaginary for years to come. If that is the obvious Schnabel pick (he won Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival for this film which he made in France, in French), the more enduring experience was with his paintings. I saw a survey exhibition of his installed at the majestic Palazzo Venezia in Rome and I subsequently had occasion to witness Schnabel at work in his studio and there is little doubt in my mind that he is the next explosion—poised for a return to art's epicenter. The 1980s are due to be re-examined and along with a thorough house-cleaning there will be a restoration of idols. Because of the strength of his recent painting, which for some unknown reason people have been slow to see, there

is little doubt in my mind that Schnabel will be recognized as one of the great American painters. Read Walt Whitman and look at a Schnabel painting. His images are what the American cultural grain is—and his range is (to appropriate some cinematic descriptors) imperially free!



4.

#### **Badhai Ho!**

Few of my experiences with television rival an appearance on Badhai Ho!, a weekly news journal of events and issues relevant to the Indian Canadian community. Otherworldly theme music and the beguiling, supple host Geetika teleported me to an imaginary Dick Cavett-in-India moment. Probing the depths of contemporary Indian Art, on view at the AGO in the exhibition Hungry God: Contemporary Indian Art, I was able to narrate televised imagery of Bharti Kher's bindi-based abstractions—the pullulating circles of colour teeming with the flow of life. And, as the images flashed, I made links between Subodh Gupta's photo-realistic painting of cookware juxtaposed to an installation of a stainless steel assortment of cookware. Gleaming commodities or necessities? Art...

5.

#### **Nuit Blanche 2007**

Did all those critics who lamented that year two was inferior to year one

either forget how to party with art, or perhaps they fell for the trap of Queen Street, passing-by the traffic-free zone of the University of Toronto? I spent 20 hectic minutes subbing for Dean Baldwin in his mini-bar, handing out drinks to all comers, inventing concoctions at will, and sampling the crowd's appetite for art by posing 'nuit' questions. Curatorial stand-up lubricated with liquor...a new genre? Based on art-aware or pithy answers many drinks flowed for free. And, what about "Slow Dance with Teacher," a tour de force work by Darren O'Donnell making genial use of a large, arch-ceilinged atrium in Hart House. Bystanders became lucky participants if selected by a dance teacher. All those anxious high-school dance moments came cascading back in the near dark, and when one danced it was like being in the eye of a hurricane, delirious calm. Suzy Lake's early film "The Natural Way" (1975) could not have been better placed, posed high in a staircase, vertiginous. The close-up of her face undergoing self-imposed maquillage triggered association to so much art that followed and eerily flows from it—from Genevieve Cadieux's billboard-sized lips to Cindy Sherman's insistence upon self-portraiture.

As with all sprawling art exhibitions, biennials, or festivals, one way to judge them is on the quality quotient: If there is enough good art, then it must be good. Forget the underlying logic or cohesiveness of a night like this, if you were fortunate enough to ascend the spiral ramp of the old Addison garage on Bay Street and encounter Willie Doherty's haunting audio before you glimpsed the rotating head of "Non-Specific Threat," or if you wandered D'Arcy Street in Michelle Jacques's expertly curated Zone B and voyeuristically watched the animated shadow play in house windows by Millie Chen, then you would have seen some good art. Similarly, had you dropped into Swintak's "ThunderEgg Alley: A dumpster Diver's Paradise," then you would have had a revelatory experience. But above all, one experience remains lodged in my memory and I can't tell if it was part of the official program or not (and perhaps that is the point of the entire undertaking) Adjacent to the Cecil Street Community Centre, across the lane in a small ground floor room of a house, the door was ajar. Emanating from inside a room no larger than my office, and with lower ceilings, came a pounding anthem of rock at full volume. Non-stop and flat out at concert speed, a trio of musicians was working hard: drummer flailing, guitar grinding, and a lead singer wailing—a thousand yard stare in his eyes. Before them posed a young woman on a chair, seen sideways. A band in a box, perfect.

6.

### **David Altmejd: The Index**

I remember stepping around the angular entrance to the Canada Pavilion in Venice and into the space-consuming entirety of The Index and feeling that feeling...yes, the art feeling. If not for this moment, which when it surfaces is the raison d'etre of my professional being, then why else travel the spaceways of art? Other such moments for me include, seeing the Clyfford Still exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum

in 1979, or seeing James Lee Byers perform at the opening of his exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum. When you have the feeling, you know what art is.

The Index struck me as a comprehensive statement. Initially I did not need to look at many of the details to know how pervasive and complete it was, how fastidious Altmejd's immersive construction was. But art often is in the details, and that is what makes The Index such an encyclopedia of an artist's mind. I am looking forward to watching Altmejd install and re-incarnate The Index in 2008 in the AGO—its new permanent home.

7.

### **Karin Davie**

Who knew that painting could still be this good, again. Having watched Davie's work since the mid-1990s and valued her measured progressions, I am convinced she is now making the best work of her career. With such a tight vocabulary of application, she has mastered a zen-like trance-stroke of ribboning gesture that refuses to succumb to being merely formal. Her newest painting gives one confidence that painting is inveterate, the milestone that can never be surpassed.

One feels a similar resurgence in the power of abstract painting with the work of Kristin Baker, a key memorable image from the Palazzo Grazi Venice—her room-consuming curving vortex of colour that merged the velocity of Formula One with Frank Stella's vertebrae. One other exceptional painting encounter: Callum Innes's new coal black cascade paintings shown at Frith Street Gallery's raw new space on Golden Square, London.

8.

### **The Gehry Staircase at the AGO**

My first steps onto the Frank Gehry spiral staircase, which hangs like an incongruously light ribbon, allowed me to levitate above the city of Toronto—free from the museum, art, architecture... Remember those paintings by Robert Yarber that ideally captured the excess and aspiration of the 1980s, with recumbent bodies flying above nocturnal cities? Yes, it is as just as I imagined, but better.

9.

### **Berlin: Reichstag**

Step through the side entrance to the Reichstag in Berlin on a rainy morning in November and meet Andreas Kaernbach the curator of the Federal collection for the past twenty years and take the tour with him of the collection he has overseen—first in Bonn and now in Berlin. A vertical Jenny Holzer doubles as a soaring architectural pillar, displaying in vertical speed selected speeches given at the Reichstag from 1871 through 1999—manifesting a proposition that the building, and indeed German democracy, is held aloft by the substance of political words. Within this impressive new federal complex there are

some excellent examples of art given an unfettered voice: Angela Bulloch's witty light-cubes, Hans Haacke's planting of the letters comprising "Der Bevölkerung" in a garden, and Jorge Pardo's chromatically luminescent cafeteria hovering above water are high points of a superb government art program, capped by an ultimate walk-in Christian Boltanski, Archive of the German Members of Parliament, 1999. This is Berlin so art about history is fated—as is every cultural utterance. My tour culminated with an elevator ride to the top of the Norman Foster re-imagined edifice. I viewed the dome and city skyline from behind glass, kept within a secure sequence of rooms—the public freely roaming on the roof beyond. Strange being trapped within a vitrine in Berlin.

10.

### **Tino Sehgal**

If I was writing Tino an email, this is what I would tell him about his recent work "This Situation" which New York critics are raving about:

Tino,

I think I must be the only person -- and I mean, the only one -- to have seen "This Situation" in Berlin on its final day and then in New York on its preview day. The same work in a state of conclusive maturity and enthusiastic nascence...

Language is the key to that piece and you should always to use interpreters who are well-schooled, and, to quote Kerouac, "hip without being slick." Isn't that how he characterized the Subterraneans?

I hope the room is big enough in New York, as it was just large enough in Berlin on that busy last day. I was leading my group of Toronto patrons and trustees and for the first few minutes they were perplexed by the German. I went up to one of the interpreters and asked "Can't you do this in English?" and she immediately obliged, changing the language of the work, which was great, although to our ears their English was a little hesitant, which gave the work another layer of texture. I wondered how intentional this is in the work: a comment about the fundamental un-translatability of thought? The essential subjectivity of the ideas being discussed, beauty and aesthetics?

I hope you are well.

As ever,

D

Even if The New York Times does not have its facts straight when waxing poetic a few weeks ago about Sehgal's entry into America, let the record be set straight here: the first time he set foot in the States (excepting a childhood jaunt to Florida at the age of 7) was in summer 2006 when he popped down to the New York—his first time there—from Toronto where he was ensconced for two weeks in order to produce "Kiss" at the AGO. Yes, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto is the first museum in North America to both exhibit and acquire Sehgal's work—fully one year before all that (justified) hoopla in the lower 48.

But, of all my Sehgal moments in 2007, the one crystalline encounter is without doubt, watching "Kiss" at the opening night gala of the Toronto International Art Fair. After two months of mounting the work in 2006 it seems like all that institutional experience coalesced in the near-three-hour span of "Kiss" perfectly performed at the Gala. Amid the swirl of money and glamour seeking art to buy the one work that was lent by a museum (along with Mark Lewis's film "Algonquin Park, Early March") that could not be possessed was "Kiss." It was the ultimate antidote to capitalist art-fair fever and the two interpreters Kate Hilliard and Steeve Paquet from Dancemakers appeared to have memorized "Kiss" intrinsically—as if they were no longer dancing, or acting, but were put there as real art incarnate. Watching the work for a few minutes with Tom Bjarnason, the generous, far-sighted patron who made "Kiss" possible for the AGO, I came to the conclusion that this is a masterpiece and began fantasizing future installations of "Kiss"—in the company of a room of modern sculpture spanning from Rodin and Brancusi to Caro and Kelly Mark.

11.

(Why limit the list to a mere 10?)

**Interviewing Raymond Pettibon** for the catalogue of *Wallworks: Contemporary Artists and Place*. In response to my question about his works painted directly on walls being ephemeral Pettibon replied: "That's what makes it worthwhile. It's not the two years that it's up, it's the lifetime, the eternity that will crash down on your face."

- sally mckay 1-03-2008 3:53 am

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[back to sally mckay and lorna mills](http://www.digitalmediatree.com/sallymckay/)  
(<http://www.digitalmediatree.com/sallymckay/>)

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The last line of #10 puts me in mind of a few years back when John Bentley Mays compared the work of Micah Lexier to that of young

Caravaggio, Rembrandt's portraits and Picasso. But somebody has still yet to put that one together as a fantasy show.

- anonymous (guest) 1-03-2008 6:49 pm

Oh anon, you made my morning.

- L.M. 1-03-2008 7:01 pm

You will know me when you see me by my special tattoos.

- anonymous (guest) 1-03-2008 7:09 pm

Dear David, How could you make Kent Monkman's work sound so boring?? I have had better conversations with you on the phone about more mundane stuff!!! Its ok not to sound like an AGO curator sometimes. How can you turn Kent's camp into that lingo?? His work is also fucking hilarious - good i feel better just using the f word.

Anyways you just be you David and keep rockin in the free world!!

x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x0x Andrew Harwood

- Andrew Harwood (guest) 1-12-2008 1:29 am

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