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FEATURES



The Year In Art

BY DAVID BALZER December 26, 2007 16:12

It's felt like a hiatus year for visual arts in Toronto — though, all things considered, the lack of dynamism is ordinary. The AGO has now been closed for almost three months, and I wonder if many outside the arts have noticed. (To me, the exciting thing about the renovation, set to be unveiled in fall 2008, is not the Gehry-by-numbers exterior, but the extra aspects of the gallery's collection.)

Similarly, the Toronto Alternative Art Fair International (TAAFI) disappeared — due, the loud rumours have it, to financial mismanagement — is it that TAAFI was redundant, many of its participants returning year after year with the same artists, and holding additional spaces at the TIAF to boot? Probably, though TAAFI's scenester-ism, for better or worse, actually did much to brand the city's cultural identity during the year, so I want TAAFI back.

Then there's Nuit Blanche, which seemed, even more than last year, not about the art. I liked the two works that everyone else did: Swintak Daniel Borins and Jennifer Marman's Spielberg-like alien crash landing at U of T. These met my minimum expectations for a Nuit Blanche: big enough to create a social happening around it. It should be clear, now, that it's a Koons-y, Disneyworld aesthetic that works best on a crowded street means the event needs more money (probably more tacky sponsors like Scotiabank), better management (the lineups, this year and last, were bureaucratic strictures (Janet Morton had to strike her pink house at 7am, which is insane) and a conceptual approach that puts fun and inter-

My favourite show this year comes right out of left (er, right?) field: U of T Art Centre's "The Virgin, Saints and Angels: South American Paintings from the Thoma Collection." There was so much to look at, such skill in rendering, so many powerful ideas, such intricate and bizarre symbology, that I don't think I saw anything else I saw. There's an affinity, however, between this and the contemporary shows I enjoyed: those by Kent Monkman, Kris Knight, Sakis, St. Flores, and Dan Kennedy (whom I was much too hard on in my Eye Candy review).

Figurative art is back, goddammit, and though it has a way to go in asserting just what it's trying to do — rather than merely being pretty and decorative — it has more relevance for me, and for most art lovers I know, than, say, Rirkrit Tiravanija's brick wall at OCAD, which epitomizes the worst of contemporary art masquerading as post-structuralist provocation. Sure, it takes guts to block the entrance of a gallery (yawn), but it takes more to believe it's one amenable to skill, communication and even transformation. It's happened before and it is, slowly, happening again.

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