

Globe Visual Arts

Gary Michael Dault A new media work by David Rokeby casts a kinetic spell. R16 ➤

PROJECTION

Doing it in the dark

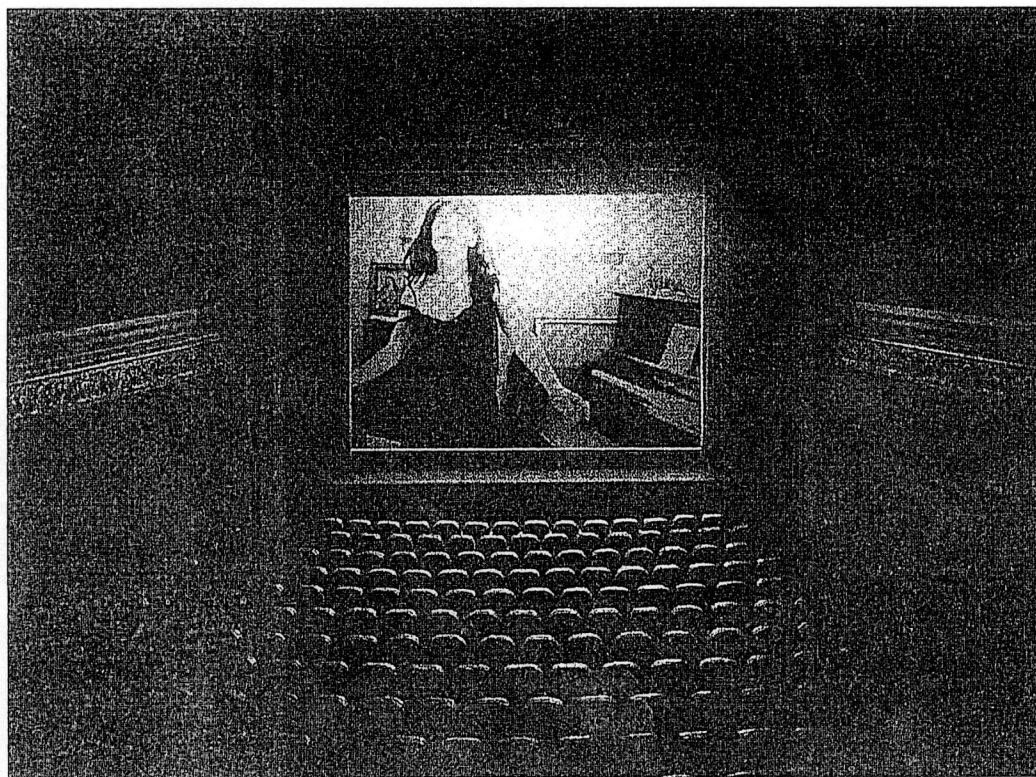
After three decades, the self-aware spectacles of projection art are now sitting squarely in the art world's mainstream. A new retrospective skilfully maps the genre's fascinating, maddening history, **Sarah Milroy** writes

Over the course of the past thirty years or so, a new artistic medium has become mainstream in the world of contemporary art: the projection. In this art form, the image moves – usually against the wall in a darkened room and generally accompanied by sound. Often a story unfolds, or a fragment of a story, or something that makes you want a story. But it's not a movie. It's something else.

Major international shows and biennials from Istanbul to Pittsburgh now frequently include hall upon hall of darkened cubicles filled with projections, separated by heavy black curtains muffling the sound spill from one room to the next. One wanders between them like a traveller in an enchanted forest (trying not to step on the feet of the other souls in the dark), pausing here and there to be enveloped by spectacles that last from a few minutes to a quarter of an hour, and often more.

Barbara Fischer, director/curator of the University of Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, has just launched a four-venue exhibition that traces the projection's ascendancy from the mid-sixties until today, from a Canadian perspective. While the earliest projections involved film – and we have an internationally acclaimed classic on view in the current show in the form of Michael Snow's *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974) – artists in the seventies turned to video (then a new medium) and, later, to digital recording, embracing new technologies as they became available.

Many of these works have been dazzling, but just as many have been far from it, with artists relying upon sheer noise, scale, techno-trickery and the charged content of found imagery (pornography, news footage, etc.) to get a rise from the



No happy endings here: Janet Cardiff and George Bures-Miller's *Muriel Lake Incident* plays out two dark plots within a miniature movie house. COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS, GALERIE BARBARA WEISS, BERLIN, AND LUHRING AND AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK

viewer. I remember back in the early nineties having a discussion with John Bentley Mays, who was then the art critic of this newspaper, about a video installation I had just seen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The work in question was Bruce Nauman's *Anthro-Socio*, and I was rapturous about it until Mays asked me to consider how it would be possible not to be moved by a giant bald-headed man 20 times my own size screaming "Feed me!

Help Me! Eat me! Hurt me!" in a darkened room at the top of his lungs. He had a point. By way of contrast, he asked me to consider the emotional current in a painting by Mark Rothko, an effect achieved through the mere application of paint on canvas. Projection art, he concluded, was cheating.

Of course, Mays was playing devil's advocate, but his skepticism was helpful, and it has stayed with me. Fisher's show generally separates the wheat

from the chaff, focusing us on works that hold a legitimate claim to our attention, and delivering an authoritative pocket history of the medium in Canada. This show pays due attention to our structuralist-influenced founding fathers, among them Snow, Stan Douglas, John Massey, Ian Carr-Harris and David Askevold, all of whom are indebted to structuralist thinking, and have used the medium to dismantle the mechanics of perception

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as well as cinematic traditions.

The screen, one of the primary requirements of film, has been one area of inquiry. At the University of Toronto Art Centre, Askevold's *Accelerations* (1972) consists of the raking projection of a beach scene onto the corner space of the gallery. The walking figure of a man seems to zoom forward as the image is stretched along one wall, only to be brought up short as it turns the corner.

In an adjacent gallery, Snow makes cinema a two-sided experience, provoking us to hop back and forth from one side of the screen to the other in an impossible effort to check the two views simultaneously. Recorded by two cameramen facing each other, actors interact in the space under Snow's direction, performing physical acts that dramatize an imaginary boundary line between the two cameras' perspectives.

Carr-Harris is showing a two-part, furniture-like wooden sculpture with film from 1970-71. One element supports the film projector, and the other receives the illumination from it: the words *EMPIRE PIECE* projected onto an elevated wooden screen. In this work, Carr-Harris declares himself doubly colonized. Choosing a faintly Victorian vernacular for the object (with its homely, pseudo-European wooden turned legs), he also refers to Warhol's famous 1964 film of the Empire State Building, recorded over eight hours, from dusk to dawn (another deliberately boring movie, like this one). Carr-Harris thus situates himself in the shadow of the glamorous American art star, with subtle subversion suggesting Canada's role in relation to its imperialist neighbour, while also positing himself as the inheritor of crusty 19th-century British tradition.

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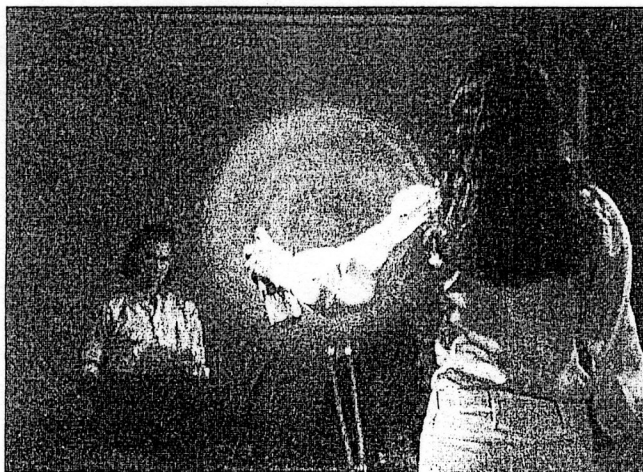
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Seeing things that aren't really there

Other early champions of the medium are here too, like the Polish-born artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, who had a strong presence in Canada in the eighties before decamping to teach at MIT in Boston. A series of black-and-white prints at the University of Toronto Art Centre documents some of his most notorious projects on this side of the border, like his projection of an American Cruise missile onto a rock face at Bow Falls, Alta. (during the Cruise missile crisis), or the projection of a man's hand plunging a dagger into a clothed body on the column of the South African War Memorial on Toronto's University Avenue.

It's great to revisit these golden oldies, and Fisher's selections are astute, but the show also brings us up to date on more recent developments. London-based Canadian Mark Lewis is showing *Children's Games*, *Heygate Estate* (2002), one long continuous shot that takes us through a rundown housing project in East London, an eerily masterful, disembodied tour of the failed modernist utopia.

Kelly Mark is showing a jumbled pile of identical TVs all



With *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), Michael Snow makes cinema a two-sided experience, provoking us to hop back and forth between two sides of the screen. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

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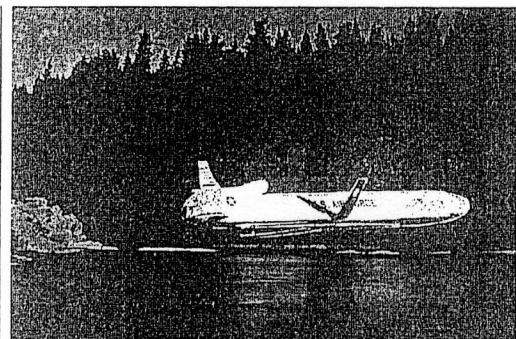
turned on and projecting an eerie blue light that flickers in unison. Titled *Commercial Space* (2007), the work was made by the artist recording the light that is reflected on the walls of her studio during TV commercials, and then playing that back on the pile of monitors simultaneously, sensitizing us to an aspect of the

viewing experience that we are inclined to overlook.

Nathalie Melikian's new work *Science Fiction* is a sequence of text fragments projected on the wall, an alphabetized inventory of cinematic clichés (from the "d" section, for example: "dead bodies everywhere" and "delta quadrant") and structural elements ("dialogue" and "dolly shot") accompanied by a pumped-up *Star Wars*-style musical score that is oddly affecting. The effect is wryly comic. See how easily we can be manipulated?

At Blackwood Gallery, in Mississauga, Nestor Krüger is showing his bleak but mesmerizing *Analogue* (2005), a three-channel black-and-white work that proposes a digitally generated architectural space. Our gaze is carried along on a series of train tracks that materializes and dematerializes beneath us, intriguing but also disorienting.

Melikian, Krüger and Mark share a fascination with dismantling and analyzing the cinematic experience. But the impulse toward storytelling also remains strong, even if it is expressed in a way that makes a conclusive understanding problematic, or even impossible. At Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Janet Cardiff and George Bures-Miller are showing one of their best works: *Muriel Lake Incident* (1999), a projection ensconced within a miniature movie house, complete with faux balconies and rows of seats. You put on headphones to listen and watch as two stories unfold. The first is the murder thriller that is developing on-screen. The second is a parallel drama involving a woman and her male companion in the audience, whom we



Krzysztof Wodiczko put this provocative image of a Cruise missile onto an Alberta rock face. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE LÉLONG, NEW YORK

seem to overhear seated behind us.

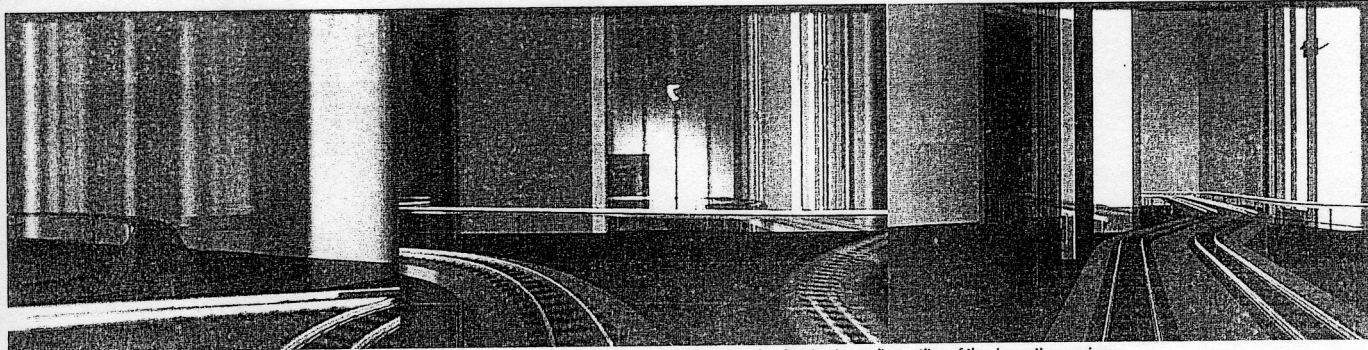
In an atmosphere of gathering anxiety, you hear them sharing popcorn and exchanging observations from their day (for example, noticing the creepy guy outside the theatre on the way in). Suddenly, just moments after the woman leaves to meet someone in the second row, the cinematic image on the screen appears to burn through to white, as if the projector has caught on fire. A shot rings out, and you hear the audience flee in hysteria. Then, right at your shoulder: maniacal laughter. The two plots intermingle, one artfully but ambiguously suspended within the other.

Calgary artist David Hoffos also toys with our narrative yearnings in *Bachelor's Bluff* (2005), a projection installation from his *Scenes from the House Dream* series. In this iteration, Hoffos creates the illusion that we are looking through a little window onto a night scene at the beach. The small figure of a man seems to

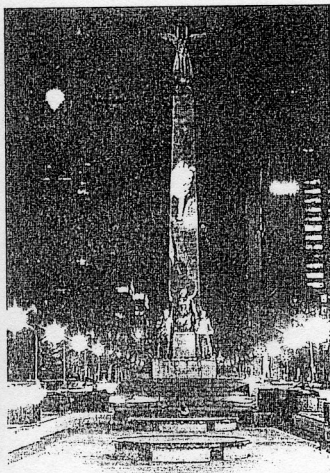
pace on a bluff, near his parked car. We see the waves lap on the shore below him. (In fact, it's the reflection of a simulation on a nearby monitor, reflected in the darkened pane of the window.) There is a magic to Hoffos's effects that harkens back to Georges Méliès and the earliest, jerry-rigged experiments of French film at the turn of the 20th century. Hoffos returns us to that sense of delight.

This fin-de-siècle mood also permeates Stan Douglas's 1986 work *Overture* (at Doris McCarthy Gallery), in which flickering archival footage taken from a train in the mountains is married to a delicately poetic passage from Marcel Proust describing the moments between sleep and waking. (The image takes us through a series of tunnels, evoking unconsciousness.)

Rodney Graham's *Coruscating Cinnamon Granules* (1996) likewise recalls the antique charms of early cinema. The spice is sprinkled on a coiled stove-top element that



Nestor Krüger's *Analogue* (2005) is a bleak but mesmerizing trip through digitally generated space — it's intriguing, but also disorienting, a dismantling of the cinematic experience.



Wodiczko's *South African War Memorial* (1983) projected violence onto the Toronto monument. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE LELONG, NEW YORK

is heating up in the darkness, transforming the granules from intermittent sparkles to a blazing vortex before the light once again dies away. Prelude, suspense, climax and denouement — the whole arc is right here in comically condensed form.

Is this cinnamon, or cinema itself? Sitting in the dark and watching the screen fade to black (Graham seats us in a mini movie house within the gallery), I watched the last winking points of light subside, and found myself thinking about the essence of this medium's delight: the magic of seeing things that aren't really there, and the beauty of light playing against the darkness and over the surface of things. In Graham's deft hands, an inconsequential domestic event — the spilling of cinnamon — takes on a kind of magisterial significance. The cosmos is unfolding over toast and tea.

» *Projections continues until June 17 at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, University of Toronto; University of Toronto Art Centre; Doris McCarthy Gallery (U of T Scarborough); and Blackwood Gallery (U of T Mississauga). For more information, call 416-978-8398.*