

Kelly Mark's Stupid Heaven

By Nicholas Walsh

"I really should pay them back. I really should put something on that before it gets infected. I really should buy some asparagus. I really should try and improve my vocabulary. I really should get the bills paid. I really should punish all those who defy me. I really should branch out...". In the light of refusing to accept the inner voices that steer us away from living in the now and into restless anxiety and future planning, Toronto-based multimedia artist Kelly Mark showcases her Stupid Heaven exhibition starting this Saturday, January 12 and running through February 24 at the Cambridge Galleries' Queen's Square location.

Stupid Heaven is a survey exhibition examining Mark's conceptually based explorations. The exhibition features a selection of the artist's unwavering investigations of the mundane and the everyday, ranging from photographs of broken parking meters to her clever appropriations of broadcast television. Curated by Barbara Fischer for the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery in Toronto and the Blackwood Gallery in Mississauga, the exhibition presents key works from Mark's past twelve years of production, including drawing, sculpture, video, performance, audio, and television-based projects. There is, however, a corresponding theme in her work. And for visitors of Mark's Stupid Heaven, to figure out what that theme is, it really shouldn't take all that much time.

Time: time wasting and time keeping. These are primary motifs that play themselves out in Mark's showcase. What is the utility of making art? Is there one? If so, could we call it a job? What are its requirements? Mark, the working-class artist, who sees the beauty in the value of labour many might call insignificant, praises the splendour of a furrowed Kleenex and the intricacy of her pet cat's exploration of the world. In doing so, Mark forages through hours of antiquated film and television footage, and observes the logging and tedious ramblings of her own itinerant mind.

Only recently has Mark turned to television to foster her development. Instead of taking issue with the content on television, however, Mark centers her interest on a more implicit aspect of its presence by concocting installations that consist of the iridescent glow typical of specific program genres, such as pornography and romance. Non-figurative pieces such as 30 Minute Stare (precisely what it sounds like) and The Kiss (two televisions arranged in an intimate embrace exchanging rhythmic pulses of light) draw the reader's attention to the set itself rather than the text that is generated from them.

Fatigued (or aroused) by this stage in Mark's exhibition, viewers are then confronted by REM, the artist's two-and-a-half-hour tangling of paralleled narrative television scenes excerpted from 170 different sources that play in an installation of four living rooms equipped with couches and stalled clocks. The piece begins with a series of studio logos – the Arctic mountain range, the winged unicorn, the lion roaring, and the Greek goddess with her blazing lantern. It then proceeds to display a variety of opening credit styles, and, finally, the monotony of channel surfing. While this may sound like a simple equation for boredom, by displaying the similitude of television content, the installation makes challenging and amusing statements on how pop society structures culture, work, and leisure. The effect is strangely engrossing; readers will find themselves engulfed in and overwhelmed by the medium itself.

Mark's Stupid Heaven also features work from a variety of other media. In Take Placed, one of the show's most spicy works, a series of photographic sketches illustrates litter that has not been merely tossed away, but rather stylishly placed by passersby, who take it upon themselves to wilfully penetrate the urban fabric, revealing, in the process, the many sexual possibilities in an urban environment. For instance, in one photograph, a tissue is pressed into the cracks of a red picnic table. In another, a pink phone-message slip is folded upon itself and comfortably inserted into a white metal door hinge. With these subtle gestures of intimacy, Mark not only observes urbanites' rapport with the big-city machine, but also brings forth her own prospect of the compassionate world under siege. In doing so, she fashions still-life portrayals of the sometimes cozy and sometimes aggressive relationship man has with her or his environment.

Taken together, Mark's pieces offer the simple excitement of the everyday and a self-sustaining rejection of consumerism mixed with cutting dark comedy and an unflinching critical look at the stupidity many of us seem to exhibit in our supposed heaven on earth. Accordingly, Mark has become an internationally respected neo-conceptualist.