

VISUAL ARTS ▸ REVIEW

Pictures are out – experience is in

Long known as a hub for photography (think Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham), the Vancouver art scene is undergoing a shift to works that engage all the senses, **Sarah Milroy** writes

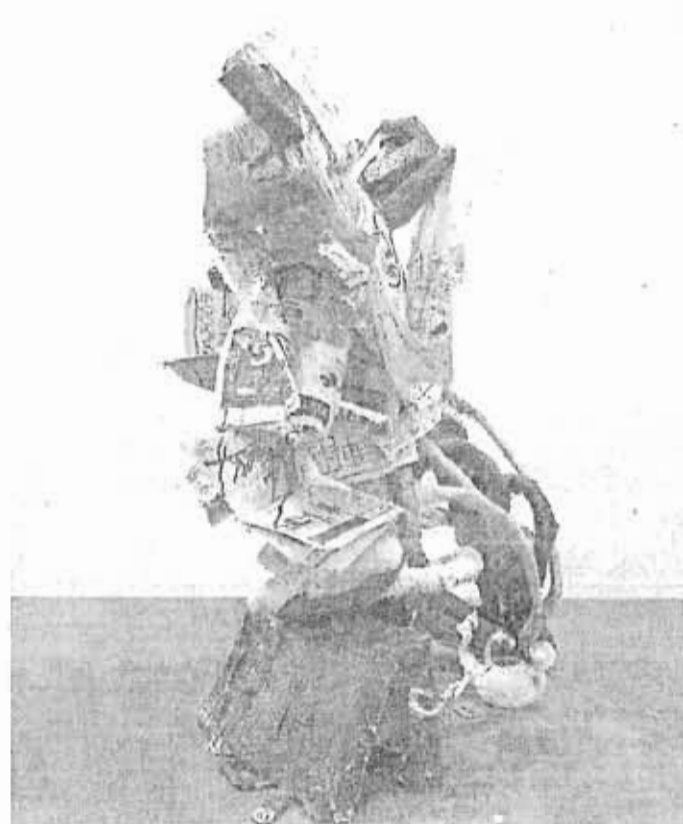
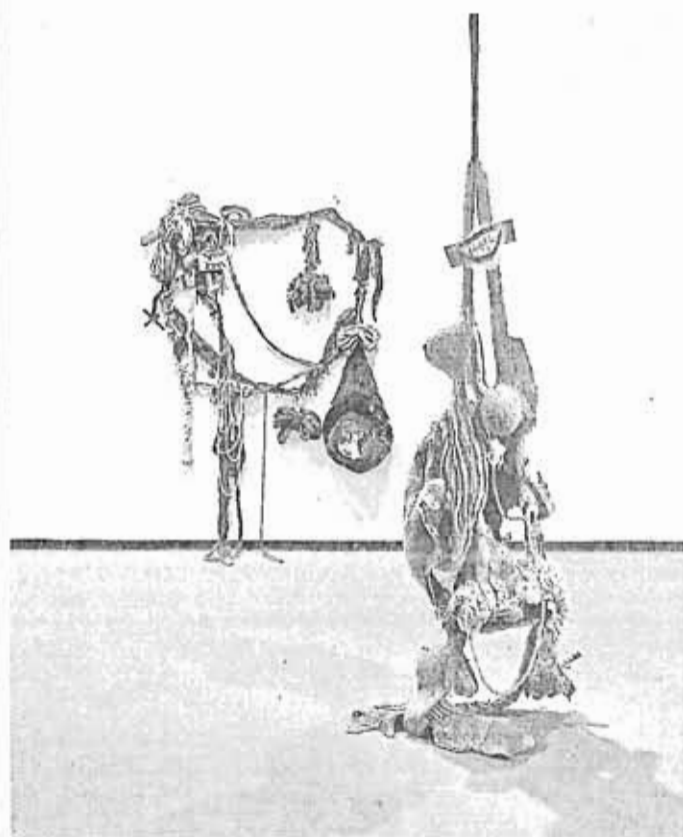
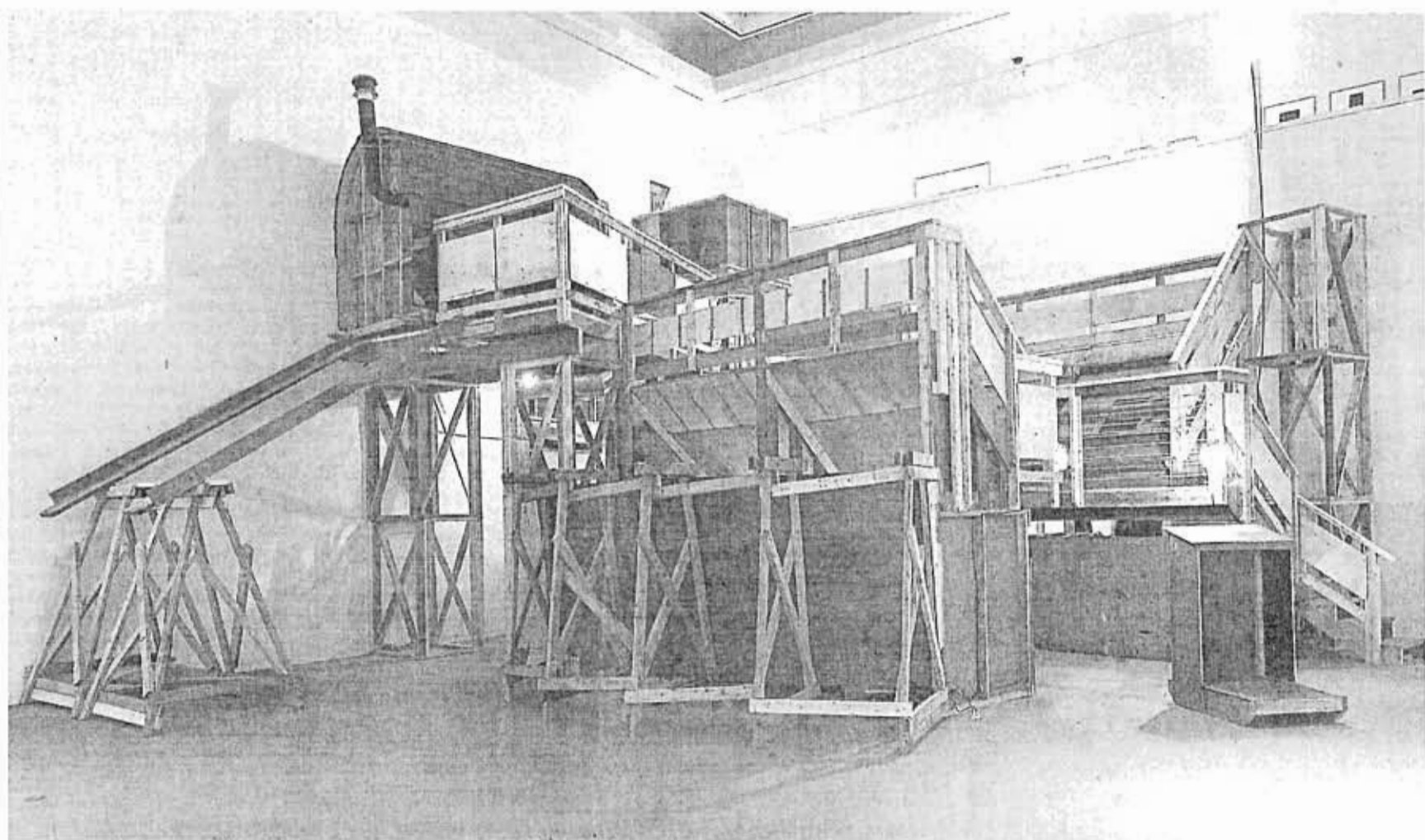
VANCOUVER

For decades now, the Vancouver art scene has been known as the seedbed for new photo-conceptual art, with artists of note (Roy Arden, Stephen Waddell, Scott McFarland) following in the footsteps of artists like Jeff Wall, Stan Douglas, Rodney Graham, Ian Wallace and Ken Lum. So, how odd to attend a group exhibition largely devoted to recent art from British Columbia, as I did last week at the Vancouver Art Gallery (the show is titled *How Soon Is Now*) and find almost no photo-based art on view.

A tour of the local scene also turned up nothing on the photography front. Instead, sculpture and installation were on the menu, a diet of visceral sensation that only the three-dimensional can deliver. The Henry Art Gallery's touring show of work by Liz Magor, a senior Vancouver sculptor and noted teacher and mentor to many younger artists, is on view at Simon Fraser Art Gallery – a body of work that teases our visual certainties with simulations, inviting touch. Titled *The Mouth and Other Storage Facilities*, it explores her fascination with hoarding and excess, bringing found objects (candy bars, bottles of booze) together with immaculately rendered replicas (party trays, dead mice) made from a rubbery polymerized gypsum.

At Catriona Jeffries, newcomer Gareth Moore is exhibiting the vestigial accumulations from his walking tour of North America and Europe – a collection of found objects that he has crafted into sculpture, physical testimony to his body's journey through time and space. And, at Charles H. Scott Gallery, Germaine Koh is growing a garden of weeds (complete with muddy footpath), transplanted whole from an abandoned lot at the foot of Main Street in Vancouver's Downtown East Side. Entering the gallery, you smell the damp soil, a sensory affront to this white-cube *sanctum sanctorum* of the purely visual. These days, it seems, the body must be accounted for in Vancouver art in a new way. Pictures are out; experiences are in.

How Soon Is Now, organized by the VAG's Kathleen Ritter, is the result of more than 100 studio visits, with the list ultimately whittled down to 34 artists. The éminence grise of the show is the video artist Paul Wong. However you may view his work (and it can at times come across as enfant-terrible affectation), there's no denying that – when it comes to singing the body electric – he's the go-to guy, for more than three decades making works that explore, among other things, race, human sexuality and the occasional foray into drug abuse. (One work here, titled *Perfect Day*, extols the pleasures of ice cream, heroin and cigarettes.) His most powerful work in this show, though, is *Storm* (2009), quite simply a video recording of a car ride at night in heavy rain. We look forward to the road



The father and sons team of Jim, Cedric and Nathan Bomford allow people to climb the sprawling construction that is *The Office of Special Projects* (top), a work that blends crude stadium bleachers with something that looks like a prison watchtower. Luanne Martineau's representations of body parts are made from densely pin-felted wool and other textiles (bottom left); while Rhonda Wepler's and Trevor Mahovsky's productions of papier-mâché and clotted paint evoke bricks, canned goods and potted plants. RACHEL TOPHAM/VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

ahead, while the noise of the slapping windshield wipers and water hitting the roof surrounds us in a deluge of lush, percussive sound. What you see and hear, you also come to feel in the body: the delicious pleasure of being inside a warm, dry place while all about you nature rages.

The father and sons team of Jim, Cedric and Nathan Bomford also set the stage for sensation with their sprawling construction *The Office of Special Projects*. (The work takes its title from a short-lived department in the Bush administration which brought us the "data" regarding Iraq's alleged WMDs.) Building their structure from found lumber transported from nearby Bowen Island, they created a work

that blends crude stadium bleachers with something that looks like a prison watchtower, and, way up top, a little shingle-clad survival hut housing a wood stove and kindling. Morphing between architectural forms, it puts us through our experiential paces (you're allowed to climb around in it), evoking the realms of both public and private communion, and the fears and comforts that such spaces afford.

At times the move toward tactility produces work that feels a trifle light – as with Kristi Malakoff's giant skull image crafted from 12,000 paper flowers, or Kathy Slade's giant black pompom, which sits waist-high at the exhibition's entrance. But some works really pull the rug out from under

you, like Christian Kliegel's faux-aluminum elevator doors (designed to riff on Arthur Erickson's modernist revamping of the VAG's historic courthouse building), which he has installed in various locations throughout the exhibition, or Mark Soo's audio installation, which broadcasts the subtle ambient sound of partying and other noises from behind the gallery walls.

Other pieces go for the gut, like Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky's gooey-looking concatenations of papier-mâché and clotted paint evoking still lifes of the unlikeliest objects (bricks, window panes, canned goods, potted plants, magazines and newspapers). Luanne Martineau is the other high priestess of ooze here. Her

disemboweled-seeming representations of body parts, mad from densely pin-felted wool and other textiles, evoke the paintings of Philip Guston and the cartoons of R. Crumb. As with Wepler-Mahovsky's sculptures, the eye gives you wet, but the material itself goes in another direction, setting up a contradiction between how something looks and how it might feel to the touch.

Germaine Koh makes an appearance in the VAG show too exhibiting a 2005 work titled *Fair-weather forces (sun:light)*, an installation which attunes our senses to the natural world. Gallery lighting in a small exhibition space is wired to fluctuate brighter or dimmer depending, from moment to moment, on the level of light in the sky outside. In this way, Koh links the hermetic interior of the gallery – where distracting sensory stimuli are traditionally eliminated – to the world of tactile experience beyond its walls.

In a way, Koh's installation is a companion piece to Wong's rainy night drive. This is visual art that delivers us from the purely visual back to the work of physical experience with all our senses awakened. Instead of bringing us the instantaneous photographic image – or the digitally enhanced photographic simulation – these artists direct us from the world of images to the world of things, inviting us to grapple with them at first hand.

» *How Soon Is Now: Contemporary Art from Here* continues at the Vancouver Art Gallery until May 3. Liz Magor: *The Mouth and Other Storage Facilities* continues at the Simon Fraser University Gallery until Feb. 21. Germaine Koh: *Fallow*, at Charles H. Scott Gallery closes on March 8, and Gareth Moore closes at the end of this weekend at Catriona Jeffries Gallery.