

Akimblog



Vancouver

Judgment and Criticism in Contemporary Art Conference | How Soon is Now at the Vancouver Art Gallery | Germaine Koh at the Charles H. Scott Gallery | Isabelle Pauwels at Presentation House Gallery | Alison Yip at CSA Space

posted by Aaron Peck - March 12th, 2009.

Dogs and judgment have been much on my mind. Dogs because the word cynic comes from the Greek meaning “dog-like” and judgment because of a recent conference. The cynic Diogenes once said, “Of what use is a philosopher who doesn’t hurt anyone’s feelings?” The same might be said of the critic. **Fillip** and **Artspeak** recently co-hosted a conference on this very topic entitled *Judgment and Criticism in Contemporary Art* (full disclosure: I sit on the board of Artspeak, though I have no part in any programming). I couldn’t make it to all of the presentations, but **Diedrich Diederichsen**’s talk caught my attention most; analyzing the cultural-historical shift in criticism over the past thirty years, he argued for the continued role of judgment in criticism.



Instant Coffee, Nook, Number One: Wish You Were Here, 2007, mixed media

How Soon is Now: Contemporary Art From Here, an auspicious attempt to identify a British Columbian zeitgeist, opened recently at the **Vancouver Art Gallery**. The press release heroically announced that the selections were made from over one hundred and twenty studio visits. The fact that few of the artists in Vancouver (let alone the rest of the province) that I would have included (in that useless if-I-were-President fantasy a lot of people play when criticizing curation) are present, I guess only highlights just how many contemporary artists BC has. There is a lot of work here, some of which I think strong (among many: *Nooks* by **Instant Coffee**, Christian **Kliegel**'s useless elevator doors, **Dan Starling**'s video, **Aaron Carpenter**'s flag), some less so. The exhibit's size makes considered responses difficult because one has to address many conflicting and intersecting themes, let alone the more desirous task of engaging with each work. *How Soon is Now* requires far more space than an Akimblog roundup provides, so the following remark need to be read with the caveat: there is much more going on than this. The exhibition as a whole evinced a trend toward populism. For instance, the exhibition avers that a young generation of contemporary artists in British Columbia are concerned with "interactivity." The truth of that statement is debatable as a rubric for the whole generation, though it is the case for certain artists. Not pejorative, the populism of *How Soon Is Now* feels reactionary.



Germaine Koh, *Fallow*, 2009, installation view

Sometimes the art world makes me want to escape to a pastoral setting and forget about it all. The funny thing is, sometimes art is what provides that pastoral setting. I won't get into the aesthetic implications of that paradox, but I'll let them linger. **Germaine Koh**'s exhibit at the **Charles H. Scott Gallery**, *Fallow*, evinced a simplicity that could also be called populist, yet doesn't feel reactionary. Koh transplanted a complete swath of lawn from a vacant lot in East Vancouver and installed it in the gallery. Since then, bugs and blackberries bushes have thrived. The playful inversion of outside/inside is only heightened by how delightful it is to wander through a field during a lingering winter. Koh first exhibited *Fallow* in 2005 in Berlin using lawn taken from a field between two sections of the Berlin wall. The political implications are very different in Vancouver - perhaps resonating more with real estate. A few days ago, Koh discovered that a couple engaged to be married changed their wedding plans so that the ceremony could occur in the gallery. The fact that this piece has had two completely different lives, both of which were dependent on context, makes *Fallow* an all the more layered piece.



Isabelle Pauwels, *B-----+-----+-----E*, 2008, video installation

Rounding up Vancouver is not as simple as walking one geographical strip or neighborhood. Venues for art are becoming more and more spread apart and decentralized, so staying current involves strategic movement across the city and environs, and one such section of the greater Vancouver area, the Northshore, often feels secluded and far away. However, the trip over Burrard Inlet to the **Presentation House Gallery** is almost always worth it. **Isabelle Pauwels**'s new work there is neither simple nor populist; it's complicated and fascinating. *B and E* (the exhibition) is comprised of two video installations. *B-----+-----+-----E* is shorter, a fourteen minute video shot from the projection room of a porn theatre. The video is installed in a room with a large clanging door similar to the door in the porn theatre of her video. Patrons (played by actors) enter and exit as a film is projected on the screen above. The door opens. Light floods the theatre. The door slams. There is no plot. Repeat and repeat. The only character appears to be the videographer (Pauwels herself). As with most of her work, the act of telling a story is as much a part of the piece as the video. *B-----+-----+-----E* (beginning to end, the letters which appear on the screen of a video projection to indicate duration) seems to be as much about the medium of video as it does pornography.



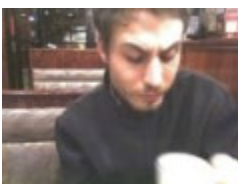
Isabelle Pauwels, *B & E*, 2008, video installation

The other video, *B & E*, both reveals and conceals the story of Pauwels' family as they divide up a family estate in East Flanders. Details slowly emerge. Shots of objects, people, and discussions reveal a family history. The effect of Pauwels' camerawork is, at times, dizzying and disorienting, which makes the video all the more effective. What is so striking about *B&E* is its ability to give the viewer the necessary details to divine a narrative for an otherwise incoherent structure. From the reoccurring details and motifs, sounds and images, the viewer is provided with enough information to make some kind of sense.



Alison Yip, *Bathers*, 2008

Back in East Vancouver, I snuck into **CSA Space** one evening as Pulp Fiction Books was closing. Pulp Fiction/CSA proprietor **Christopher Brayshaw** was kind enough to give me the key to the gallery while he closed up the bookshop so that I could see **Alison Yip's** latest exhibition, *Drawings 2002-2007*. What constantly strikes me about Yip's work is how it makes me slow down. I found myself sitting on the floor in front of her drawings, all tacked to the wall haphazardly. Her work requires and perhaps comes from sustained observation. Would that more art did that.



Aaron Peck is the author of *The Bewilderments of Bernard Willis* (Pedlar Press, 2008). His reviews have recently appeared in

Canadian Art and Phillip. He lives in Vancouver.

Fillip: <http://fillip.ca/>

Artspeak: <http://artspeak.ca/>

Vancouver Art Gallery: <http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/>
How Soon is Now continues until May 3.

Charles H. Scott Gallery: <http://chscott.ecuad.ca/>
See website for current exhibitions.

Presentation House Gallery: <http://www.presentationhousegall.com/>
Isabelle Pauwels: B and E continues until March 22.

CSA Space: <http://www.csaspace.ca/main.html>
Alison Yip: Drawings 2002 - 2007 continues until March 20.

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