



Contemporary art show full of contrasts

Carte Blanche survey of Canadian art lets works compete, contradict

November 20, 2008

PETER GODDARD

The new Art Gallery of Ontario is making a case for itself as the "It" spot in town for contemporary Canadian art, a claim that's put into clearer focus after a visit to the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art and its new survey show, "Carte Blanche, Volume 2: Painting."



SUPPLIED IMAGE

The book and exhibition versions of "Carte Blanche: Volume 2: Painting" share the same artists but not all the same work. Tony Scherman's 'Lincoln,' for example, appears in the book only.

The somewhat-clunky MOCCA title comes from the full-colour coffee-table book of the same name produced recently by the Magenta Foundation (328 pages, \$75). Directed by MaryAnn Camilleri, a one-woman publishing powerhouse, Magenta was behind the earlier collection, *Carte Blanche: Volume 1: Photography*.

The "Carte Blanche" book, and the MOCCA survey of Canadian painting, share the same artists – from newcomers such as Joe Becker, a 30-year-old Toronto artist with a thing for 17th-century Dutch still-life painting, to heavyweights such as Tony Scherman – but not all the same work nor the same kind of success. Indeed, the show delivers a wallop that's impossible for any book to muster. It's also a wallop missing in the AGO's contemporary spaces.

Works in the MOCCA collection are engaged in an often stormy dialogue. They compete with one another. They offer sharp contrasts. They contradict one another. The galleries feel alive with their attention seeking. The dialogue at the

AGO is much more polite. Indeed, most of the pieces exist in splendid isolation; burdened, as it were, by the necessity of representing something or other.

I can't remember feeling any visceral response at the AGO of the kind I felt at MOCCA seeing John Boyle's *Canadology: Mating Rituals* (1994). The humungous acrylic-on-linen painting of buck-naked Canuck superheroes striding over Toronto greets visitors like a trumpet fanfare. *Canadology* could be called one of the first serious artistic reflections on video game culture if it weren't so over-the-top cheeky and such great fun.

Not that "Carte Blanche" reflects any particular single-mindedness on the part of its curators: David Liss, MOCCA director, and Clint Roenisch, whose gallery is next door on Queen St. W.

"Now, we have everything in painting," notes Roenisch in his introductory essay to the book. "The great troubling, liberating, enervating pluralism where anything goes and no one style or material or process can be discredited at a glance."

Nor does the MOCCA show attempt to recreate the book's manner of organizing itself along generational lines into "emerging, mid-career" and "established" artists. In the gallery, whippersnappers rub shoulders with veterans. *The Carte Blanche* photography book arranges its content on the basis of photographic genres, with the inherent problem of one genre overlapping another. Any clear-cut distinction between "documentary" photography and "editorial" is lost, for instance, in Deborah Samuel's portrait, *Margaret Atwood*.

Indeed, the MOCCA exhibition is strengthened considerably by severing most of its ties with the book. "In some cases the work we're showing is so new it was on another gallery's walls only a week or so ago," says Liss.

Art books are best seen as the *Coles Notes* version of the real thing. With "Carte Blanche," even imaging the enormous scale suggested in the book's reproduction of Dorian FitzGerald's *The Beer Hall* (2005) in no way prepares you for the scale – emotional as well as physical – of the 33-year-old Toronto painter's *Gabana Yacht* (2008) and its fractured realism. Likewise, Harold Klunder's sensuous painting, shown in a pair of powerful works at MOCCA, is in no way brought to life in the book.

For all that, many painters may feel they're served well, if in a somewhat diminished way, by the book, particularly those artists – such as Janet Werner, Natalka Husar and Sholem Krishtalka – whose work begins with depicting people.

"Art Metropole: The Top 100," the companion show at MOCCA, originated earlier this year at the National Gallery of Canada, where some 100 objects – art books, multiples and photos from some 125 artists – were given a fair amount of space. At MOCCA, where much the same number of objects is stuffed into a cramped back gallery, the effect is that of a contents sale consisting of funky old stuff found in a geezer's chest of drawers. Surely the exhibition might have been given another venue, or another date at MOCCA itself.

"Carte Blanche, Volume 2: Painting" is at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (952 Queen St. W., mocca.ca) until Dec. 28.

Peter Goddard is a Toronto freelance writer. He can be reached at peter_g1@sympatico.ca