

Big Show Yields Big Favourites

VISUAL ARTS

Artropolis 2003

At the CBC studios until June 8

• By **CHRISTOPHER BRAYSHAW**

Every art critic loves a huge, unwieldy group exhibition. In the 19th century, figures like the Goncourt brothers and Charles Baudelaire sharpened their rhetorical fangs on the annual Paris Salons, while current writers like Dave Hickey and the *New Yorker's* Peter Scheldhal always seem to relish the opportunity to turn up the argumentative heat that a big juried show provides.

This year's version of Artropolis is not that different from previous incarnations of the show. Several big rooms in the basement of the CBC studios (700 Hamilton Street) are packed with paintings, sculptures, mixed-media installations, video projections, and, in a nod to the new century, computer kiosks with CD-ROM and Web-based projects.

Quality, as usual, is variable. Many pieces look like the products of the end-of-term show at the local community college, which is fair enough in the case of those artists who are in their early 20s and still students. But it's less understandable for those who are over 40 and whose practices are regularly claimed by Artropolis's organizers as a populist alternative to the high-brow, theory-driven artworks said to be infesting local university campuses and public galleries.

Not all theory-driven work is interesting or profound, but I will take the intellectual excesses of UBC's and SFU's grads any day over some of the reactionary assemblages and brushily "expressive" paintings routinely trotted out at Artropolis as evidence of underap-

preciated local genius. These works are not collected by the Vancouver Art Gallery or the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, not because they are too far ahead of their time, but because they are frozen in time, little remnants of the '60s that have persisted into the present.

Happily, Artropolis 2003 also features an abundance of interesting contributions by emerging artists, many of whom I hadn't previously encountered. The highlight of the show is a suite of three smallish paintings by Val Nelson: two of architectural details and one of a windblown palm tree against a coppery bright-blue sky. The loose, intelligent brushwork reminded me of early Mina Totino and Joanne Tod's recent, more gesturally animated work.

Another strong painting, *Glacier* by Trevor Lloyd Jones, juxtaposes a photorealistic mountain with stylized splatters of paint and shimmering, hard-edged bands of colour. This extremely idiosyncratic and funny picture looks like Lawren Harris reworked by some underground branch of British pop, circa 1968. It also bears comparison with the extremely thoughtful, if not always well publicized, work of local painters like David Sloan and Robert Young.

Photography and video are well-represented at Artropolis. Rafael Tsuchida's short video loop, *Nothing Is Happening*, depicts the artist's torso in real time as he walks on-screen and turns to face the audience, then suddenly speeds up as he stands still, so that every minor twitch and tremor he makes is exaggerated, like a sudden shock or seizure.

Another successful video work, by Carol Sawyer, offers a fixed view of waves lapping at an ocean

piling; the camera doesn't move but the waves do, creating reflections that fill the screen with abstract lines and shadows.

David Campion's small black-and-white photographs of people on the move caught my attention. Campion has a good eye for the small gestures and coincidences that transform scenes from the realm of anecdote into art. One image in particular, of a female pedestrian passing plastic-wrapped totem poles at the Vancouver airport, has lingered with me. It's a graceful comment on how advanced capitalism uses nature and local history to impose an ecologically and socially friendly face on its incessant expansionist plans.

Cedric Bomford's colour photographs of a small community hall in England also deserve close attention. Their focus is simultaneously anthropological and anecdotal, centring on details such as a wrecked heating unit protruding from a wall and the thick window frames that convert views of the hall's small green garden into misty pastoral scenes.

Other favourites? Kate Hemenway's painting *Dice Throw*, with its conjunction of painterly determination and pure chance; Jason Fitzpatrick's installation *Sledge*, one of the few sculpture projects at Artropolis to make good use of prefabricated objects; Kevin McKenzie's art deco-style tribute to Chief Pontiac; Sam Lam's two-metre-high wooden pears, which I kept colliding with all night long; and, finally, the opening-night caramel cake.

The works, while not always justified by appeals to common sense or theory, showcase a variety of current regional practices, some deserving broader exposure and others just an angry critic's fangs. ■