

A meeting of art, power and the city

Ambitious show at Toronto's Power Plant explores what it feels like to be an artist in the metropolis, writes **SARAH MILROY**

The current show at the Power Plant in Toronto — We Can Do This Now — has an ambitious premise. Responding to the city's collective fetish with becoming something bigger and better, the exhibition says nay to the big builders (the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum), positing this feisty little show as a kind of starting gun in the race to define the city. We don't have to wait for those palaces of art to be completed, the curators suggest. We can do this now.

The effort, then, is not to be a "best and brightest" roundup of Toronto art. Instead, as the exhibition's opening statement puts it, the organizers want to "explore themes of contemporary art's production, presentation and reception." That may sound a bit drab, but take heart: The exhibition seems to be about something more interesting, exploring what it feels like to be an artist in the city, and the curiously disenfranchised, far-from-the-footlights and (consequently) free condition of the practitioners working here. Institutions, and the authority they wield, are viewed in these works with a kind of looking-through-the-binoculars-backward type of alienation. Power is something studied from afar.

The show includes work by artists from all generations, but the *éminence grise* is clearly Ian Carr-Harris, who is showing two stylized scale models of museums, the Tate Modern (housed in a converted power station in London) and the Power Plant, also a converted energy facility turned gallery. But what kind of power is being referred to here? Carr-Harris's museums are white and austere, and one can enter them only visually, and only partly.

In *Tate Modern (Survey)*, from 2005, you peek through openings in the façade to see a book splayed open, a small collection of bound volumes, and an excerpt from Diego Velázquez's famous *Las Meninas*, a painting venerated for its reflections on artifice, and on the relationship between the artist and his royal patron. Looking in through the windows, we also see empty galleries, with light spilling across the floors from opened doorways that lead to places we cannot see.

In *The Power Plant (Verge)*, made in 2002, the empty interior spaces of the gallery don't seem to add up, and one is left circling the model again and again, trying to stitch together a clear understanding of the interior topography from various vantage points. Is this how artists feel about the institutions that show their work, as if their inner workings are mired in obscurity and contradiction? You wonder.

One of the young stars of this show is Kristan Horton, one of Toronto's most promising artists. (Look for his one-man show at the

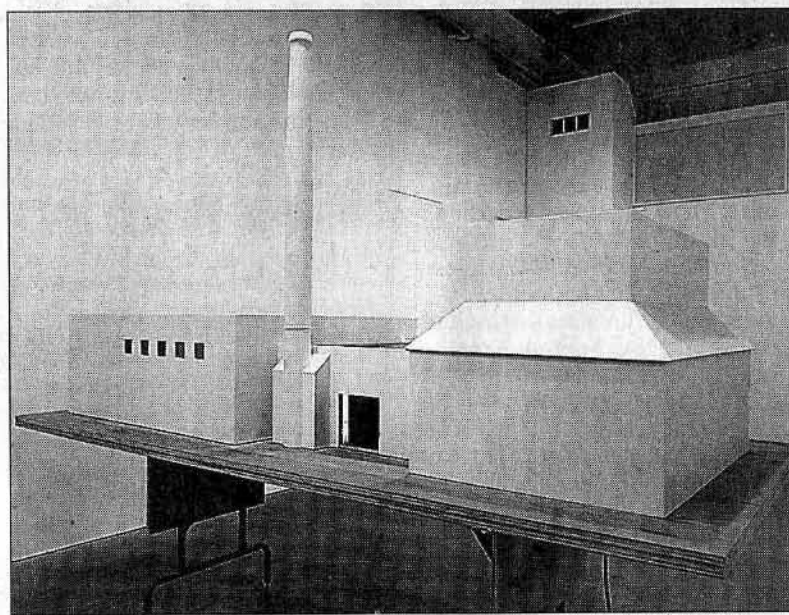
Art Gallery at York University this spring.) Horton, who has also worked in photography and sculpture, is presenting here the first issue of his mock newsletter *Walnut Nuclear Power Station*, a journal that documents the construction of an ad hoc nuclear power facility in the basement of his downtown Toronto studio. Using his own photographs, images drawn from Google and his own brand of anarchistic humour, Horton splices together a sequential record of his faux project in its nascent, excavation stages.

Again, as with Carr-Harris, the theme of power is touched upon — both its danger and its allure. Cut off from the mainstream economy and its privileges, the artist is a free radical. He will make his own power. The idea is delightfully silly, but it suggests an artist who stands apart, and it places the work in the tradition of the avant-garde stretching back to 19th-century France. Here is Horton, the ultimate *flâneur* self-starter.

The strength of the show lies in how it orchestrates a play of ideas without over-determining our reception of them. Things hang together, but loosely, and there is a lot of room for creative meaning-making on the part of the viewer. Thus, we meet Paulette Phillips's DVD installation *Crosstalk* in which a number of artists, critics and other participants in the Toronto art scene are shown dressed in business attire, traversing a busy downtown intersection (another seat of power). These men and women look at the camera as they pass by, and their expressions suggest a blend of emotions: suspicion, curiosity, contempt, ennui. Instead of the artists being the spectacle, we, the viewers, are given that role and the alienation and discomfort that go along with it.

Derek Sullivan takes on the notion of Toronto as a hermetic art community out of touch with the wider world (part of the city's bad self-talk), enacting a kind of cultural cross-fertilization by papering the gallery here and there with posters made by other artists from outside the city, among them Fiona Banner (U.K.), AA Bronson (a Canadian in New York) and Jonathan Monk (U.K.), all artists who have a connection with the city.

Scott Lyall has intervened in the infrastructure of the gallery by installing a kind of culture lab on the second floor, offering gallery visitors back issues of important local and international art periodicals and significant catalogues on Toronto artists for their use. In addition to serving as a library, the space doubles as a site for talks and gatherings in which new understandings are being hammered out. (One Sunday-morning presentation that I attended involved Horton's brilliant presentation on the Protestant Reformation and its allegorical rela-



ISAAC APPLEBAUM/COURTESY SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY

Above, a segment of Kristan Horton's *Walnut Nuclear Power Station* (2006), and at left, Ian Carr-Harris's *The Power Plant (Verge)*, from 2002: Both artists touch upon the theme of power — its danger and its allure.

tion to the Toronto art scene, sweetened by Bloody Marys, surely a high point in Toronto museum programming.) The gallery as showcase for commodity is transformed into a platform for debate and education.

The mascot piece for the show, though, is Luis Jacob's installation of a flock of taxidermied pigeons in

flight titled *From Stream to Golden Stream*. The title riffs on the Power Plant's inaugural 1987 exhibition *From Sea to Shining Sea*, which told the story of the alternative culture of artist-run centres and publications in Canada, but Jacob saucily and irreverently re-sexes it gay through the allusion to unorthodox

sexual practices of the golden-shower persuasion.

In addition to making reference to Toronto's exhibition history, Jacob's installation also responds to the city's most famous work of public art, Michael Snow's *Flight Stop*, at the Eaton Centre. Snow's piece was made in 1979, and it still feels emblematic of a bold moment in the city's growth.

But in Jacob's wonderfully ironic reprise, Snow's heroic flock of Canada geese (aloft in their glass vaulted cathedral to consumerism) are reimagined as a scruffy bunch of pigeons. The message is clear. The energy is out there, on the street. Here is a show that brings it inside the museum, and out of the cold.

We Can Do This Now continues at the Power Plant in Toronto until Feb. 9 (information: 416-973-4949 or www.thepowerplant.org).