

Akimblog

2008 Critics' Picks

The Year in Review from Coast to Coast

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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.... Actually, right now, it's just the worst. The year started off alright, business as usual, with nary a thought of belt-tightening. Come summer, the Conservative government called an election and then announced a series of multi-million dollar cuts to arts funding. Suddenly the country was up in arms! Nothing unites a bunch of artists more than a threat to their meager financial freedom. And what an outcry it was! Quebec jumped in full force, email chains started linking, subversive YouTube videos were produced. The capital-A Arts were finally an election issue and the Conservatives suffered for it. But then the bubble burst and all bets were off. This financial crisis signals dark ages ahead for anyone interested in arts funding, gallerists hoping to sell work, and institutions needing to raise money. Next year is going to be a heavy one, so – on that happy note – let's look back at the past twelve months to see what lifted the hearts of Akimblog's national correspondents. These are the pictures, people, places, performances, etc. that kept us going on.

Happy New Year,
Kim Fullerton & Terence Dick

Sarah Adams-Bacon - Calgary

1. Having existed for barely over a year, **IDEAL Gallery** was a blast of fresh air in Calgary's art community. Balancing itself between a professional space committed to contemporary art and a spontaneous platform for experimentation and excellent fun, the gallery provided opportunities for exploration and discourse. Founded and managed by Erik Olsen and Erica Brisson (both coming from outside of Calgary), IDEAL hosted well over a dozen exhibitions during its brief run. The programming included work that sometimes adhered to established disciplines, but frequently stepped into experimental and investigative practices. Hopefully, with the boom disappearing in poofs of greasy ash and real estate crawling into various dark caves, spaces like IDEAL will become more available for future artist ventures.

2. The **Arbour Lake Sghool** is possibly one of the most exciting collectives in Alberta right now. With subversion seeping from under the doors and cracks of their suburban clubhouse, their reputations as cheeky, provocative saboteurs of comfortable thought precedes them as they break bylaw after bylaw in the name of art and brattiness. Beginning spring of 2008, the Sghool has hosted a monthly variety show called **Talk Show Thursdays** at the downtown pub Broken City. From segments such as "Jay Leno's Monologue" by Scott Rogers, "What Suits Aaron Sereda?" by Aaron Sereda, "Justin Do Something!" by Justin Patterson, "Science vs. Popcorn" by John Frosst, and excellent banter by comedian hosts Chris Gordon and Don Wood, the entire night is a hyperactive spectacle of shitty (a good shitty) fun.



Chris Millar in the studio

3. Everything **Chris Millar** makes is like a shot of electric sunshine: irreverent, hilarious, and frenzied. His work is the best example of new visual punk I can think of. I could spend hours in front of any given piece, as each tiny detail packs a sucker-punch's worth of wonder. What's most impressive about Millar's paintings, aside from their dexterous use of color and gleeful play on the word "fuck", is the laborious use of every single space on the canvas. No wishy-washy backgrounds or half-considered shortcuts, every inch is as strong as the next and could almost comprise a separate piece in itself. That's some serious skill.

4. **John Will** has been a staple in Calgary's art scene for as long as I, or anyone, can remember. I've seen his work regularly pop up in most of Calgary's contemporary art galleries, most recently at TRUCK in the exhibition *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. Will's art is always confrontational and often very funny. He has caricatured his artist persona into an arrogant jester, billowing his cardboard ego to the point of absurdity. If it's a shtick, it's a good one, and if it isn't, I still love the work, but my appreciation for Will comes mainly from his consistent visibility within the community. It is exactly his willingness to share a pint with an emerging artist that makes him so endearing. Whether at openings, the local pub, or just browsing through gallery archives, he remains actively plugged into the activities of Calgary's art at whatever level and, at the ripe old age of somewhere between seventy and ninety, his commitment to art community hubbub is something to be admired.

5. Every fall season, as the community finally recongeals from the sweltering summer heat, we're slammed against a wall of art by almost a month's worth of festivals (eg. Artcity, M:ST). While this activity is incredibly beneficial to our city and great to see, by the end of it the **Calgarian art workforce** is on the verge of collapse. By November, the exhaustion is conspicuous in almost every artist-run centre: heavy lidded stares, conversations punctuated by mumbles and grunts, and many heads held in hands. What with the hours and hours and days and days of frenzied coordinating and facilitating, chasing down tardy artists, nudging for deadline acknowledgement, setting up, showing up, cleaning up - these people deserve some serious props.