

How Soon Is Now a thrilling mix that spans manga, ceramics, tattooed pigs

By [Robin Laurence](#)

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At the Vancouver Art Gallery until May 3

How Soon Is Now, the Vancouver Art Gallery's survey of contemporary British Columbia art, is big, lively, and engrossing. Subtitled Contemporary Art From Here, the diverse array of exuberant works by 34 young, emerging, and established artists is not bound to any one theme or medium. Instead, said its curator Kathleen Ritter during a mob-scene media preview, it is characterized by "a sense of immediacy", an address of "the present moment".

What this translates into is an abundance of audio, video, and sculptural installations and architectural interventions in and around the gallery space. Note to trendoids: there is scarcely any photography on view. Ditto, painting. The few exceptions include Kyla Mallett's photos and screen prints of books and sundry research materials, and Noah Becker's oil paintings and graphite drawings of highly detailed, phantasmagorical scenes of hunters, derelicts, and tattooed pigs.

There's so much strong and engaging work here that Now deserves long visits and multiple reviews. Before entering the exhibition, walk past the gallery's Georgia Street façade and Aaron Carpenter's Good Night, fluttering at the top of a little-used flagpole. Gaze at this nylon flag of bands of bright colour based on the standard television test pattern, and imagine you're one of a far-flung nation of late-night TV viewers, signing off in a communal, pop-culture salute to video calibration.

Beyond the flag, in the VAG's Georgia Street windows, is Erica Stocking's Mannequin, store dummies borrowed from Pacific Centre merchants and outfitted in hats, scarves, gloves, shirts, jackets, backpacks, and other forgotten paraphernalia from the VAG's lost-and-found. The installation not only references nearby retail display but also examines the architectural interval between public and private, outside and in. At the same time, it creates a tension between social conditions: it's difficult to ignore the disparity between a homeless person huddled in his grubby blanket outside the VAG and the discarded abundance gleaned from within.

Walk into the gallery through its Hornby Street entrance and listen to starlings whistling and chittering in the flanking trees. Abbas Akhavan's audio work uses the invasive presence of European starlings, introduced to North America in the 19th century, to provoke our thinking about migration and colonization. Walk through the lobby, across Kristi Malakoff's Star laid on the marble floor in

actor's marking tape, and hear garage-band sounds broadcast from Samuel Roy-Bois's "recording booth", located on the second floor. When you get to that booth, titled Ugly Today, Beautiful Tomorrow, you'll discover that it is outfitted with a Craig's List selection of cheap guitars and drums, crudely decorated by their former owners. This is an interactive work—visitors are invited to enter the booth, pick up the instruments, and make music—that confuses physical and psychological boundaries and challenges the art museum's usual rule about looking and not touching. It also speaks to a creative yearning, a longing for expression that exists apart from the institutionally validated works on display.

Just inside the second-floor landing, Kathy Slade's immense yarn sculpture, Black Pom-pom, leads the charge of artworks that pose high modernism against lowly craft, including those by Luanne Martineau and Damian Moppett. In a remarkable series of porcelain and mixed-media sculptures, Brendan Tang mashes together Chinese and French ceramic traditions with contemporary Japanese manga forms. Born in Ireland to Trinidadian parents and now living in Kamloops, Tang is well positioned to investigate cultural hybridity and the migration of art forms across expanses of time and place.

Hadley+Maxwell's complex video installation, $1 + 1 - 1$, takes apart and "unfinishes" one of Jean-Luc Godard's revolutionary-era films, *One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil*, shot in 1968 and released in 1970. The work uses a range of disruptive techniques—fracturing footage across multiple screens, speeding it up, slowing it down, repeating short segments—to explore the ways in which meaning is made and unmade. Probing Godard's state of mind while he made the original, the artists also pose questions about the use of aesthetic elements to express political views. It's a dynamite work.

So is Raymond Boisjoly's beautiful mixed-media sculpture, Beginnings and Latecomers. Composed of a raw yellow cedar log, installed vertically at a slight tilt and draped with Christmas lights, this piece responds to a badly made miniature totem pole Boisjoly found in a Gastown shop. The strings of coloured lights in his sculpture outline facial features on the pole, then trail off to the wall behind, where they spell out the work's title. Boisjoly again stimulates our thinking about cultural hybridity and malleability, and about the ways in which ideas concerning aboriginal culture are diffused across nonaboriginal contexts.

The most ambitious work in the show is The Office of Special Projects by artist brothers Cedric and Nathan Bomford and their architect father Jim. A two-storey-high structure, built of used and salvaged wood, it disrupts our usual horizontal experience of the art gallery and forces us to consider the power relations inherent in architectural forms, especially in those arranged vertically. Climbing up the stairs and bleachers to the top of the work, standing on the rough podium, or bending over to view the little cubicles and sleeping platforms beneath the structure, we are thrust into an exploration of the privileges and abuses of power. Terrific stuff. Terrific show.