

## To coin a phrase

*Micah Lexier's new installation reveals his fascination with ordering systems*

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We're 68 floors up in the offices of the Bank of Montreal at First Canadian Place in Toronto, perched high above the city with imposing in-flight views of the lake below. But instead of catching the view, I'm having a visit with the Toronto artist Micah Lexier in a little corner room that the bank has recently started programming with contemporary Canadian art. The boyish 49-year-old Toronto artist is showing me his newest creation. Titled *I Am the Coin*, it's an installation of 20,000 zinc-plated brass coins installed in a grid pattern on the wall of the little gallery. The work is glittering – part 1960s go-go dress, part Fort Knox treasury – and it imbues the room with an atmosphere of highly concentrated value. The space feels supremely secure and well ordered, like a vault. It's also a bit claustrophobic.

These coins are not money, however. They carry another, distinctive kind of value, each one bearing a letter from the alphabet. Closer examination shows that they are sequenced to make up words, and that these words tell a story, written (the nearby handout tells us) by the Toronto author Derek McCormack, a writer Lexier admires, and who he commissioned to write the text. The bottom half of the grid spells out McCormack's

story, with all the letters placed in order without punctuation or spaces. (By careful design, each line is 200 characters long, and ends with the completion of a sentence.) The top half of the installation mirrors the bottom, with all the letters from below appearing in reverse. A clue buried in the text fancifully directs the viewer to identify which of the many coins on the wall is the "author" of the text.

At first glance, these coins all look the same, an undifferentiated throng. Look closer, though, and it's a different story.

Looking closer has always been Lexier's thing, a predilection that manifested itself early in some arguably eccentric collecting habits. His first collection, for example, was not coins or stamps or baseball trading cards but discarded metal keys, defective objects that he scavenged from the local hardware store in the mall near to his Winnipeg home. Organizing the keys by type, he stored them in a green metal tool box. He also collected the weekly Top Forty Hit printouts from the local radio station. "I liked discovering these categories of things for myself," he remembers. He became a connoisseur of castoffs.

Soon his enthusiasms extended to collecting exnumia, which (he tells me) are things such as tokens or medallions used for everything from memorializing events to riding the bus. As he got older, this passion meant road trips to token-collector conventions in places like Kansas City and Chicago. Daily trading gave way, at night, to live auctions, where the real treasures were swapped. "One of my favourites is a weight-and-measure token that I found," he says. "On one side it says: 'This is two centimetres.' And on the other side it says: 'This is two grams.' And if you weigh it, it is exactly two grams." His eyes widen at the miracle of it, the sense of perfect equivalence, and resolution.

Token manufacturer's dummy blanks (called planchets by those in the know) are another favourite subgenre, with or without the dentil trim. "I'm glad you are calling these passions, not obsessions," he adds. "I like that. I've just always been interested in the things that other people aren't." This passion extends to scraps of paper bearing scribbles, fragments of packaging, found signage and obscure objects found in laneways, which he organizes by category (things with dots, things with arrows, things bearing lists, or grids, or numbers) and displays. Concurrent with this year's Bank of Montreal commission, he is presenting a sequence of such arrangements in a glass case at another Toronto gallery, Art Metropole, changing the collection monthly.

Lexier's fascination with numbers, letters and other ordering systems places him in a continuum of conceptual artists both Canadian and international – Jerry Ferguson, Eric Cameron, On Kawara, Roman Opalka and myriad artists whose multiples and books form another category of things he has also been collecting since his student years, long before the current market craze. As well, he steadily adds new pieces by emerging, then-unknown artists he admires: Kelly Mark's *Object Carried for One Year*, a metal bar the size of a small chocolate bar (it was the first piece she even sold), Toronto artist Ken Nicol's student work *The Button I Pressed a Million Times* (simply a red button in a silver metal box hooked up to an analog counter), or Guelph grad Joel Herman's sequence of pencil drawings that replicate the title pages of various philosophical texts, their titles a

linguistic daisy chain of meaning (Language and Context, Context and Content, Content and Object etc.).

Lexier's Bank of Montreal commission likewise invites us to sort through the chaff, and revel in the detail that beckons. *I Am the Coin* is a field of shimmering metal, ostensibly uniform. Yet it harbours within in it an endless variety – from discs of dazzling white, through the spectrum of shimmering silvers, to pewters and darkest blacks, depending on how the light falls.

"It's not always the shiniest coin that you notice," Lexier says, likening it to the way we discover each other in the crowd. "I think it's important to be individual about how you allocate value," he adds. "It leaves you a little freer to make your own decisions. I think that's a good thing."

*Micah Lexier's I Am the Coin will be on view at Bank of Montreal's Project Room for the remainder of 2010, viewable by appointment only (see [www.iamthecoin.com](http://www.iamthecoin.com)). Lexier's monthly vitrine installations are on view at Art Metropole, Toronto, throughout 2010. This spring, NSCAD Press will publish Micah Lexier: I'm Thinking of a Number; Selected Invitations, Books, Catalogues, Packaged Prints, Objects in Multiple, T-shirts, Projects in and for Publication, Coins and Other Printed Matter, 1980 to 2010, edited by Halifax artist Jan Peacock with essays by Christina Ritchie, Garry Neill Kennedy and AA Bronson.*