

VISUAL ARTS

by Joe Obad

Preview

MECCA

Peter von Tiesenhausen

Runs until April 12

Illingworth Kerr Gallery (ACAD)

Preview

COUNTERPOINT

Peter von Tiesenhausen

February 21 to March 22

TrepanierBaer Gallery



Peter von Tiesenhausen speaks humbly of his work – perhaps too humbly. Fortunately, the folksy manner of the artist from Demmitt in northern Alberta is only a thin veil. When lifted, one finds the powerful meditations of his recent works.

"Art is a feast or famine business, and I'm grateful to be having a bit of a bumper crop lately," von Tiesenhausen says of his recent successes, including a \$150,000 commission by Olympia and York Properties of Toronto. Calgary shares in von Tiesenhausen's harvest, with two daring new shows revealing the artist's inquiries into landscape. Illingworth Kerr Gallery is showing *mecca*, an installation work, while TrepanierBaer Gallery hosts *Counterpoint*, a summary of his new works in various media.

Both *mecca* and *Counterpoint* are products of von Tiesenhausen's long-standing process of engaging his surroundings and channeling his observations into strikingly primal creations. Audiences familiar with von Tiesenhausen will recognize *Counterpoint* as the latest evolution in works he has gleaned from walking his land for the past 40 years. Initially, viewers may see *mecca* as a radical departure from this tradition, but Illingworth Kerr curator Richard Gordon sought the artistic continuity with a deviation.

"For years, we had wanted collaborate with Peter. However, I wanted an installation that reflected the process and spirit he puts into his land works, which I believe are the core of Peter's art," Gordon says. "But how do you bring Peter's engagement of land into a gallery installation?"

In November, von Tiesenhausen came to Calgary to answer that question. In this case, however, "walking the land" meant driving through the city's suburbs, which ooze year by year into the surrounding farmland.

"I walked through the construction sites for new houses and was struck by the amount that was being thrown out," he says. "It dawned on me that I'd use this waste as my material. The crazy thing was that there was so much of it that I found a guy who delivered it to the gallery for free instead of taking it to the dump."

A spontaneous community of artists, gallery staff and others worked with von Tiesenhausen for weeks in the spirit of a country barn-raising to produce *mecca*. Gordon was so impressed that he arranged for the production of a catalogue to document *mecca*'s creation, which he calls the artist's most important installation work to date.

Walking into mecca is more about entrance and inhabitation than passive viewing. Just opening the gallery doors is pure theatre – what appears to be shattered brimstone cascades above viewers out toward a white triangular wall of unknown material. Actually, the hellish ribbon above consists of burned Christmas trees directing on to a brilliantly lit 16-foot drywall pyramid.

Our sleek new homes and their perfect Christmases are either imploded or set ablaze within mecca – fastened with 50,000 staples, the pyramid presents a monument to our excess, but also to the hope that we can do better.

Does mecca also speak to immediate global concerns? Can the points of the trees careening towards the pyramid be read as missiles attacking the Arab world?

Yves Trepanier, TrepanierBaer Gallery curator, shies away from political interpretations of von Tiesenhausen's work. He argues that as a summary show, Counterpoint reminds us of the artist's grounding in archetypal, rather than political imagery. The images of boats, human figures, eyes and fire recur in the work again and again, according to Trepanier. Like visual koans, they demand our time and contemplation.

"With every new inflection of these images, Peter refines his craft," Trepanier says. "More importantly, through his work he asks us to develop our intuition and emotional intelligence about the transitory nature of the world, decay and transformation."

Fire, as process and image, figures highly in Counterpoint – paradoxically, despite von Tiesenhausen's very public battle with the energy industry, combustion is their common ground. Trepanier offers insight into this irony: "Peter's life is a kind of counterpoint to industry, and his honest way of seeing, listening and reflecting are a counterpoint to our everyday perceptions of the world," he says.

EUB Ruling Against von Tiesenhausen's Claim of Artist's Copyright

by Joe Obad

On January 28, 2003, the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board ruled in favour of ConocoPhillips's proposed sour gas well near Demmitt, denying artist's copyright as a basis for rejecting the application.

At the December 9, 2002 hearing, Peter von Tiesenhausen had asserted his claim of artist's copyright over his land, arguing that the land is indivisible from his work, and the proposed sour gas well neighbouring his property would add to the industry's current intrusions to the point of violating this copyright.

The EUB's report states that the proper forum to argue the case for artist's copyright would be before a court, adding the EUB cannot rule without legal precedent. EUB spokesman Greg Gilbertson stated the decision was based on all the evidence brought before the hearing. However, he also noted that the EUB ruling sent a strong message to industry about the importance of presenting witnesses who have actually been to proposed well sites.

"The ruling says Conoco's presentation lacked 'cogency and credibility' for not providing a single witness who'd been to the well site," responds von Tiesenhausen. "So my 40 years of walking that land is worth less than a presentation lacking in credibility and sense? What kind of a message does that send to Albertans?"