

What is so interesting in Ottawa?

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Where to begin with *It Is What It Is*, the National Gallery's weirdly modest-sounding (ahem) “Canadian biennial?” How about the basics of what, on the surface it actually is: 70-plus works by 50-some living Canadian artists from coast to coast, all acquired by the gallery in the last couple of years.

While the title may sound shruggingly ambivalent, even backhandedly apologetic — it's taken literally from a bright-white neon text work by Vancouver's Ron Terada, one of the many international brand-name artists that city boasts — there's nothing to be sorry for here. The Gallery has stacked its recent acquisitions with a litany of bona fides: Here, Rodney Graham's huge, luminous three-part photographic tableaux; over there, David Altmejd, with his visceral wilderness fantasy of a disemboweled werewolf oozing innards in a crystalline, snowy forest glade; a few rooms on, Jeff Wall, Ian Wallace, and 2009's Venice Biennale entrant Mark Lewis, not far from 2011's rep, Stephen Shearer (Altmejd, by the way, was our emissary to Venice in 2007).

If *It Is What It Is* was only and entirely about affirming long-held consensus, it would be a very nice, safe exhibition that I'd have a problem with only for that timidity. It's not. Not by half. There's a refreshing priority here on dozens of emerging artists, some of which I was gleefully surprised to have never heard of myself.

The curators here have clearly done their homework, chasing down fresh, vital practices in every corner of the country, and in nearly every possibly medium and mode of production. While some may grouse that as a title *It Is What It Is* stands as something of a curatorial cop-out — which it might be — and the “biennial” label is ill-fitting. But as a simple statement of how plugged in the Gallery is to Canadian contemporary art, *It Is* is a revelation of affirming wonders.

Sharp counterpoints abound, clever enough to satisfy art wonks, and straightforward enough to tickle the masses. It's these moments that give the show curatorial cred beyond its obvious *raison d'être* (don't like *It Is What It Is*? Try *Stuff We Bought Lately* and maybe you'll warm to it). The first room is dominated by Graham's glowing photographic *mise-en-scène*, with Graham himself, in Hefner-esque blue silk jammies, playing artist in a campy, swinging-'60s living room — very *Mad Men*, quite consciously, I'm sure — dribbling different colours of paint on a tilted canvas (it's called *The Gifted Amateur*, Nov. 10th, 1962).

The date pegs itself around the time Abstract Expressionism shifted fully from its original conception as art's philosophical *ne plus ultra* — painting's endgame, pure distilled form — to a mass-market brand (hence Graham's swinging bachelor's interest in it, I'd guess). Graham's hokey refutation of that idealistic naiveté resonates with his roommates, Kristan Horton and Luanne Martineau.

Horton is represented by works from his *Orbits* series, densely layered photographs of junk piles in his studio shot from multiple perspectives which, in the end, evoke nothing so much as abstract painting, albeit with maddeningly recognizable junk — doorknobs and records, a finger here and there — emerging from the pictorial soup. Meanwhile, Martineau apes perhaps the Gallery's most controversial acquisition ever, Barnett Newman's monumental,

three-striped canvas *Voice of Fire*, which Martineau renders in fleshy pink hues, knitted in rough felt.

In Martineau's hands, Newman's tidy composition becomes infected by all sorts of rough viscera quoted from recent art history's less tidy portions — macabre cartoon fingers drawn straight from Philip Guston poke out here, there and everywhere; the fabric ripples and pocks like hives on flesh, joining Graham and Horton's defiance of Modernism's sterile purity.

And that's just room one. A few steps through the threshold you're in David Altmejd's wildly sensual *The Holes*, a mesmerizing horror-fantasy in which a huge, white werewolf lies splayed in snow amid pine saplings and wilted flowers, its organs, still connected to the body, neatly parcelled out in rows to the side. It is, as ever, unabashed visceral phantasmagoria: Part fantasy, part paean for the irreconcilable chasm between unforgiving nature and modern man — as a fusion of the two, even the werewolf doesn't cut it — Altmejd embraces an old Canadian artistic conceit (see: Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood) in a way entirely his own.

The curators let you cool off as you move into a room with three of James Carl's witty sculptures (made from intricately woven venetian blinds) from the *Jalousie* series, which debuted in Toronto in 2008. Some artists reappear at different stages of the exhibition, like Rhonda Weppeler and Trevor Mahovsky's paint-and-resin sculptures of everyday objects (a take on the disposable and the valuable), giving them new contexts to riff off.

Others are assembled as counterpoints, like a trio of painting/drawing, that's simply awesome in its disparate perfection: Stephen Andrews' hauntingly oblique *Auditorium*, in his signature, thickly-lacquered oils, of a distinctly Obama-like figure seen facing a crowd; Tim Pitsiulak's pencil-crayoned view of craggy Nunavut, as seen from the territory's new jetliner; and Wanda Koop's multiple indistinct renderings of her memories of the war on Iraq, as seen on TV.

Shearer's bizarrely Borg-like cube of black PVC pipe, groaning and straining from within, like a mechanical bowel overfull with bad clams, next to a creepy-dark black-and-white photograph by Wall, *Cold Storage*, of an empty warehouse, its ceiling encased in ice.

And surprises: There were a few, though Simon Hughes, with his cheeky cartoon renderings of Modernist architectural idealism transposed to Inuit ice floes (like a Buckminster Fuller dome making a tropical terrarium) takes the prize for me, while Moshe Safdie's cubed *Habitat*, built in Montreal for Expo 67, appears here made of logs, next to a whale being carved into blubber.

The urge to make a shopping list is potent, as there's so much strong work here. Let me just say that many of us hoped, when Marc Mayer took over as director of the National Gallery two years ago, that it would refocus on contemporary art as a true barometer of our country's cultural self. Whatever you may think of the title, *It Is What It Is* confirms that hope, and shows unequivocally that artistic production in this country is as vital and dynamic as anywhere in the world, but on its own terms.

The show may lack, what curator Josée Drouin-Brisebois' catalogue essay calls “strategic insight,” but as Marshall McLuhan said, the most Canadian trait of all is to defy catch-all definition. It is, he might say, what it is. And what it is, is something to be proud of, and not to be missed.

It Is What It Is continues at the National Gallery of Canada until April 24, 2011.