

Thought-provoking sculpture from a thought-provoking author

Douglas Coupland: *Twenty-first Century* at TrépanierBaer
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Installation view of Douglas Coupland: *Twenty-first Century*, on view at TrépanierBaer Gallery, Calgary, AB

Douglas Coupland will likely always be known, first and foremost, as a Canadian literary giant.

He captured the zeitgeist of a generation with his 1991 debut novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* and he kept his finger on the pulse of our times with such books as *Microserfs*, *jPod* and *Generation A*.

However, Coupland's first great artistic passion was not writing, but visual art. He graduated from Vancouver's Emily Carr College of Art and Design in 1984 with a focus on sculpture.

He only began writing "by accident," first for magazines, as a way to pay his studio bills.

In the past decade or so he began actively pursuing his tactile artistic visions once again, to considerable acclaim.

That's what brings the 49-year-old artist to Calgary on Thursday for the opening of his newest exhibition, *Douglas Coupland: Twenty-first Century* at TrepanierBaer Gallery.

Featuring thought-provoking sculpture, paintings and a collection of Marshall McLuhanesque "slogans for the 21st century," the exhibition is sure to turn heads.

When we requested an interview with Coupland last week — he was in Stockholm, Sweden — in advance of the opening, we were told he would only do an e-mail interview on queries about the exhibition. Questions about his literary career were strictly off limits.

The Herald doesn't generally do e-mail interviews. It's hard to have an actual conversation with genuine back-and-forth discussion — one of many reasons in-person or phone interviews are preferable.

But, then again, it was just too meta to resist: an interview with an artist/writer who won't discuss his literary works, but will converse via the written word.

So, here's an abridged version of our Q&A on *Douglas Coupland: Twenty-first Century*.

Q: I understand that the cone-shaped sculptures are inspired by your collection of plastic lids from house-cleaning products. What made you want to collect them?

A: I think it's the small "unimportant" things in cultures that often tell us important facts about them.

Q: You're known as a great satirist of consumer culture. Is there a satirical statement being made with these cones?

A: Possibly. But you know how if you stare at a word on a page too long, or, if you say it over and over again in your mind, the word stops making meaning and becomes a sound effect? It's the same thing here, except with physical objects instead of words.

If you stare at an object long enough, it stops being what it is and becomes something pure and mysterious.

Q: Regarding your Memento Mori QR paintings — which can be scanned with a cellphone QR app to reveal the title of the paintings — what inspired this approach and what do you hope it awakens in people?

A: The series began as a way of sending messages to people who died just before I was born, or to people born just after I die.

How can I compress something I've learned about being alive on earth into 250 characters or less?

In the end, the statements (became) prayers, almost ... I remember back in the 1970s, NASA had to compress a message about humanity and life on earth into an ... embarrassingly tiny amount of space.

It always haunted me, having to convey something massive with highly finite limitations.

Q: In the Spectra Four Seasons set, which is built with rows of coloured pencils in plexi boxes, I have to think that the last row, dominated by whites, represents winter. I hope I'm not being too literal here.

Am I correct, or totally off base?

A: No, you're right. It's the four seasons.

The colours are from Crayola pencil crayons.

If you look at the four (rows), they graduate seamlessly from almost no colour to supersaturated colour (autumn).

Pencil crayons have a wonderfully nostalgic meaning for most people ... Getting a fresh box in September for school... They evoke the landscape so primally.

Q: I understand that 12 Slogans For the Early 21st Century evolved from a live-time presentation you had done for YouTube on the theories of Marshall McLuhan. Do these 12 new slogans ... address McLuhan's theories, or put them in a modern context?

A: They're part of an overall scheme of hundreds of statements that address the early 21st century mental condition head on. I don't see much work out there that tries to do this. It feels necessary.

Q: Would you be able to elaborate (on the slogans)?

A: I'll try. But I don't want to take something where simplicity defines the idea, and then undermine it by over-describing it.

Q: How about this one? "It's okay to want to stop being an individual."

A: There's a huge amount of pressure on people to be unique, special, magical, wonderful, the best they can be, a hero, a winner ... and this goes against the grain of our being just another species on earth, like any other species. Birds don't sit around wondering how many blog hits they got. Dogs and cats don't see if their picture on Reddit is going up or down. Blogging and memes and virality reinforce the artificial need for validation by others.

Q: Are we losing our individuality? How so?

A: I think the flattening powers of the Internet combined (with) a largely ad-driven impetus for citizens to be as unique as possible, does create an arena for schizo behaviour.

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