

## Little by little by lots

Artists David Hoffos and Kim Adams prove that less really can be more as they craft tiny, imaginary worlds and capture unexpected moments of human interaction, SARAH MILROY writes

By SARAH MILROY  
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TORONTO -- There is something endlessly engrossing about the spectacle of the world in miniature: the sense of things being somehow magically distilled, of life's complexity resolved into a perfect, tidy harmony, every stray bit settled in its rightful place.

Artists David Hoffos (from Lethbridge, Alta.) and Kim Adams (Grand Valley, Ont.) both have a penchant for working small, but the effect is more unsettling than pacifying. Theirs are Lilliputian dystopias, and they are well worth a close look.

Adams, in fact, can work big as well, cutting up cars and trucks and reconfiguring them in new ways, or mimicking fairground rides with his sculptural improvisations. His current show, at Wynick/Tuck Gallery in Toronto, has as its centrepiece one such large-scale work: a funky reinterpretation of the ice-fishing hut -- that staple of folk architecture found scattered across northern lakes in the winter months. (This one was used by the artist last winter on Ontario's Lake Nipissing.)

Adams has fashioned it from a corrugated aluminum grain bin with metal water troughs appended to the sides for windows, adding a complete galley kitchen, and Sapporo beer cans concealing miniature porn dioramas. It's the ultimate low-budget retreat for the owlsh introvert.

But at the same time as Adams has been known for working big, he has also created miniatures: imaginary cities and theme parks, make-believe artist-run utopias (albeit ones threatened by toxic spills and violent crime) and roll-away realms perched atop carts -- all of them maddeningly encrusted with narrative detail and loaded up with apocalyptic humour and visual surprise.

*Clingons (Proposal for Urban Landscapes, New York)*, a piece in the current show, is consistent with his past work on a small scale. It's a model of a cast-iron building (one thinks of the gallery buildings in Manhattan's SoHo), inside of which you discover installations of sculpture by John Chamberlain (crushed cars), Donald Judd (silver boxes) and Adams himself. The work is a three-dimensional homage to his artistic roots.

Some of Adams's most recent miniature works here are built out of model boxcars, which he has stacked in geometric formations to produce what feel like enclosures, surprisingly impenetrable and austere. Where his earlier works had presented sprawling, Brueghel-esque panoramas of people at work and play, these most recent structures seem designed to

obscure our view. Peeking through the windows, we discover unexpected moments of human interaction (many of the little figures, for example, seem to be engaging in standup sex acts), but we are shut out much more than we are let in.

It's a new kind of signal for Adams to send, startlingly arid after the profusion of the earlier work. The boxcar formations evoke the minimalist sculptures of Judd (one is titled *Judd Pier*).

It suggests the severe and economical sculptural forms of America's pre-eminent minimalist infecting the quotidian stuff of daily life. (Instead of abstract shapes, these are boxcars, moving trade goods in the global economy.) Intellectually, the work is sharp, but one can't help pausing over its slightly misanthropic sting. Could this be the winter of Adams's discontent?

David Hoffos, at Toronto's Gallery TPW, is meanwhile presenting puzzlements of a different sort, the latest instalments of his ongoing magnum opus, *Scenes from the House Dream*. In *Airport Hotel*, we discover a woman pacing her modern hotel room. Beyond her, through the open curtains, we see the airport's control tower and the runway, with its twinkling lights. (The woman, you soon realize, is a reflection from the image on a nearby monitor, while the hotel room and airport view are mini sets fashioned from model parts, with one set opening onto the other.)

*Sixty-Five Footers* feels like a scene lifted from a crime movie. A yacht is tied to a dock at night (the play of reflected light over the rocking boat hull is particularly bewitching), and a naked woman paces the deck distractedly. The scene is surprisingly creepy -- it reminded me of the infamous porch scene from *Blue Velvet* -- with Hoffos's visual effects making it strangely hypnotic and alluring.

In *Airstream*, Hoffos brings us to a wooded trailer park at night, a scene perfectly poised between slasher horror and cabin fever of the romantic sort. In the foreground, he sets a camper van, its door open, a warm light emanating from within. A ghostly figure flits in and out of the door. Partly hidden in the thick surrounding trees you can glimpse other vans, their lights twinkling like fireflies in the darkness -- an effect Hoffos creates by lining the walls of his diorama with mirrors, creating the illusion of infinite regress.

What does it all mean? It's most obvious call is for us to attend to the dreams that leave us tangled in our sheets at night, teasing us with their dark poetry and their dangling clues. But the works themselves -- so crudely jerry-built to produce this evanescent artifice -- revel in the sleight of hand that lies at the heart of the filmmaker's trade.

Hoffos reveals the methods he employs, setting the mechanics of the work up in plain view of gallery-goers. (As a visitor, you must negotiate your way in the dark around several monitors set up in the middle of the space, their surfaces selectively screened with black masking tape so that just the right part of the image is reflected in the dioramas.) There is a point to this homespun humbleness, revealing to us, all the more, the strength of our own desire to suspend reason in the arms of art.

Toronto has been swarming this month with film-festival heavy-hitters and industry acolytes. One wonders: Who among them could engender so much magic on such slender means?

*Kim Adams: Multiple Use -- New Sculpture, Models & Research Works continues at Wynick/Tuck Gallery in Toronto until Oct. 9 (416-504-8716). David Hoffos: Scenes from the House Dream runs until Oct. 16 at Gallery TPW in Toronto (416-504-4242).*

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