

# "We Can Do This Now" The Power Plant

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by Dan Adler

Toronto's art scene is diffuse and diverse, resistant to rigid codification in terms of tendencies or movements. Such diffusion might suggest a disagreeable lack of cohesion or focus, but this recent exhibition demonstrated otherwise. Gregory Burke, director of the nonprofit Power Plant, and Helena Reckitt, senior curator of programs, mounted a heterogeneous array of work by twelve artists based in the city, designing a display in which minimal interpretive guidance (in the form of brief wall texts) placed the onus on the viewer to speculate on what "Toronto" is or could become.

Native Torontonians Derek Sullivan's subtle contribution, *Cameo Appearance*, 2006, consisted of a series of posters boasting a suitably diverse range of linguistic, pop-culture, and artistic themes, produced by invited artists from outside the city—including AA Bronson, Fiona Banner, and Jonathan Monk—that were distributed in clusters throughout the exhibition and the city. These might have been even more effective had they been more scattered still, thereby suggesting a reading of Toronto as a porous environment open to influences from without. Martin Bennett's painting *Static Image Painting/Grey/Squirrel*, 2004, depicts a blankly staring rodent seated against the overlaying patterns formed by a series of abstract geometric stripes and the image of a greenish-black lawn. The work's surface has been sanded and the image drained of color in a manner suggesting the effects of repeated mechanical reproduction. Related paintings by Bennett were dispersed throughout the show, further encouraging a roving approach to observation.

A shift from flaneur to voyeur is made manifest in Paulette Phillips's video *Crosstalk*, 2006. Men and women in business attire are here seen traversing a busy downtown thoroughfare. Their expressions turn from detached to wondrous as they pause in the middle of the street to gaze at something worrisome, or perhaps at someone in trouble. The subjects exhibit faint signs of concern, but it is unclear whether they will get involved or maintain a position of morbid detachment, one in which the viewer is to some extent complicit. Occupying two smaller galleries, Kelly Mark's double-channel video portraits *Pete and Devon* and *Dave and Roula* (both 2006) each show a man and a woman in a relationship talking candidly about the other partner at the same time. Fearful of missing some juicy anecdote, we allow our attention to oscillate between the two speakers on each pair of monitor screens, and the disconnect we observe comes to emphasize the roles that imagination, fantasy, and projection play in any relationship.

Similarly, Ian Carr-Harris's haunting architectural models "Tate Modern" [Survey], 2005, and "The Power Plant" [Verge], 2002 (both from "The Paradigm Series," 2002-2005), blur fantasy and reality. A semifictionalized representation of its titular institution, each model is a reworking of its inspiration as an ominously lit interior punctuated by half-open doors. An even more grandiose architectural fantasy—of building a nuclear power station in the artist's studio—is enacted on the storyboard from a graphic novel by Kristan Horton, *Walnut Nuclear Power Station: First Issue*, 2006. In addition to referencing the former function of the gallery, Horton's work alludes to the idea of Toronto as a place that is relatively anonymous and therefore a center for subversive activity. Along with the theme of fantasy, this notion of the covert or overlooked operates structurally throughout the exhibition, as a successfully nonprescriptive means of hinting at the unique potential of Toronto's contemporary milieu.

