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A dissemmor who loves to make strange

Kristan Horton breaks things and puts them back together. Case in point: Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. Sarah Milroy reports

In a scruffy laneway off of Walnut Street in Toronto's Queen Street West district, a warehouse door stands slightly ajar, secured from inside by a chain. This is the studio of Kristan Horton, one of the city's most intriguing artists.

"Is this the Walnut Nuclear Power Station?" I inquire through the doorway, referring to his recent fanciful series of comic-strip storyboards describing the construction of an off-the-grid reactor in his studio. "Indeed it is," I hear him say, courteously as usual. He comes to the door, a gangly, strikingly underfed fellow with a sprightly, slightly electrified bearing. "But first you have to make it through the security system." Removing the chain, he lets me in with a conspiratorial smile. "This is all that stands between the plutonium and me."

Of course, this whole exchange is nonsense. There is no plutonium here, the comic strip is an elaborately conceived farce — one of his "highly realized fantasies" — but it's fun to imagine. Entering, I survey the piles of papers, crates and cardboard boxes, his computer, eclectic bits and pieces (he is packing up to move studios before his upcoming trip to Berlin for the summer) and the faint aroma of something none too fresh.

"Please excuse the smell," he says, explaining that he accidentally left rotting garbage in his studio when he took a recent trip to New York. "Now my studio is saturated by the faint odour of decay. I've been burning candles, but they don't seem to help."

Over a work table at the rear of the little space, I see the profile of his new artist's book, *Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove*, pinned to the wall, page after page of black-and-white horizontal images. The defining yourself against the too much will be launched tomorrow afternoon, gathers together a body of work that Horton has been working on since 2003, the subject of his cur-

rent show at the Art Gallery of York University in Toronto. There, curators Philip Monk and Emile Changar are presenting 42 of the 200 works in the series. Each work has a binary structure: on one side, a still from Stanley Kubrick's classic science-fiction comedy and, right beside it, a replica of that still that Horton has made by shooting the detritus of the studio and the kitchen, artfully arranged for the lens.

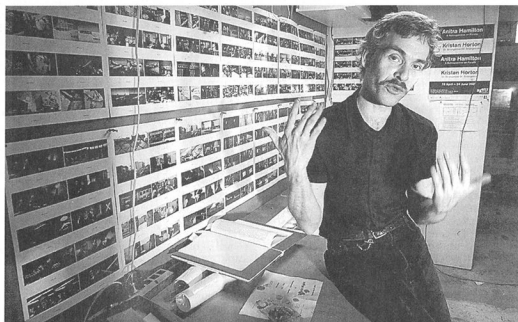
The result is a kind of virtuosic display of dissembling. A school bus is conjured up with a roll of toilet paper, a beam of light with a lump of Plasticine, an atomic explosion with scoops of vanilla ice cream.

I ask Horton to explain his fixation with the film. Five years ago, the mother of one of his friends dropped a VHS tape of it off for him to watch, he explains. He's not sure why. Horton estimates he has watched it more than 800 times. "Finally," he says, "my being was totally saturated with it. I felt I had to react."

The first work he made in the series was an elevated view of a U.S. Air Force base. Horton replicated a B-52 bomber with two forks resting atop a knife. The ground is suggested by a layer of sprinkled coffee granules; the engines are evoked by a row of cigarette butts; the hangars by a cigarette pack, matchboxes and computer parts; the service vehicles by empty pistachio shells. "Absurdity plays a huge role in what I do," he says.

In this, he feels a kinship to Kubrick himself, who was struggling to cope with the new language of Cold War conflagration. "Megadeaths. Megatons..." says Horton. "The language of war, the scope of war, was breaking his mind down. Humour is a way of defending yourself against the too much," a trick of psychological self-defense that comes in as handy today as it did in the Cold War era.

Looking at these images, it



Horton: "Humour is a way of defending yourself against the too much." TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL



On one side, a movie still; on the other, a replica made of forks, knives and cigarette butts. KRISTAN HORTON

takes a moment to register the deception; our brains get busy overriding perception in order to nurse what we think we know. Horton refers me to a Cambridge University study from the 1970s on the "peristemic of vision," which examined language apprehension. If you preserve the first and last letters of a word but then scramble the letters in the middle, he explains, the human brain will almost always be able to identify the scrambled word, at times not even noticing gross misspellings. Horton's image pairings seem to operate the same way.

First stop: cognitive theory. Next stop: philosophy. He tells me about the Sophists of the fifth century BC, and their belief that "everything derives from one essential substance which they called 'incipient matter,'" the foundation of all material being. (His confidence I know what he is talking about is touching.) Then, he explains, "Plato comes along and says, no, there are two substances, one the material and the other the transcendent, the world of perfect forms." Finally, Spinoza brings these two views together, imagining "a condition where

substance and God were one." Spinoza is his current hero, but there are others. Horton is an aficionado of educational radio. (His favourite shows at the moment are Stanford University Radio's *Entitled Opinions*, and *In Our Time* on BBC Radio 4.) Over the past few years, he has archived more than 300 lectures, playing them over and over again on his headphones. (A new photo-self-portrait currently on view at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects shows Horton with his headphones on, embedded in a sterile sci-fi-style interior, as if immersed in one of

his beloved recordings.)

Other projects of Horton's reveal his persistent interest in breaking things down and getting to the core, such as his two-part artist's book, *Oracle*, from 2005. This work documents an imaginary machine designed to change books on tape back into text (another absurd undertaking). The first volume consists of two essays examining the implications of the machine (as if it were real), which Horton solicited from Canadian philosopher Hugh Alocck and New York artist and writer Holly Coulis.

The second volume contains a text Horton generated by running Alex Jennings's Penguin Audiobooks reading of Homer's *Odyssey* through a voice-diatomy program set to contemporary American usage. The resulting language is a kind of apocalyptic Ginsbergian verve. For example, we read: "He never will get home he had when it was intended by the White House gobble us all back baseball now was watching him aboard a total of it for the sea." Text becomes speech becomes text, with meaning mutating, marvelously, at every juncture.

In the *Dr. Strangelove* works, the original film still is similarly lost in translation, supplanted by crude imitation inspired in part by the crackle clarity of B movies. "Everyone knows that the UFO is really a plane," says Horton. "That's what is so delightful about it. Making something out of nothing." This, after all, has been a pursuit of artists since the dawn of time. "People think that the scandal of Manet's *Olympia* was that a prostitute was being displayed as a divinity," says Horton, referring to the 19th-century masterpiece that set the critics chattering at the Paris Salon of 1866. "But I think the real scandal is that anything can be. A bottle of water. A shoe."
 ▮ Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove continues at the Art Gallery of York University until June 24 (416-736-5169).