

Art & Ideas

Eighteen artists from home and abroad



COMOX VALLEY ART GALLERY



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EIGHTEEN ARTISTS FROM HOME & ABROAD

AUGUST 5 TO SEPTEMBER 30, 2006

Eva Bensasson, UK
Sara Björnsdóttir, Iceland
Jaime Castro, Venezuela
Oliver Comerford, Ireland
David Cotterell, UK
Claudia Firth, UK
Hatty Lee, UK
John Hooley, Canada
Caroline Marie Jones, UK

Diarmuid Kelley, UK
Donna Mattila, Canada
Madelaine Moore, UK
Samu Raatikainen, Finland
Deborah Rigby, UK
Elizabeth Russell, Canada
Silke Thoss, Germany
Kathy Tycholis, Canada
Ed Varney, Canada

Guest Curated by Elizabeth Russell

Setting up the exhibition in the CVAG Public Gallery. Pictured left to right: Claudia Firth, Kathy Tycholis & Elizabeth Russell.



ART & IDEAS opening night reception, August 4, 2006.



The Wild West performance *Persona* by 'Silky Toss' on opening night.

FOREWORD

By guest curator Elizabeth Russell

Art and Ideas - Eighteen Artists From Home and Abroad is an exhibition that features the work of artists from the UK, Ireland, Germany, Finland, Iceland, Venezuela and Canada. The invited artists responded to the theme of place and home, illustrating how a sense of place contributes to one's social, cultural and political experiences.

Art & Ideas emphasizes the process of contemporary art-making from the methods artists employ to the ways artist communicate their ideas. This show juxtaposes radically different works from traditional to experimental as a way of representing the pluralistic amalgamation of contemporary art practices today. Unlike other curated exhibitions that tend to separate works according to discipline, such as painting from photography, this show embraces and unifies the differences in forms.

This exhibition focuses on how artists from different countries living in rural and urban communities respond to the idea of place or home. The work in *Art & Ideas* reflects an eclectic collection of work while also providing some surprising similarities in works responding to community and social issues. While the majority of the artworks echo social and political concerns, such as immigration, class, education, homelessness and urban development, other works reflect quieter insights into architecture and the landscape.

All of the artists were selected for *Art & Ideas* based on their previous art works and past achievements. I was introduced to the thirteen international artists in 1996 in London, UK while completing my Masters of Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art and Design. For a decade this group of international artists have formed an ad hoc artist network. Many of the participating artists in *Art & Ideas* have organized exhibitions previously and have made use of selected artists from the ad hoc artist network. For *Art & Ideas* five local artists, including myself, from British Columbia, Canada were also included as a way of incorporating the regional perspectives of Vancouver and the Comox Valley.

This exhibition was two years in the planning and the invited artists were sent electronic images via the internet of both traditional and alternative spaces in and around the Comox Valley Art Gallery. It was my intention to allow the artists the freedom to choose one or more pieces of work for this exhibition. While some artists, such as Kathy Tycholis, Sara Björnsdóttir, Silke Thoss, Donna Mattila and Ed Varney, created completely new works in response to the exhibition, most of the artists submitted works that they had made previously.

Silke Thoss of Germany and Claudia Firth of the UK were able to come to Courtenay, British Columbia for the exhibition, courtesy of the Canada Council for the Arts Visiting Foreign Artist Program. Sara Björnsdóttir of Iceland travelled here with the help of the Icelandic Arts Board. The Arts Council of Finland funded Samu Raatikainen's trip to CVAG in September

I am extremely grateful to all the artists who have gone to great measures to ship their art or create on-site work for this exhibition. I would like to thank CVAG Director/Curator Tony Martin and the many staff and volunteers at the Comox Valley Art Gallery for making this project a reality. I would like to extend my gratitude to Craig Carson at Second Page Used Books for his enthusiasm and willingness to lend his time, store and books for this exhibition. I would also like to commend and thank Ann Rosenberg for her insightful article *Art From The Global Village*. I also want to thank my family for their support and patience while I pursued this artistic venture. On behalf of the CVAG and myself I would like to thank the Comox Valley Credit Union for its financial support.

ART FROM THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

by Vancouver Curator/Critic Ann Rosenberg

Preface

The show opened on Friday August 4th with an accordion hootenanny by ‘Silky Toss’ of Breman, Germany in her Wild West performance *Persona*. The next afternoon artist talks by Silke Thoss who used her legal name in this formal presentation, and by Sara Björnsdóttir of Iceland, helped create ‘the buzz’ that something, challenging, amusing and yet serious was taking place at the CVAG.

Patio

It’s logical to begin the tour with the Ed Varney’s 6’ x 8’ *Untitled Sculpture*. This windowless, door-less hut built “to code” out of cedar shakes and lumber, was set in CVAG’S forecourt near the public library. The artist statement declared that the structure was supposed to look “a little bit out of place, functionless, enigmatic and a bit funny” in this site. Its meaning, if any, had to be “constructed” in the mind of the beholder.

The piece attracted much attention. Many viewers scratched their heads as they wondered why it was so small, why it had no means of entry, why light could not come in. If they were able to speak to Varney or to read his notes about it, they would have learned that this hut had roots in the tiny cabin he and his brothers built when they were teenagers that (while only large enough to accommodate two bunk beds, a table and a Coleman stove) created an ideal club house. *Untitled Sculpture* was also inspired by the efficient small shed on a barge where the artist lived when he counted fish for a living in Alaska. In this instance, the space was so minimal that the table Varney ate at and did his accounts on slid under his cot when it was not in use. In addition, the fact that prisoners are caged for years in cells not much bigger than his artwork caused Varney to

hypothesize about the tiniest space in which a human could live.

In the end, Varney’s “useless piece of art” not only became potentially *useful* as a jumping-off point for thinking about moveable, aesthetically pleasing structures in which to house the homeless, but it also was one of several socially relevant works in *Art & Ideas*.

Ed Varney is a conceptual artist who resides in Royston, BC Canada.



Ed Varney, *Untitled Sculpture*, cedar, 182.5 x 243.5 cm, 2006

Window Gallery

The three concept-oriented pieces in the CVAG's Window Gallery advanced the 'issue' portion of the group show's theme. They created an interesting dialogue among themselves with the setting in which they were installed and with Varney's structure in the forecourt.



CVAG Window Gallery

Donna Mattila's contribution to the group show was *Migration*. The acrylic on board, 8' wide, two-part painting featuring the words: "Appropriated, Emigrated, Selected, Liberated, Purloined, Transferred, Seized and Changed". It was hung in the right hand corner of the Window Gallery fairly close to Varney's *Untitled Sculpture* on the patio. The descriptive modifiers listed above were emblazoned on individual discs of various hues on the left panel of the diptych.

Each word appeared desirous of 'migrating' in order to settle on a similar, still-empty, flatly painted circle on the right side of the work. The large, broadly-brushed monochrome strokes underneath those vacant circles suggested the stomach-churning feelings stirred up by some of the issues and the situations such words imply before resolution has been achieved - everything from ecstasy to angst.

The artist likes to be informed about world events and has strong personal opinions, hence if she were able to converse with the viewer about what any of these concepts exactly mean to her, coming to a short explanation would be difficult because so many stories and so many emotions are evoked by every one. *Migration* acknowledges the fact that "Canada is a country of immigrants". At this moment in history, African peoples are migrating *en masse* in response to political, economic and environmental factors over which there is no control. Empathy with the homeless people in B.C. as they move from place to place to find shelter, is a concern Mattila holds in common with Varney.

In the physical context of the CVAG's storefront, Mattila's painting functioned as an 'ad' for the

contemporary art a viewer might discover within. It was also an echo of the window presentations she created in co-operation with Courtenay businesses in the past.

Painter and mixed media artist Donna Mattila lives in Comox, BC, Canada.



Donna Mattila, *Migration*, acrylic on board, 244 x 122 cm, 2006

Appropriate to its subject was the placement of Hatty Lee's *Window Washer* video situated dead-centre in the glass-fronted Window Gallery. In this documentary (which was programmed to continuously replay) a black day-labourer (likely a man from the Caribbean or Africa) washed the windows of a café inside and out, time and time again. Because the tape did repeat endlessly, the boredom and futility of a casual-labourer's job was underscored. It made the visitor think about window washing situations: at home where Fido can ruin a morning's Windexing with a dab of his wet nose or a dribble of his slobber; in restaurants where an unclean (or clean) glass may turn the potential client away or make him feel safe to come in; as well as in public buildings and hospitals where 'Cleanliness Is Next to Godliness'.

Who does this kind of work - poor immigrants, students or unionized workers? As we watch, such questions arise and empathy is developed for the man who is performing the eternal, thankless task.

The documentary was shot with a fixed camera from a single point of view. The entire range of the floor-to-ceiling glass panes were maximized within the TV's horizontal format. From this vantage point it was possible to see some aspects of the café's interior, people entering the café, being served their lattes and then leaving. The view onto the street revealed cars and trucks coming, going and occasionally parking.

Mostly, one was encouraged to watch the activity of the diligent window washer whose motions were sometimes ballet-like. Soapy water from his bucket cascaded down the storefront panes in Jackson Pollock-style drizzles. Sometimes his dexterously manipulated squeegee spread water over the surface of the windows in a way that temporarily obscured the view to the outside. Then the soapy liquid was herded back by the tool in preparation for the squeaky-clean finale.

There were no zoom-ins, no hints of romance in this trysting spot, just a chance to watch a man absorbed in his work and to wonder where in late 19th century London the café and the brick building across from it are located.



Hatty Lee, *Window Washer*, DVD, 2005

Hatty Lee is a mixed media artist from London, UK.

Thanks to a grant from the Icelandic Arts Board, Sara Björnsdóttir was able to come to Courtenay. Her installation/intervention for *Art & Ideas* was entirely created while in Canada in co-operation with the book store next to the gallery.

The installation part of Sara Björnsdóttir's *I Wish You Had More Time* was a found-object sculpture situated in the left-most part of the Window Gallery. Here two stacks of randomly chosen hardbacks borrowed from Second Page Used Books supported a much-used, orange and brown crocheted afghan that served as the structure's 'roof'. It was the sort of hideaway a child might construct in which to enjoy reading undisturbed. In many installations (especially one constituted of borrowed components like this example) the piece will never be repeated and all the elements that comprised it will be returned or recycled.

The titles of the tomes in the window communicated no coherent message, but the title of the installation/intervention - *I Wish You Had More Time* - was a gentle rebuke from all unread books to all who neglect to peruse them.

Just as the mere mention of 'migration' fills our minds with dread, the 'procrastination' implied in the Björnsdóttir title was equally unsettling. The truth is that none of us will ever make enough time to read the books that we've known about for years. In a more positive vein, the true fact that inspired the concept is one that is often cited in articles and media stories about literacy - namely that people in Canada and Iceland read more than the citizens of any other country in the world.

Björnsdóttir's *I Wish You Had More Time* could have served as an effective shop front ad for the store next door. Like its two companions in the gallery's 'introductory space', it was perfectly suited to the purpose of the CVAG's Window Gallery.

The much larger part of Björnsdóttir's *I Wish You Had More Time* was created for *Art & Ideas* as an intervention in Second Page Books where it fit seamlessly.



Sara Björnsdóttir, *I Wish You Had More Time*, installation, 2006

Second Page Used Books

A long-standing dream of Craig Carson, proprietor of Second Page Used Books, was to work some day with artists, and perhaps even in co-operation with the public gallery adjacent to his store on Duncan Avenue. He was delighted to be approached by guest curator Elizabeth Russell and Sara Björnsdóttir to help in the creation of two new works for *Art & Ideas*.

Because of Carson's help, Björnsdóttir had access to a low-budget way to make the two interrelated works of art - an installation for the Window Gallery and an intervention for the shop. The interrelated works conspired to encourage literacy. In the artist's opinion, even thinking about the names of books expands one's knowledge.

After the intervention in the book store was complete, a regular client (or a person coming specifically to view the second part of Björnsdóttir's piece) might not, at first, have observed anything out of the ordinary. Interventions are often designed to intrude in such a subtle way that they appear to be an inevitable part of what's there.

Within Second Page Used Books there was, as one might expect, a large inventory (especially hardbacks in excellent condition) arranged by category on nicely finished wooden shelving. There were chairs to sit on, a cat snoozing in her seat near a scratching post and the sound of recorded music. The framed photographs (large and small) which hung over the shelves however did strike some book-buyers as a bit unusual. Although many book stores do exhibit art, a typical display consists of watercolours of flowers and

landscapes, not images of books.

Those who had already seen the first part of the *I Wish You Had More Time* would definitely have recognized that the two dozen framed colour photos of books in various formats were directly connected to the sculpture in the Window Gallery. The vertical, three-dimensional stack of books in the installation anticipated the two-dimensional pictures of rows of books in the intervention..

A careful examination of the larger room in Second Page Books revealed that Björnsdóttir had made a little secret ‘nest’ for children to read in under the front window’s display counter, reminiscent of the afghan-roofed niche next door. Here there were toys to play with and specially chosen books to discover. A mother and grandmother who is a committed reader made this cozy place in homage to her own favourite childhood pastime.

The two quotations, which came from the second pages of two different books in Carson’s store, were also important aspects of the intervention. The first: “*I grab a little ice, do a little dance and walk back to the grill...*” is from Jim Daniel’s poem called *Short Order Cook*; the second: “*My ability to laugh . . . in a strange, wild and exhilarating world*” is from Ray Bradbury’s book, *S Is For Space*.

Because Björnsdóttir’s individual projects are never “the same” there was no problem with her keeping consistent in style and/or medium when she did her first in-store intervention. Carson’s venture into the role of showing art brought potential new clients into his shop. Requests from other artists to show their work on the walls of Second Page Used Books have begun to come in.



Sara Björnsdóttir, *I Wish You Had More Time*, photography, 20 x 30 cm, 2006

Sara Björnsdóttir from Reykjavik, Iceland is a new star in the European contemporary art scene.

Student’s Gallery & Foyer

This illustrated ‘tour’ continues with a description of the three aptly situated artworks in the Student Gallery to the left of the reception desk and in the alcove near the Main Gallery entrance. The largest was a low-relief, floor-to-ceiling installation by Kathy Tycholis, who made brilliant use of the space available to her.

Kathy Tycholis constructed *Neighbourhood (Ode to Little Boxes)* along almost the entire length of the corridor. The housing developments in *Neighbourhood (Ode to Little Boxes)* which crept up walls on either side of the barrel vault threatened to make a gravity-defying leap across the narrow aisle at ceiling level (occasionally penetrating into the row of overhead lights) in order to become a single, humongous, exemplar of urban sprawl - one that most nature-loving, environmentally-concerned, history-loving folks passionately hate but are powerless to stop.

The shapes of flimsy dwellings cut out of bits of discarded cardboard were overlapped (shingle-

fashion) to 'render' the semblance of two encroaching overcrowded communities in the most simple, cheap and speedy way. We were supposed, no doubt, to believe they would succumb to 'leaky condo' problems (or fire) any minute. Varney also employed 'overlap' when he was nailing down meticulously cut shakes to make waterproof walls for *Untitled Sculpture* which followed the most recent B.C. Building Code to the letter. His structure looks as though it was executed with eternity in mind.

As Varney's hut was not erected on the Patio until the day before the exhibition opened, the coincidence is serendipitous, not planned. In *Art & Ideas*, Russell left the artists free to make their own choices about what to make and what to submit knowing that surprise dialogues among two or more works would occur and be enjoyed by discerning visitors.

Neighbourhood (Ode to Little Boxes) is Tycholis's direct response to the sadness and annoyance she feels in the face of the 'constant construction' that is occurring in East Vancouver where she lives. A place that was once filled with heritage homes, bungalows and vegetable gardens has become a mosaic of 'Vancouver Specials', 'Monster Houses', condos and duplexes.

She conceived of this artwork as an homage to Malivina Reynolds who coined the phrase 'ticky-tacky' in her often-cited 1962 song called *Little Boxes* that sarcastically denounces the conformity of suburban houses and the cookie-cutter behaviours of those who live in them. Reynold's observations include:

*"Little boxes, Little boxes
Little boxes, all the same
There's a green one and a pink one
And blue one and a yellow one,
And they're all made out of ticky-tacky
And they all look just the same."*

Tycholis's use of turquoise, beige and other *blah* mis-tints for the exterior hues of her suburban dwellings follows the exterior décor tastes cited above as faithfully as a paint-by-numbers painting.

Tycholis's gift for socially relevant installations was known to Russell through the 'designer' homeless shelter she made for ARTROPOLIS 2003 at CBC headquarters in Vancouver.

Painter and mixed media artist Kathy Tycholis is from Vancouver, BC.



Kathy Tycholis, *Neighbourhood (Ode to Little Boxes)*, installation, 274 x 731.5 cm, 2006

A perfect counterpart for *Neighbourhood (Ode to Little Boxes)* was provided by the DVD shipped to Courtenay from London, UK by David Cotterrell. Like Tycholis's work, his piece was also about architectural and human conformity in the suburbs. It too was inspired directly by a lyric - in this case, a ditty composed in the upbeat manner of early Beatles' music which was written by Ray Davies in 1969.

SHANGRI-LA (the poem) is a paean of praise for those who've found heaven in semi-detached housing units like one in the 1930's Gants Hill development where Cotterrell spent his young life - duplexes

similar, in fact, to the more ‘posh’ row houses aspired to by certain citizens of Coronation Street’s Weatherfield. The following words suggest the contentment such a move up the social ladder could bring:

*“Now that you’ve found your paradise
This is your Kingdom to command
You can go outside and polish your car
Or sit by the fire in your Shangri-La
Here is your reward for working so hard
Gone are the lavatories in the back yard
Gone are the days when you dreamed of that car
You just want to sit in your Shangri-La ...”*

Cotterell’s DVD by the same name is an “affectionate ode to his childhood home,” not a visual slap at urban uniformity. It is comprised of subtly manipulated presentations of 80 of the thousands of almost-identical houses that were part of the duplex explosion that occurred before WW II in England.

In *SHANGRI-LA*, each house in the sequence occupied the entire frame of a TV monitor which was upended to make the vertical format possible. Each façade was like a fixed portrait, and yet within a second or two each one morphed seamlessly into the next ‘face’, exploring the seemingly opposite concepts of sameness and variety in a simultaneous manner.

The viewer perceived that something strange was being revealed as a duplex with lace curtains suddenly transformed into one with blinds or when an exterior treatment in stucco became one where brick accents were present. The cars parked out front also transmuted and so did the rarely depicted trees and shrubs. These ‘secondary’ details resolved and dissolved in tune with their own ‘timing’ thanks to electronic wizardry.

In Hatty Lee’s *Window Washer*, the camera recorded a real-life event in real time from a single position. The endlessly repeated tape and the action of the workman produced a soporific effect. *SHANGRI-LA* was also designed to numb the spectator’s sensibility as he or she watched it, by presenting the viewer with four dozen similar images which were constantly in flux in a sequence that had no action to help him or her discern a logical beginning or a logical end.

Amazingly complex work on 80 different sites and in the lab was necessary to produce *SHANGRI-LA*. As exhibited here, Russell saw the wisdom of having the sound permeate the whole corridor providing an aural enrichment of Tycholis’s piece. The domestic-scale monitor of the small TV set up a nice relationship with the scale of the ‘homes’ in her suburban sprawl. The facades presented in *SHANGRI-LA* (while rich in detail in contrast to the featureless buildings in *Neighbourhood (Ode to Little Boxes)*) were equally exemplary of conformist tastes and tepid lifestyles.

David Cotterell, who resides in London, UK, explores a range of media from video to site-specific installations.



David Cotterell, *SHANGRI-LA*, DVD, 2004

Silke Thoss (aka Silky Toss) was responsible for the jocular, rude wall-art sculpture called *Suckless Stamps* which was placed opposite *SHANGRI-LA* near the entrance to the Main Gallery. It resembled a slot machine and when the right levers were pulled, out popped men's naked bums and legs, not 'stamps' as the title implied. This was one of the many pieces she made from scratch in Courtenay, using bits of unfinished wood, in the week before Art & Ideas opened.

As planned, its placement encouraged the viewer to proceed directly to the opposite corner of the CVAG's main space, drawn there by the presence of a cluster of artworks that displayed similar bright colours, the same rough and ready appearance and which exuded a carnival aura.

Public Gallery: Part 1

The tour of the CVAG's *Art & Ideas* show conducted so far attests to the very great care Russell took in installing the pieces submitted (or fashioned in Courtenay) to maximize their valence and their ability to create 'dialogues' among themselves and with visitors who wished to interpret them. The majority of works in the Patio, Window Gallery, Second Page Used Books and the Student's Gallery in some measure pertained to "place and home"- concepts singled out in Russell's Foreword as areas she hoped some of her invited artists would address. Even Björnsdóttir's *I Wish you Had More Time* (set up in her temporary home abroad) pertained to the homely comfort of reading anywhere you can find a book and how books (titles, texts and pictures) expand minds while shrinking the world by bringing cultures together, by 'bringing them home.'

That same sensitivity extended to the treatment of the artworks arranged in the Public Gallery where the spectator was again encouraged to grasp relationships and not just follow a straightforward circuit, a right-to-left reading of the art on display. In this Gallery the topics and technical means were more diverse and Silky Toss's wall-sculpture served as a pivot into that more varied realm.



Silke Thoss, *Wall Art, Installation View*, latex paintings on wood, 2006

As mentioned earlier, Thoss's *Suckless Stamps* apparatus led me (and perhaps other viewers) to traverse the room to see the objects arranged in the far corner of the Public Gallery because they were similar in character. Once there, it became immediately evident that Silky was about to bare more of her personal predilections.

Silke's stay in Comox enabled her to make many new pieces included in her installation and to introduce the local audience to her art and music-making *persona* on opening night. At the time she explained that her friends at Chelsea (and others she made in England and elsewhere)

couldn't quite 'get' her name. People began to call her Silky and took the 'h' out of her surname, hence soon she began to think of herself as Silky Toss - a free spirited, slightly racy gal who lived in her own tiny caravan in the parking lot behind the school she attended in 1997. While sculpture was her MFA speciality during that year, Thoss was learning to play the accordion and to write her own songs.

The introduction to her multi-work installation is written on a projecting sign, such as one might find on the exterior of a Gold Rush Saloon. On both sides there is a crudely written invocation to make the best of life:

“EVERY DAY IS A HOLIDAY!
“DON’T FORGET TO REMEMBER!”

Within Silky Toss's realm were many unique products that poked fun at North American consumerism (for example, *It's Better Not To Think Body Lotion* and a Silky-endorsed blue facial cream which was called *I Want U Back*). All the pieces - rectangles, cups, saucers or bottle shapes were crudely cut out of wood, then glued onto smaller concealed bits of wood in order to have them make impact by “coming out from the wall”. Her low relief sculptures and their painted messages were intentionally rough and ready. The messages on the signs were meant to evoke the wild west, a midway carnival or both. The artist has lived in America's South West when she was a teen, so the affection for that aesthetic comes from a personal, deep place. Perhaps too she was influenced by the writings and movies of Germany's very famous faux cowboy, Karl May (1842-1912) whose books have sold more than any other contemporary German author.

Every piece was witty and informed the viewer about the artist's tastes in American music from jazz and rock and roll to pop and conveyed her sardonic observations on many topics, particularly North America's obsession with useless, expensive cure-alls and potions.

Thoss only brought her accordion and a few works with her from Germany. The rest she made during the week before the show opened in her typical, wild and wooly manner. The circular platform inscribed with her latest hits on which she played and sang remained as a focal point in Silky's special section throughout the show. More than any other artist in *Art & Ideas* what Thoss performed, talked about, brought and made here gave CVAG viewers an opportunity to have a full picture of what the artist does and the thinking behind it.

Silke Thoss who exhibits and performs under the pseudonym Silky Toss, lives in Bremen, Germany when she is not travelling with her art and music.

On the way back from the examination of Thoss's installation, the visitor might then have paused to look at Deborah Rigby's tiny bear set on a small plinth in the centre of the Public Gallery. At first, because of a mental association with the midway-like contents of Silky's realm, it seemed as though the animal could be a dancing bear similar to the ones featured in travelling circuses. When very close, it was obvious this was not a cutesy creature or a toy, but a cunningly formed semblance of a very mean, rearing grizzly with nasty bared teeth cut out of white cardboard that revealed a blood red, open mouth



Deborah Rigby, *Glue Bear*, mixed media, 12.5 x 33 cm, 2005

suggestive of a not-wholly-ingested, fleshy meal. The body was constructed from a skein of slightly unravelled brown wool stuck down over a partially hidden inner core of a toilet roll. All ten claws were fashioned from straightened-out staples poked into crudely made cardboard paws. The ‘glue’ in the *Glue Bear* title referred to the ‘archive imperfect’ white glue used to hold the work together. The crude craftsmanship delivered Rigby’s subject as effectively as Tycholis’ layered cardboard-cutout house fronts formed a creditable impression of a creeping, land-devouring suburb.

According to Russell, “the artist uses animals as subjects (for example, the domesticated London swan and the American eagle) and her work is typically humorous.” It was odd but not out of character for her to send a grizzly bear to a place in BC that is the animal’s natural habitat.

Rigby likes to have us question where (and if) a line between art and craft may be drawn and perhaps even (in *Glue Bear’s* case) whether flagrantly bad craftsmanship precludes the making of a successful piece of art. In this regard her approach to art has a lot in common with that of Silke Thoss.

Deborah Rigby of London, UK is principally known as a photographer and mixed media artist.



Oliver Comerford, *Distance*, DVD, 2004

Directly opposite Silke’s environment a huge screen showed DVD projections by Ireland’s Oliver Comerford and Venezuela’s Jaime Castro.

In contrast to Cotterell’s *SHANGRI-LA*, Comerford’s *Distance* was not edited to create a sense of stillness but rather the sensation of continuous motion as it is perceived when you drive down a road at night from the perspective of a person sitting in the driver’s seat. His work documented not one but several voyages by editing together different sequences selected from a number of travelogues. Like Hatty Lee’s *Window Washer* Comerford’s video was shot from a single angle

and is about nothing very important until the viewer begins to think about what he or she is seeing.

Questions come to mind. In what part of the world was this travel documentary made? Because the centerline of the highway is occasionally visible in the semi-darkness, the viewer knows that the vehicle is being driven in Ireland or in another place where cars have their steering wheels on the right. What kind of terrain is being shown? In the dim light which hardly brightens even when the sun is apparently about to rise or has not yet set, it is almost impossible to distinguish anything at all. The DVD appears to record short takes of several different two-lane roads in the outskirts of nameless, featureless towns where occasional industrial buildings or rows of trees are glimpsed.

Distance is likely a metaphor for the journeys one makes in life that are endless, more trouble than they are worth and means to a goal or purpose that is just out of the reach, just over the hill that one cannot articulate. In Comerford’s video, the answer to the question “Are we there yet?” is not just “No!” but “No, you never will be.”

This slow-moving journey is nothing like the kind kids engage with in video arcades in the mall where speed, danger, crashing and dying are among the expected thrills. The most exciting thing that hap-

pens in *Distance* is when rain starts and soapy water spills over the windscreen blinding the driver (and us) before it is eliminated by the windshield wipers. These moments in Comerford's video created an unexpected tie-in to the water cascades in Hatty Lee's documentary, an entirely fortuitous coincidence that must have delighted Russell. Almost any moment in *Distance* could have served as the basis for the large photorealist paintings that Comerford is known for.

Oliver Comerford, based in Dublin, Ireland, is a painter and video artist.

Jaime Castro's work is the second DVD played as a large screen projection. *Vista Al Avila 2.2005* offers the visitor a constant but ever-changing view of the Avila Mountain as seen from Caracas, Venezuela. Like *SHANGRI-LA*, this video depends on highly sophisticated special effects.

A substantial portion of Caracas' famous landmark is presented in such a way that it is consistent throughout the duration of the video. Tapes from the dozens of cameras that recorded details of weather change and cloud patterns from the same viewpoint and those that documented the motion of traffic that was recorded from another perspective, provided the moving, tile-like vignettes that are now clustered around the mountain's summit and along the streets of Caracas below. As was the case with the shrubs, trees and cars in Cotterrell's *SHANGRI-LA*, these subsidiary details were added in to create a sense of dynamism and to convey a sense of change through time for the immutable mountain.

In Castro's documentary the city of Caracas is apparently hundreds of miles away from the as yet untouched wonder of nature in the background. Because of Tycholis's urban development installation, the viewer speculates about the inevitable despoilment of Al Avila.

Through association, one is also inclined to make mental associations with other famous mountain icons - Fuji, The Matterhorn, Mount Everest, Mt. Baker and The Lions.

Although it is a DVD, its sense of composition, of building a whole from many parts, is reminiscent of the photographic art of David Hockney where collage is used in a dramatic, pictorial fashion.

Jaime Castro is a video and mixed media artist who is based in London, UK.



Jaime Castro, *Vista Al Avila 2.2005*, DVD, 2005

Elizabeth Russell, artist and guest curator of *Art & Ideas*, contributed a large mixed-media painting called *Dusk*. It was directly inspired by the oil on canvas view of the Comox Valley executed in 1953 by senior Canadian artist E.J. Hughes in his colourful, rather rigid academic style. Russell's image documents the same top-of-the-hill location today, in an art-historical gesture which would be appreciated by many local visitors.

A comparison reveals, however, that in the '50s there were only farms and orchards whereas in 2006 many newer houses have been constructed in the Town of Comox that lies below. The electric lights which twinkle in Russell's *Dusk* are emblematic of the kind of *progress* that is changing country life. Hughes probably walked up the hill to make his preliminary sketch on paper, whereas Russell drove near to the spot in her car and took photographs and made drawings of the contents of the vista. Her work is painted more loosely than the Hughes precedent, as befits an artist who has studied different styles than those which informed Hughes' tight, graphic manner.

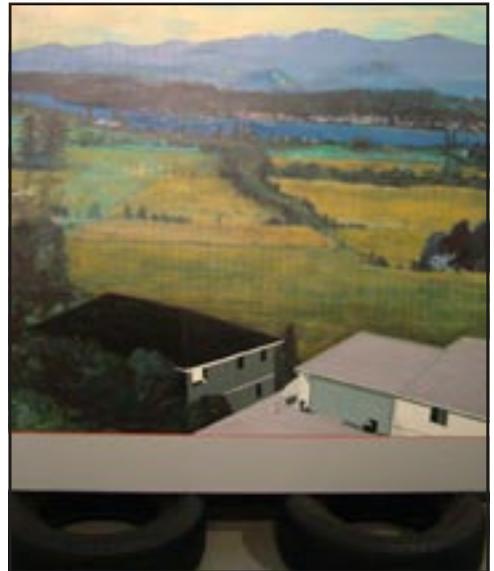
Russell's painting leans against the wall behind as it rests on two tires that serve as a podium for it. These tires are meant to symbolize the omnipresence of the automobile. They are Russell's way of pointing out there are now roads everywhere and people drive everywhere. The physical incorporation of the tires increases the meaning of the work and transforms the painting into a sculpture that reminds the viewer of an easel.

Dusk sets up an exciting dialogue with Castro's *Vista Al Avila* as both compositions offered similar overviews of human habitation. Russell's *Dusk* is a view down the hill above the tiny, New World Town of Comox that was established in 1946 and now boasts a population of twelve and a half thousand; Castro's DVD is a panorama that overlooks the Old World City of Caracas that was founded in 1567 and now is home to almost three and one half million citizens.

Russell's piece also reverberates with Tycholis's *Neighbourhood (Ode to Little Boxes)*. She shares the East Vancouver artist's concern about urban development which tends to replace things of character from the past with featureless dwellings of the present. Insubstantial bungalows that are rapidly filling up the vacant farmlands are front and centre in Russell's *Dusk*.

Is this a typical work for *Art & Ideas*' guest curator? Russell told me several months ago that "she never does the same thing twice" - hence, the answer is "Yes."

Elizabeth Russell is a mixed media artist who resides in Comox, BC.



Elizabeth Russell, *Dusk*, acrylic and latex on wood,
177.5 x 152 cm, 2006

Claudia Firth, like Silke Thoss, was sponsored in her visit to B.C. by the Canada Council Grant for Visiting Artists Program. Claudia Firth's colour prints that were hung next to Silke's display were the only photographs in the main room of CVAG that had not been obviously altered by special effects. *AID* and *RINK* each featured one object that might or might not be the subject of the artwork.



Claudia Firth, *AID*, photograph, 50.5 x 76 cm, 2004

from home. The ever-increasing numbers of drawings that resulted from the workshops for *Souvenirs from Home* were installed when they were made in the Main Gallery. The video by the same name, when complete, will be part of the Gallery's archive.

From this brief description, it's obvious that this community- involving project was pertinent to one of the main themes of *Art & Ideas*.

Claudia Firth, is noted for her videos and, is a London, UK resident.

Eva Bensasson trained as a painter. During the last six years, she has successfully chosen digitally-altered photographs as her main medium of expression. Undoubtedly this new direction occurred partly as result of her studies for the MA she earned from Birkbeck College in London in 2002 where her graduating thesis was "Computer Application for the History of Art".

The artist's work currently features exterior or interior views of historical architecture, public spaces and monuments situated in various cities in Europe and Britain. Her series are often called after the sites where the images were taken.

Bensasson sent five pieces for Russell's consideration for inclusion in *Art & Ideas* but space allowed her to hang only three. On opening night when I viewed the trilogy, the labelling of the Bensasson art was not yet complete. At that time, the title of each member of the group was *Untitled*. This fact gave me (and other viewers) total freedom to speculate about the possible implications of each work.

What had immediate impact were the dozens of digitally-produced, black silhouettes of people who were engaged, apparently, in everyday activities in different locations. Did the artist intend to present a palpable rendition of the Sci-Fi concept of an advanced, electronically-wired race of humanoids that cannot be detected on any sensor or surveillance camera? Were these non-people inspired by Stephen Hawking's black hole theories, perhaps fulfilling our deepest fear of the universe implosioning? The black silhouettes could

In *AID* it's a First Aid box that was placed on a platform that could be accessed by ladder. As no one was on the beach, the viewer was encouraged to create appropriate dramas for the scene in his or her imagination. In the second work, similarly, the full dramatization of a puzzling image must be conceived in the mind of a spectator. Here a small child in winter clothes was, apparently, abandoned in a totally empty skating arena. In both instances what is not seen is more important than what is.

Firth's main role while visiting Courtenay was to make a video with the local people who attended several workshops at the CVAG and who were willing to speak about and draw images of the much- loved objects they brought



Claudia Firth, *Souvenirs from Home*, installation, 2006

not communicate any clues about their ethnicity via skin colour. The no-detail ebony forms eliminated hints about the class or profession of these anonyms through the clothes they wore, because all traces of the specifics of attire had been obliterated. Were the people in the middle photo who are sitting around in a hall decorated with golden hexagons discussing cultural matters or instruments of mass destruction? When I looked at the ‘programs’ on the chair seats in the foreground it seemed like there were bazookas (not bassoons) on their covers.

From afar and up close the black silhouettes with jittery edges set into bland, could-be-almost-anywhere sites were provocative and stunning. You couldn’t tell, sometimes, whether they were coming or going and that was really amusing. Furthermore, the digitally erased figures were satisfactory extensions into a different medium of the black silhouettes of people that Bensasson used to paint.

As mentioned earlier, Bensasson’s titles usually contain the place name of the site where the photos were taken *and* a word or phrase that pertain to a specific piece. When I was informed about the complete titles of the individual works in the triptych I felt, on the whole, that my appreciation of them was not increased because they led me away from concentrating on the possible ideas conveyed by the black silhouettes which are, in my opinion, the compelling, mysterious true subjects of Bensasson’s current oeuvre.

In the case of *Puerto del Sol, Madrid*, however the first words of the full title refer to a street sign visible in the left foreground of that composition. This title not only identified the street in the Spanish capitol where the crosswalk through which the figures moved was, but also pointed out the irony of silhouettes walking towards (or away from) the ‘Door of the Sun’.

The central work in Bensasson’s triptych which to me was among the strongest works in *Art & Ideas* when called *Untitled*, was pushed by its *actual* title (*Las Meninas, Bury St. Edmunds*) into an area of reference that would be totally baffling for viewers unfamiliar with English towns and/or art history and annoying to people like myself who are. Whereas Madrid is known to virtually everyone, few are aware that Bury St. Edmunds is a place in England famous for architecture from the Norman era.

An art-historically aware spectator might believe that the *Las Meninas* part of the title refers to Velasquez’ revered group portrait of the same name. In it the Spanish princess who is positioned in the front centre, is served by two upper class women giving rise, perhaps, to the familiar name of the 17th century painting - *The Maids of Honour*. If you look up the historical image, you’ll find that Bensasson’s piece has nothing in common with the early art work.

A note sent recently to Russell by the artist explains that the *Las Meninas* in her title actually refers to the name of the all-girl Salsa band that had just played in the concert hall in Bury St. Edmunds depicted in the photo, a fact that one would have to know, a fact that could not be guessed. Bensasson realizes that when taken out of context her art sometimes needs clarification.



Eva Bensasson, *Untitled*, photograph, 50 x 75.5 cm, 2002

I had similar but different reservations about the usefulness of the title of Bensasson's third work, *Lisbon Game, Lisbon* where the figures don't appear to connect with any game I know, unless the reference is simply to the black pieces in checkers. Again, a statement from Bensasson clarified that the game she had in mind here was the playful relationship she felt existed between figures in the city and the city elements such as zebra stripe crosswalks and monuments. The exhibition in which this piece was originally shown was called *Order out of Chaos* and that context endows the title with a *raison d'être*.

Titles are very important, and two of the three mentioned above were originally estranging because they were so obscure. In both cases, the artist's words led to further understanding.

Eva Bensasson is a conceptual photographer based in London, UK.

Public Gallery: Part 2

Of the five participants in *Art & Ideas* who remain to be mentioned in this walk-about on paper, three presented art in which the revelation of process was a more important overriding aim than the expression of idea. As mentioned in the Foreword, Russell's non-restrictive curatorial manner encouraged the submission of a wide range of items from the 18 artists and that stance (and other factors) led to a quirky diversity, and an easy embracement of all things.

The abstract qualities of representational and non-representational art (for example, composition, colour, texture, etc.) are themselves worthy of aesthetic appreciation and analysis; hence, this portion of the essay will occasionally touch on such matters as the relative effectiveness of central or non-central placement of imagery or the associative powers of blue, green, brown and beige. It will also seek to connect as many of these less concept-oriented works with others in the *Art & Ideas* exhibit.



Diarmuid Kelley, *Millions Like Us*, oil on canvas, 50.5 x 40 cm, 2005

It will also seek to connect as many of these less concept-oriented works with others in the *Art & Ideas* exhibit.

The most 'classical' of the process-oriented contributors was Diarmuid Kelley who is one of the most established artists in this exhibition. The portraits he paints always depict models dressed in special garments that could have been worn by a Dickens era workman.

Whether he is depicting a person, a cup and saucer, or a vase with a flower, his personal manner of rendering pays tribute to old masters like Leonardo da Vinci, Goya and Manet in a thoroughly respectful, academic way. He plays off highly finished areas with those that are more roughly handled, to lend a work an unfinished effect.

Kelley's contribution to *Art & Ideas* titled '*Millions Like Us*' was a 50 x 40 cm oil on canvas portrait, a little smaller than the TV monitor that displayed Cotterrell's DVD of duplex facades. Kelley's portrait of a model does not 'see' the onlooker. He conceals a secret, unknowable

inner life just as surely as a Cotterrell duplex facade gives no clue about what lies within.

Spectator appreciation of Kelley's art was based on what could be intuited from seeing this single piece in CVAG's main gallery. A visceral reaction (not an intellectual one) was elicited in response to the artist's painstaking, highly skilled rendition of the sitter's sensitive visage over which skin, without blemish, was tautly stretched. The brow and a bony skull were utterly three-dimensional and the individual members of the crowd of closely cropped, curly hairs could be counted one by one.

Although the model radiated health, he seemed as still as a corpse. For a moment, it was like having an eerie encounter with a contemporized version of Keats' death mask, viewed almost from the side.

The smoothness of the painting of the surface of the features was in tension with the broadly-brushed, black strokes that haloed his head. This and the unfinished portion of the brown work shirt ensured that the painting would be considered a work-in-progress.

The enigmatic title - *Millions Like Us* - led the viewer into the realm of conjecture. Millions of workers? Millions of poetic introverts? Any group you imagine could be the answer, but a large homogeneous class of not very affluent people is implied. This anonymous white man of the working class is an apt counterpart to Hatty Lee's black window washer.

Diarmuid Kelley is a high profile artist who lives and works in London, UK.

Finland's Samu Raatikainen's *Chi-Squared, Series 2* called attention to technique in a different way. Every millimetre of this work that effectively combined elements of painting and sculpture was perfectly (even compulsively) finished.

In *Chi-Squared, Series 2*, the undulant configuration of the surface was achieved through complex methods the artist has utilized for about a decade. It involved cutting and bending thin plywood veneer through bending, clamping and drying. When the desired curvy surface was formed, Raatikainen stabilized it by applying an appropriate wooden backing.

After that was accomplished, the front of the canvas was glued onto the surface. The canvas was tinted in various layers of acrylic paint until it glowed like a precious, pale, lilac-silver metal. Countless identical flatly-painted dots were applied in a quiet, but contrasting, grey colour over the satiny background. Smaller globules of beige pigment surmounted each minuscule disc, as though each had been applied by the tiniest imaginable pastry tube. It's the kind of non-representational work that makes the viewer say "WOW!" and marvel at the accurate eye and steady hand that was responsible for achieving this high quality *tour de force*. Its *raison d'être* is itself and the fact it's called *Chi-Squared, Series 2* does nothing to elucidate its meaning. Although it is a kind of wave, the viewer won't be tempted to connect to the breakers on any beach. A comparison with a sine curve or a virus might be more fruitful. A critical essay on his work



Samu Raatikainen, *Chi-Squared, Series 2*, acrylic, canvas and wood, 40.5 x 110 cm, 2004

(*The Perfect Dot* by Kari Alatalo) states that Raatikainen's process is akin to Buddhist meditation.

Although the finish of the shake surfaces on the exterior of Varney's hut "almost became an obsession" when he was finding a perfect place for each shingle, the texture-full result of this one-time mania is not in the same league as Samu Raatikainen's life-long devotion to the surface and shapes and *be-dotting* of his labour-intensive sculptures. Like Rigby's work (in a very different way) it walks the thin line between art and craft.

Samu Raatikainen is a Finnish artist who is currently living in Lincoln, UK.

Another abstract was sent from London by Caroline Marie Jones who typically employs oil paint to brush non-representational imagery in muddy-hued swaths and patches on light-admitting materials such as fibreglass or voile. Although non-specific, according to Russell her paintings are meant to evoke nature (the Welsh seaside) through the gestures of the brushwork and through colour choice.

It is customary for Jones to set the mate-

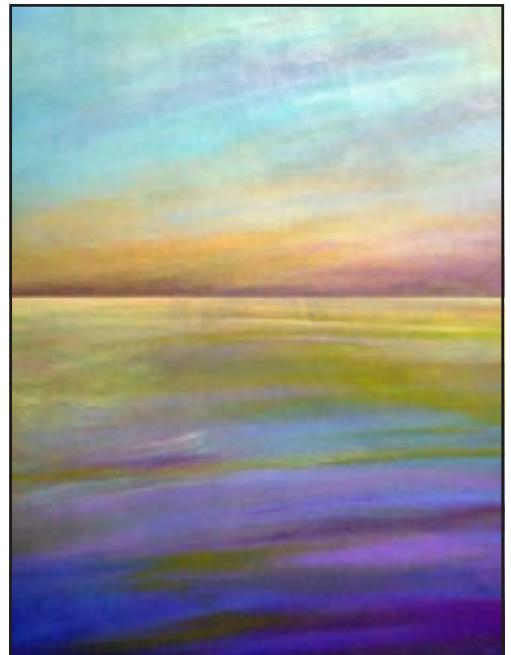


Caroline Marie Jones, *MOVE # 2*, oil on voile, 73.5 x 86 cm, 2006

rials on which her non-specific motifs are painted a little away from the wall behind them so that light can penetrate through and produce barely visible shadows. If, as here, the material is a type of gauze, there will be some motion and, if hung as she prefers in natural light conditions, the length, position and density of the shadows cast will change according to the varying conditions. The title *MOVE # 2* is therefore an apt summary of her aims and an accurate description of the end product of the process it embodies. Like Raatikainen, Jones wishes to blend second and third dimensional characteristics to form a hybrid between painting and sculpture.

Caroline Marie Jones paints in London, UK.

It's easy to segue from *MOVE #2* to Comox artist John Hooley's *Sea of Possibilities*, one of three rather traditional paintings submitted for display in *Art & Ideas*. Here the lovingly brushed strokes which combined tints of many shades of blue, brown, green and beige suggested the four zones of sand, ocean, distant shore and sky that



John Hooley, *Sea of Possibilities*, acrylic on canvas, 121.5 x 101.5 cm, 2006

are common features of west coast seascapes. The dampness of the atmosphere and its ability to dissolve and transmute form attests to Hooley's knowledge of precedents offered by European masters like Claude Manet and Canadian peers such as Gordon Smith. It created a nice contrast to the crisp clarity of Firth's colour photograph *AID* that was installed close to it.

John Hooley lives and paints in the Comox Valley, BC.

Irish painter Madeleine Moore's *Office* is the last work to be described in this illustrated tour. The artist has continued to develop enigmatic, semi-abstract paintings for over a decade. The soft, slightly blurry, optimistic sense of the world her small canvases exude is their subject more than any particular thing in life (or in the realm of art) they may be depicting.

Architectural aficionados will recognize the interior alluded to in *Office* as indisputably derived from the open-plan foyer of Frank Lloyd Wright's late 1930s headquarters of the Johnsons (Wax) Building at Racine, Wisconsin. The eccentric 'lily pad' columns and the translucent ceiling they support are often cited as fine examples of FLW's original thinking in non-domestic design. Moore's pastiche of the foyer eliminates many critical details from the source that inspired it, for example, the floor on which the ceiling supports rest. The viewer would not recognize it as a place of business, without the assistance of the title.

In her painting, the floating columns, the almost spiritual light that spills down from the skylights, the rosy tonality of the colours affects the viewer, but does nothing to explain what the image intends to convey beyond that it is art, Moore's personal form of art and, more significantly, art that affords insight into her imagination in a manner that no other work in the show does. Unlike Kelley's portrait that bars the viewer from penetrating his sitter's private thoughts, Moore gently invites the viewer into her daydreams.

Madeleine Moore is from the UK and is currently living in Dublin, Ireland



Madeleine Moore, *Office*, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 58 cm, 2004

CONCLUSION

Hearing about *Art & Ideas* from the time of its conception and having the privilege of seeing the large group show when complete afforded the chance to appraise how far the exhibition managed to achieve the goals and hopes that guest curator Elizabeth Russell had for it. The catalogue essay so far expresses my belief that the exhibition met and exceeded the objectives summarized in Russell's Foreword. Although not every piece in the exhibition was excellent in and for itself, all were relevant inclusions. Seeing the works of 18 artists from many countries must have been a treat for the local art community members, curators and art students who were fortunate to view them. The art and artists that came to the Comox Valley created a Global Village in Courtenay that reflected ideas about art and art-making that are now common throughout the world.

For over fifty years, the art produced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has become the subject of art history education, serious scholarship and criticism and a wide range of important exhibitions. These days, artists are written about before they are dead and information about shows is sometimes published while they are current.

Many well-illustrated books, catalogues and magazines promulgate new art and new art concepts. Soon the internet will become an amazing source for art information, but at the moment not even the more high profiled participants in *Art & Ideas* could be Googled up in a satisfyingly, consistent manner because the majority of artists in all countries have not yet invested in personal websites.

In 2006, the following general principles would be agreed to by many artists, academics and curators who live in Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Iceland and Venezuela. They would concur that: a work in any style or medium (including photography, craft and now even images that are digitally produced or assisted) could be art; that anything, even a dead coyote or a slice of bread (depending upon its context) could be art; and that everyone (even your Aunt Sue) has the potential to be or be thought of as an artist. Finally, appropriate art appreciation is no longer considered to be merely a passive *that-looks-nice* response based on visual impact, but a one that has resulted from the viewer's active engagement in the interpretation of a work based on his or her knowledge, ideas, and feelings.

If comprehended, these rules of thumb give all spectators (art-educated or not) freedom to enjoy and/or hate anything he or she sees in an art venue based on personal taste or because he or she thinks it is just plain bad, but *not* because it *isn't* art.

In the last decade, more and more exhibitions are designed to be accessible and of interest to numbers of the general public. By dealing with such issues as 'home and place', about which everyone has a valid opinion, *Art & Ideas* had something to offer everyone and therefore was a good example of this approach. Firth's community-participation video encouraged art-making by people who have never before picked up a brush, or regarded their prized possessions as worthy of record as Van Gogh's sunflowers. Beautifully made pieces like Raatikainen's *Chi-Squared, Series 2* and Varney's *Untitled Sculpture* would have satisfied a traditionalist's desire to see art that demonstrated fine craftsmanship. Less technically meticulous works (like the mangy *Glue Bear* and the slap-stick, painted constructions in Silky's realm) were so humorous that, as far as I'm aware, there were no complaints about them.

None of the works in *Art & Ideas* were exclusively *about* their places of origin. The duplexes in Cotterell's *SHANGRI-LA* were English, but the art-piece celebrated domestic comfort. Tycholis's *Neighbourhood*, Russell's *Dusk* and Castro's *Vista Al Avila*, although based in particular sites, had similar messages about urbanization to convey. Comerford's *Distance* documented an unending drive in the near-dark through places that could be anywhere. That this journey took place on roads where vehicles move in the right lane was inconsequential. Visitors probably thought that the scary little *Glue Bear* was made by a west coast Canadian. Instead it was Rigby's humorous take on a specimen of BC wildlife that was sent from one part of the Global Village to another.



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Front Cover: Silke Thoss, *Don't Think Creem*, latex paint on wood, 27.5 x 71 cm, 2006

Back Cover: David Cotterell *SHANGRI-LA*, DVD, 2004



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