

Apr. 12, 2003. 01:00 AM

Domestic familiarity changes meaning

Artists re-examine some

of their favourite stuff

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ART BY NUMBERS

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No corner is without a charming mutant thing of some kind, a lamp turned into an ashtray, a soap dish turned into a lamp, even a lamp-shaped lamp they picked up in one of their crazier moments. Every wall has a piece of art. Right off you know it's really good art because it matches the rest of the room. And they're never finished fussing, because what they're really after is to turn their entire house into one big art piece.

It's gratifying to know that artists aren't taking this kind of thing lying down. In several shows around town, domestic issues are evolved in a such way that would drive my neighbours to think twice about buying that duck-shaped toothbrush holder. The warning would seem to be: Play house too long and it will play you.

Go ask Lisa Birke at Luft Method Space along with Karma Clarke-Davis, or Liz Magor at the Power Plant and the Susan Hobbs Gallery. With them, familiar objects are reconfigured in such a way as to set off alarm bells in the brain. A sudden chill blows through scenes of otherwise fuzzy warm feeling.

Maybe this is a Canadian thing — Birke and Magor are Vancouver-based; Trinidad-born Clarke-Davis works in Toronto and Berlin — this ambivalence about the comforts of cocooning, surrounded by our favourite stuff. But if you keep stuff around long enough, it begins to change meaning for you. These artists understand the power coming from commonplace objects and the complexity of our reactions when this power is played with.

With Birke's show "techanimus," the stuff is the personal computer, dressed up as if it were a young kid's revenge on an old doll now out of favour. Luft's new digs are 13 Ossington Ave. With its tiny front gallery filled with Birke's computer monitors and computer mice, wrapped in pretty fabric and left on the floor, plus her spacey paintings, you think you've wandered into a Future Shop that really is from the future.

Birke is ambivalent about computers. Officially, she thinks there are too many of the things. "Computers have gone rampant and are slowly taking over the world," she says. "They are reproducing exponentially. The evolution of these vermin has been so swift and cunning, we have not noticed their slow brainwashing of us to serve their cause. We swim daily in the flickering blue hypnotic sea created by their screens."

As if to prove her point, pride of place in "techanimus" goes to *technofish* (2003), a discarded PC monitor submerged in an aquarium, its screen painted with an appropriately fishy theme, a number of

Luft's back gallery is a sensually charged installation using small photographs with amorphous, flesh-toned imagery, sculpture and a video loop.

This is cocooning of the most primal, sexual kind. In the video, florid images flash a pair of luscious lips, as ripe as jungle fruit against the cool, loping beats from the British band Faithless. A tongue pops out of the mouth to slither comically in and around the surface of the lips. Seamlessly, scenes of winter imagery, borrowed from *The Shining*, flow behind everything, acting like a cool cushion for these hot lips. "I want to play with the subversion of sexuality," says Clarke-Davis. "I am of colour and I often play with issues of race and the idea of the hybridized, eroticised black woman. Yet at the same time I am Canadian. So there's definitely a push-pull in my work."

Magor's Power Plant retrospective resonates with the gallery's other installation, *Guy Maddin: Cowards Bend The Knee*, a 10-part video display of the Winnipeg director's newly minted black and white silent melodrama, although the gallery has piped some tinny piano music to add to the retro feel.

Part of the Magor show is turned over to her period-looking photography of groups of weekend warriors whose kick is to get into period soldier uniforms and re-enact famous battles. The show at Hobbs gallery also concerns itself with a period re-enactment, only in this case of a weird but nevertheless real tourist attraction called King Karl's Castle, far up the British Columbia coast. To Magor, the weekend "re-enactors" find shelter in safely living out dangerous scenarios they didn't have to live, although clearly she finds this need on their part somewhat suspect. Her domestic scenarios are equally ambivalent. One piece, *Double Cabinet (blue)* (2001), might at first glance be a nicely folded pile of Martha Stewart's latest line of towels. Walking around the piece, you discover that the towels are in fact a structure of polymerized gypsum, hollow enough at the core to hold cases of Kokanee beer, plus some extra cans. In an instant, the most Canadian of all media products — the beer commercial — has been reconstituted as pop art sculpture.

Then there are the sleeping bags stuffed into sculpted logs and bags of food hidden clumsily away behind a sheet of wood and a piece of gypsum. Magor's *One Bedroom Apartment* (1996), with its collection of rented furniture and moving boxes, plays with the understanding of how identity is as transient and ill-defined an idea as the sense of home.

Lisa Birke and Karma Clarke-Davis are at Luft Method Space (13 Ossington Ave.) today from noon to 5 p.m. and tomorrow from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Liz Magor is at the Power Plant at Harbourfront Centre, to May 25, and at Susan Hobbs Gallery (137 Tecumseth St.) until May 3.

★*Drugstore Cowboys, Blind River, Ont.*, a photo we recently published with a story on Gordon Parks, has drawn reaction from folks in Blind River. The 1955 photograph was part of a recent retrospective of work by the 90-year-old American photographer at George Eastman House in Rochester, N.Y. In a review, I used the words "whistle stop" to describe Blind River.

Alan McLean, 82, writes: "In 1955 when the Elliot Lake uranium finds were making the headlines, Blind River's C.P.R. terminal was a hive of activity, as it was closest to the drill sites."

Several residents in the area suggest the young men in the photo were probably transients in town looking

for mine work.

McLean doesn't agree. "There is and was no comparable storefront as it appears in the photo," he goes on, "and no one, to date, recognizes any of the young men." Maybe it was another town at another time, he says.

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