



GALLERIES



Koki Tanaka's "Random Hours, Several Locations"

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The powers that be

A look at three new shows at 401 Richmond W.

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BY DAVID BALZER January 20, 2010 21:01

Meredith Nickie: "Cartographies of Desire" \*\* To Feb 13. Tue-Fri 11am-6pm; Sat noon-5pm. A Space, 401 Richmond W, ste 110. 416-979-9633. www.aspacegallery.org. Koki Tanaka: "Random Hours, Several Locations" \*\* To Feb 20. Tue-Sat 11am-7pm. YYZ, 401 Richmond W, ste 140. 416-598-4546. www.yyzartistsoutlet.org. Elinor Whidden: "Ford Explorer" \*\* To Feb 13. Tue-Sat 11am-5pm. Gallery 44, 401 Richmond W, ste 120. 416-979-3941. www.gallery44.org.

The new year in Toronto art began last weekend with three simultaneous openings at 401 Richmond: "Cartographies of Desire" by Meredith Nickie at A Space, "Ford Explorer" by Elinor Whidden at Gallery 44 (part of "Natural Artifice" with 12 Point Buck) and "Random Hours, Several Locations" by Koki Tanaka at YYZ. All venues are artist-run centres; each show homes in on the same theme, long the fundament of such venues: hegemony, in particular colonialist aesthetics, and the seeming duty of the contemporary artist — time-honoured since at least the '90s — to destabilize them, either with cheek or with dour gravity, often both.

One essentially knows what to expect from a show with a name like Nickie's, though her intention through this name — i.e., to make beautiful things that address the problematic pageantry of European imperialism — is intriguing. Unfortunately, she doesn't really get at the "historical ambiguities and racial complexities of desire and eroticization" that, according to her artist's statement, she's after. Marvel nonetheless at the show's centrepiece, a sedan chair (the wheel-less mode of transport of important colonial officials, carried, of course, by the colonized) composed of and surrounded by sugar. But, aside from its spectacle, is it anything more than a redundant metaphor, its snow-white coating a brow-beating reference to plantation exploitation? Less subtle, even, is a photographic collage just behind it, contrasting the patterns on a tattooed Maori with those on Victorian lace.

Elinor Whidden skewers colonial history with more humour but an equal lack of subtlety. In her photographs she plays a contemporary voyageur, all hot and dyke-y in a toque and rolled-up sleeves, who stares off longingly into natural vistas, musket in hand. A twist is that the musket is made of car parts (notably a rearview mirror), as is the windshield-wiper hut in the centre of the gallery — a simplistic conflation of Canada's current carbon-footprint culture with its canoeing past.

At least Koki Tanaka is honest about the colonial role played by the contemporary artist, who often globe-trots as much as businessmen. Still, his installation (pictured) at YYZ is not this critic's cup of tea. Tanaka's video works and photographs, some about the artist's recent residency in Toronto, exalt banal Zen-art experiments such as stacking loafs of bread, spinning around with an open juice bottle to create a circle on the ground, spilling oranges down stairs, etc.

Such art is not, in fact, democratic: as a viewer of it, one feels wrongly subject to its tyranny. Sure, one could try it at home, but in the moment, at the gallery, one is enslaved by boredom. Interestingly, Tanaka's most entertaining achievement is a plywood labyrinth in which he sets his videos — a work built by others, commissioned as a result of the artist's international authority. Ah, colonialism.

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