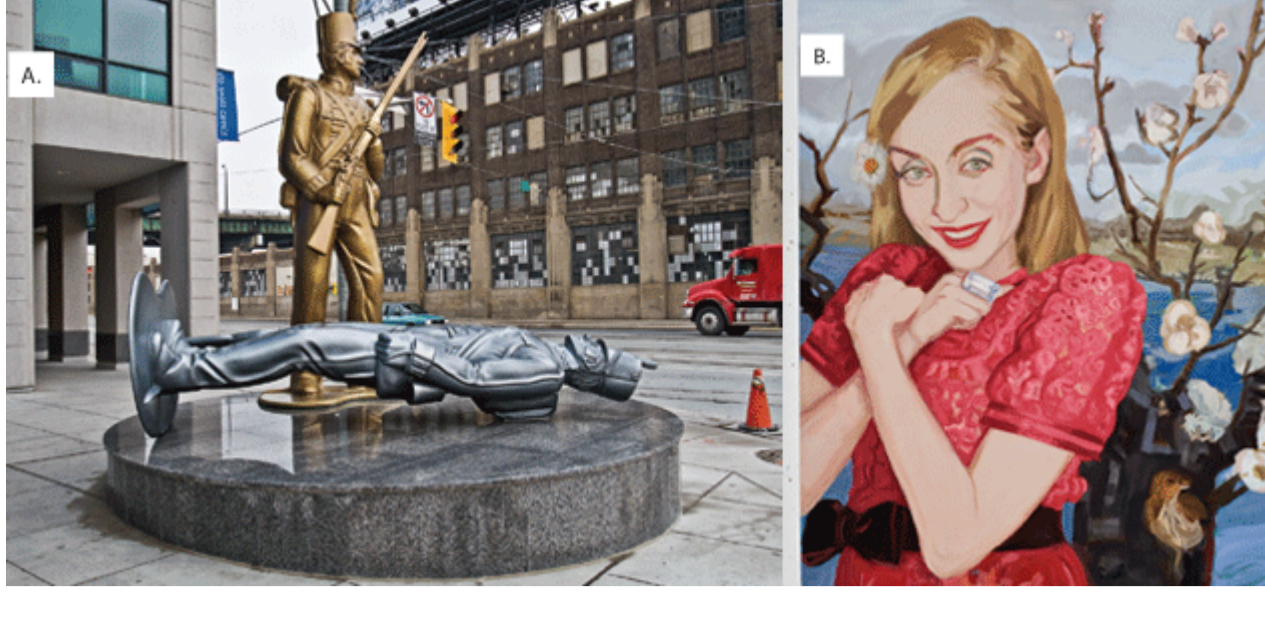


GALLERIES



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Renovation, innovation, stagnation The year in visual art

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BY DAVID BALZER December 17, 2008 21:12



A macro-view suggests no shortage of milestones for local art in 2008: the AGO, Wychwood Barns, continued opening of new galleries in the ROM, a third and still-bigger Nuit Blanche, UpArt, Simon Starling's Power Plant commission, a throng of new commercial galleries on West Queen West and elsewhere, Mercer Union's expansion and move to Bloor West, and many anniversaries, such as Katharine Mulherin's 10th, LE's fifth and InterAccess's 25th. In a year that concluded with widespread doom-saying, visual art in Toronto has, it seems, persevered, especially as an apparatus, a scene. For the general art lover, there are probably more things to do here than ever before.

That said, there is little to remark on in terms of real trends or epiphanies. A list of personal highlights seems particularly arbitrary: digging David Altmejd's The Index at the AGO; repeatedly noting the goofy gutsiness of Katie Bethune-Leaman's Mushroom Studio at the Toronto Sculpture Garden as I passed it on my bike; mulling over Douglas Coupland's Monument to the War of 1812 and ultimately conceding it power despite its juvenile provocations; doing the same for fauxreel and Specter's A City Renewal Project; discovering the work of Clifford Maracle at Maslak McLeod and of John Gould at Roberts Gallery; and lapping up the Gardiner Museum's terrific "Man-Eating Tiger and Other Staffordshire Figures from the Rosalie and Isadore Sharp Collection," my brazen pick for best exhibit of the year. The painting I preferred in 2008 was technical, graphic, allegorical and also peculiarly hermetic (I might have enjoyed it in 2003, or even 1993): Peter Hoffer's "Prose" at Nicholas Metivier; Janet Werner's "New Work" at Birch Libralato; Gillian Iles' "Mind the gap, please" at Propeller; Andrew Morrow's "New Works" at Edward Day Gallery; Eliza Griffiths' "well socialized" at Katharine Mulherin; and Scott Waters' "Time Heals All Wounds" at Craig Scott Gallery, war art so fancifully personal it ceases to be solely topical or circumstantial.

Lowlights, as for any art critic these days, abound, and pertain directly to many of our ostensible signs of growth. Gehry's AGO renovation largely works for me, but does not redeem a distasteful curatorial philosophy that positions the gallery's impressive collection within an arrogantly contemporary ethos, complete with dumbed-down panels that take a condescending, self-important approach to bringing art to the masses. The Power Plant is withering. The Starling commission and accompanying retrospective were bathetic, the artist's Musseled Moore, now in the AGO, a pissy kiss-off to the pretentious ideologues who asked for it. Similarly, the PP's "Not Quite How I Remember It" and the ROM's "Shanghai Kaleidoscope," the exhibits that made me fume the most this year, typified the ludicrousness, incestuousness, vanity and laziness that have too-long informed contemporary art everywhere. And the wrong people won both the RBC Painting Competition and the Sobey Art Award, the latter going to shallow, unfunny video and installation artist Tim Lee and not to Daniel Barrow, so clearly one of the country's best young illustrators and storytellers. I doubt anyone in the city had an art experience to rival that of audiences at Barrow's three Images Festival performances this spring – in a word, transformative, more quietly and personally so than any so-called starchitecture could ever be.

- A. Douglas Coupland's Monument to the War of 1812
- B. Janet Werner's Rachel in Marc Jacobs
- C. The new AGO
- D. Daniel Barrow in performance
- E. The Death of Munro, from the Gardiner's Staffordshire figures exhibit

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