

The beautiful decay of fine art

The pervasive-art movement hits the capital

by Emily Lam
Fulcrum Contributor

FINDING ITS ROOTS in California in the 70s, the pervasive-art movement has finally made its way to Ottawa's La Petite Mort Gallery (306 Cumberland St.), showcasing a new form of fine art never quite seen before. Also known as 'Low Brow' or 'Pop Surrealism', the movement provides the masses with art accessible through Internet-based communities, zines, and toys. Rather than waiting for the art world to notice them, artists such as Ross Bonfanti, Dave Cooper, Brandon Steen, and Magda Trzaski have taken it upon themselves to get noticed.

The works shown in the Pervasive Art North exhibit reveal intricate stories of more than mere lines, colours, and shapes. They also reveal each artist's personal story, and their views on contemporary society.

Upon first glance, Bonfanti's *Concreatures* resembles the soft and comforting stuffed animals of childhood. Yet, to the touch, these sculptures reveal themselves to be solid concrete masses that remind us of, in Bonfanti's words, the "coldness of living in an urban environment." The works are created from stuffed animals that have been discarded by their owners, and Bonfanti uses each toy as a mold in order to retain the original look and shape of the toy. The artist breathes new life and meaning into these creatures,

emphasizing the interconnectivity between people that has been lost through technology, and the general malaise of the working world.

"I felt like I was doing some sort of apocalyptic fossil ... It was a way of encapsulating something that you cherished and is given to you for emotional reasons, [and then] creating a trophy of that," said Bonfanti of his work.

This sense of open intimacy is fully expressed in local artist Cooper's erotically engaged female characters, creating a complex visualization of hedonists and their perversions within a visually lush and romanticized world. Using the naked female form as his subject, Cooper grotesquely exaggerates body proportions and facial features in oil on canvas to create outlandish scenarios that highlight his psychedelic scenes, reminiscent of the traditional surrealist genre. When inspecting Cooper's *Tilt*, the viewer is engulfed in the curves and textures of sexuality and absurdity.

Focusing on the art and the narratives themselves, Steen's works revolve around the translation of Johnny Cash lyrics, and pop references from his childhood.

Steen says, "I went to bed each night with my iPod and randomly went through 393 of Cash's songs, [and found that] there were certain ones that I remember from childhood that I used to listen to in my grandfather's car."

In reading the lyrics and text provided by Steen in colourful acrylics on birch veneer, a deeper narrative emerges from Cash's music. Steen's works provide a complex, personal elaboration of his admiration for

Cash and the residual effects of his music within Steen's life. In his paintings, Steen focuses on particular characters to prompt the viewer to enter into a personal one-on-one relationship with the subject and the story that surrounds it.

The works of Trzaski reveal the subtext of death and despair, offering a sardonic and cynical perspective of cultural norms and our lives.

"I'm noticing that people are more interested in stories and a narrative that this type of art offers. People are looking for more substance and mystery ... What is behind the art itself," says Trzaski.

Her tiny sculptures of gangly limbed and cracked-skinned characters enclosed within shadow boxes, redefine and reconstruct the norms of life and escape which, in turn, present a depiction of the beautiful decay of life. Her exaggeration of surrealism through her animal-inspired characters alludes to elements of mystery as well as a reminder of our own mortality. There is a looming feeling of cynicism, and a sense of life floating away that can only be contained within Trzaski's shadow boxes. The strange, yet intricate figurines highlight dark undertones of otherwise-innocent subject matter.

Pervasive Art North demonstrates how pop surrealism can destroy the norms of traditional illustration, and incorporate multiple narratives within a single piece of art, like a film strip passing before the eyes.

Pervasive Art North will be showing at La Petite Mort Gallery until Sept. 13. For more information, visit lapetitemortgallery.com

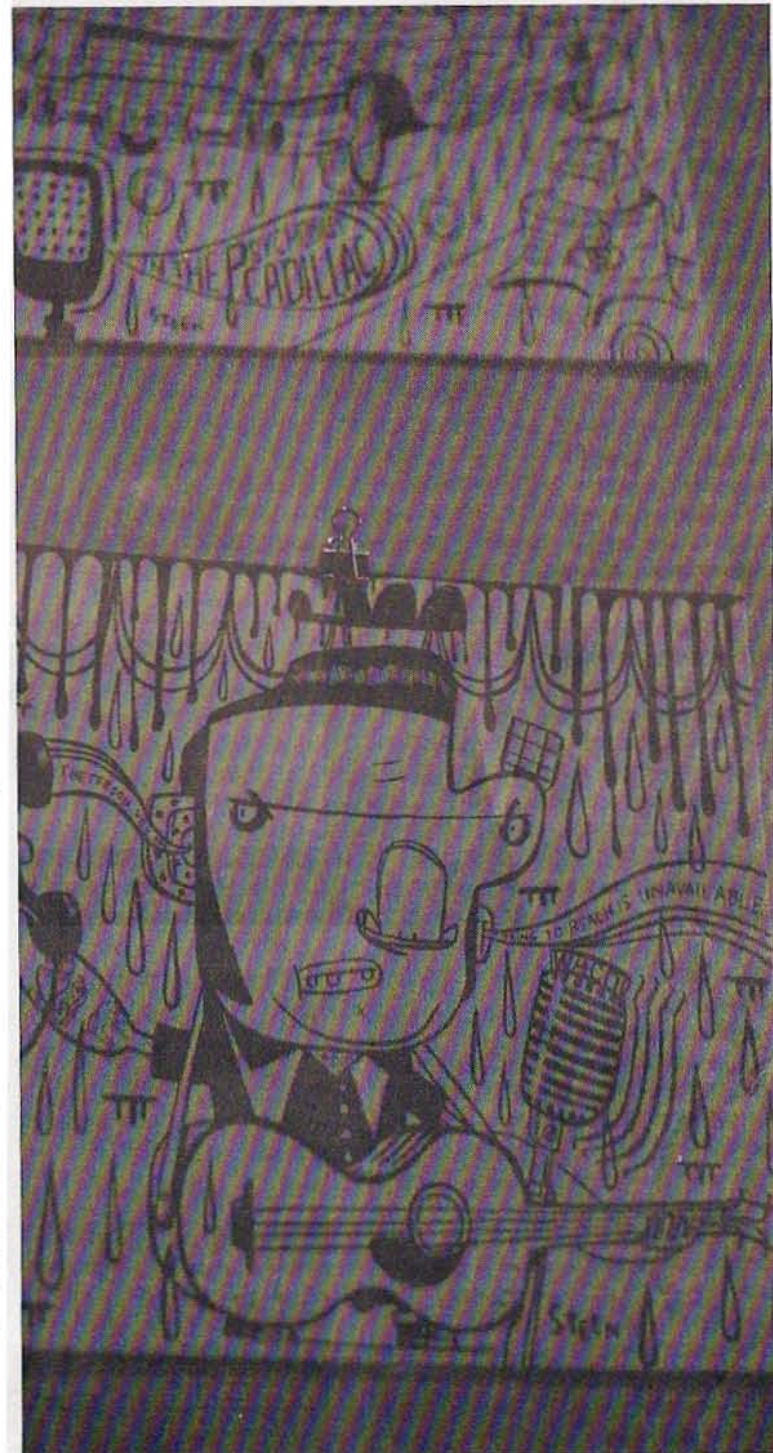


photo by Meghan Walton

He was a highwayman, a sailor, a dam builder. Now Johnny Cash can add "pervasive-art subject" to his resume, too.