

Black and white and Roda all over

GALLERY GOING GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Tim Roda at Angell Gallery
\$2,000 each. Until July 15,
890 Queen St. W., Toronto;
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New York-based photographer Tim Roda constantly insists that the most important part of his large-scale, black and white photographs, now at Toronto's Angell Gallery, is their content — which is made up, for the most part, of the rather crudely constructed sets Roda himself builds and decorates and populates both with his wife, Allison, and, more frequently, with his son, Ethan.

Much of the pleasure these big, rough-hewn photographs provide, however, is traceable — for me, at any rate — not to their content, but rather to the brawny way they work to subvert the conventional expectations of what makes for a quality print: sharpness, crispness, saturation and intensity (black blacks, white whites and carefully modulated, pearlescent greys), an immaculate surface, everything that might be gathered into one demanding word: exactitude.

Roda's photographs eschew exactitude. His prints (leaving their content aside for a moment) are, technically speaking, a delectable, engaging mess: "The rough edges, irregular margins, erratic fixer stains and haphazard tonal range," writes Roda in his artist statement (you can read it at www.angellgallery.com), "are suggestive of the working-class way of life that my grandfather experienced when he came to America as an Italian immigrant." Roda writes affectionately about how his grandfather and his father once built the family home, a swimming pool, a tree fort and deck out of the same wood they used to build the chicken house. His father, he says, once cobbled together a two-car garage "with three sides and wood that looked like a patchwork quilt."

And Roda has clearly inherited his family's sense of environmental ad hoc-ism. He claims, correctly I'm sure, that he is capable of



Tim Roda's Untitled 65: The photograph's content may be ambiguous but its structure is tight as a drum.

printing "what photographers would consider to be a perfect picture," but maintains, "I would consider that to be imperfect." This elusive perfection would be inconsistent, Roda feels, with what is important to him in a photograph: its presentation of "moments of ambiguity," moments that accumulate in the photos by means of Roda's bringing together of his platforms, partitions, hanging lamps, cables, curtains and stacks of lumber leaning precariously against the walls of his ramshackle photo-theatres and positioning his family therein.

The contrast between the homely beauty of these dusty grey tableaux (their dustiness provided to some extent by the motes of dust and other bits of photo-flotsam that have sifted over the images) and the usually inexplicable activities of Allison and Ethan within them make for a lot of symbolically rich, metaphorically charged moments — moments that lie just on the far side of explanation.

What is interesting too is the degree to which Roda's apparently chaotic photographs are invariably resolvable into beautifully weighted and measured compositions. In his *Untitled #65*, shown here, Ethan sits desolately beside a

mirror, looking abstractly at his knees (and not at the very tiny Chihuahua Roda has somehow pasted into the lower left corner of the picture). Formally, the photograph resolves itself into two sets of structure — the strong horizontals and verticals that subdivide the right half, and one superb, long diagonal that stretches from the lower right corner (where the dog is) up through Ethan's reflected head, past his real head (albeit in shadow), up through the dangling light bulb, and into the upper right corner. The photograph's content may be ambiguous but its structure is tight as a drum.