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## Coastal disturbance

The Vancouver Art Gallery has launched a provocative triennial tribute to the city's artists



Kim Dorland's 'Egress,' part of the Vancouver Art Gallery's exhibit Vancouver Special: Ambivalent Pleasures

Many visitors come to the Vancouver Art Gallery seeking Emily Carr paintings, or blockbuster shows that happen to pass through town (Picasso this past summer, Walker Evans on now). But Vancouver is also home to a vibrant, thriving contemporary-art scene. It was one of four "art cities" examined in Season 8 of the PBS series *Art 21*; and the only city in continental North America profiled in the 2013 publication *Art Cities of the Future: 21st Century Avant-Gardes*, with names such as Jeff Wall, Stan Douglas, Brian Jungen and Geoffrey Farmer regularly cited as giants of contemporary art.

These artists work in studios and artist-run centres around the city, and some are shown in local galleries. But as of Dec. 3, their work can also be seen at the brass-ring epicentre of the city's art scene, the Vancouver Art Gallery.

The VAG has launched a new triennial Vancouver Special, which, every three years, will exhibit contemporary art from the city. The inaugural iteration, Ambivalent Pleasures, is a comprehensive survey of work since the 2010 Olympics. (The overall name is a play on a typical Vancouver housing style, the Vancouver Special.)

"I think we still have one of the most prominent art scenes in North America," said Jesse McKee, head of strategy at the Vancouver artist-run centre 221A., McKee is co-curating the show with Daina Augaitis, the VAG's chief curator/associate director.

During a period of four months this year, the duo made about 90 studio visits around the city – visiting artists they knew or knew of, as well as artists they learned about. They visited commercial galleries and

other arts spaces, researched past shows, talked to curators and artists, and also approached professors at art schools looking for recent standout students.

“Some were still going to school, some we hadn’t heard of,” Augaitis says. “We did start with a younger cohort. Who are the millennials, who are the people that we don’t know about?”

There are more senior and established artists in the show as well – some who may have paved the way for the younger artists, or at least inspired them.

“Some might have a 15-page-long international CV by the time they’re 30, but Vancouver might not be aware of them,” McKee says. “Maybe it’s someone of an older age who has moved here in the past five years. Because [the show] was just trying to look at what has been really vital production in the city since the Olympics.”

Forty artists from different generations and stages in their practice were ultimately selected. They work in a wide variety of media: Mark DeLong’s fantastically adorned cardboard boxes recovered from stores in Chinatown; Derya Akay’s “stained-glass” panels that resemble artists’ palettes, with ceramic paint splotches; Kim Dorland’s very new oils, inspired by his relocation to the West Coast – so thick with layered paint, I swear I could still smell it.

The experience begins in the rotunda, with Alison Yip’s immersive mural *Gazebo*, 2016. The site-specific work places the visitor inside an imperfect structure, with breaks in its links. There are some objects woven through – a scarf, a plastic bag holding a flower. The insets are painted windows into the world beyond – a snaking garden hose, brooms and rakes, darkness. The viewer is also inside an idea. It’s a piece about uncertainty and indecision – fence-sitting, McKee explains. “In a sense we are all in kind of a post-truth [world], if you want to use the Oxford [Dictionaries] word of the year. Maybe fence-sitting is one of the only real positions you can take these days,” he says.

“It is kind of falling apart so maybe it’s past its prime,” Augaitis adds. “Maybe it’s time for the gallery to move on to its new quarters.” (The VAG is in the midst of a campaign to build a new facility a few blocks away.)

Tamara Henderson’s colourful sculpture *The Scarecrow’s Holiday*, 2015, stands guard at the entrance on the second floor – more playful than intimidating; a bright, multimedia warrior with its sturdy boxing-glove-type feet and ropey tale.

Inside, Ryan Peter’s black-and-white photograms are as interesting aesthetically as the process of their creation – an experimental form of photography created sans camera. Peter makes them by laying photo paper flat in a darkroom, cutting transparencies and layering them with different textures and surfaces, laying them on top of the photo paper, exposing it and developing it as an image, McKee explains. “While he’s making these you’re never certain what will come out on the other side.”

The exhibition is thick with discovery – works as diverse as the artists who made them.

Allison Hrabluik’s short film, *The Splits*, 2015, is masterfully shot and edited – and so much fun. Here, people perform a skill or hobby in a Vancouver rehearsal hall. Much of the film is set to the soundtrack of an opera-singing drag queen, one of the featured performers. Viewers also see sausage being made (literally) and consumed (a competitive hot-dog eater is another character) – as well as a hula-hooper, gymnasts, weightlifters, jump-rope skippers, a hairstylist – and many others. Here is an argument for passion providing the connective tissue between disparate pursuits.

Most of the works are not overtly political, but there is some critique of Vancouver’s contemporary condition. Maya Beaudry’s *The Snuggler*, 2016, is a reclining female figure sculpted from pillow-stuffed

fabric printed with images from Craigslist – photos from real estate listings. In Vancouver, of course, housing is off-the-charts expensive.

Julia Feyrer's 16mm film *Escape Scenes*, 2014, was filmed with a camera pointing out the front and back of her truck as she drove around Vancouver – always on a route leading out of the city. The shots out of her back window frame the city with physical interventions: locks and chains; Kool-Aid packets and drug baggies; a swinging wrecking ball – representing issues one might contemplate as they navigate life in this city.

Ron Tran's installation *No Gay (Bolzano/Bozen)*, 2016, was inspired by a trip to Italy and a recent residency at the Nanaimo Art Gallery. During his time in Nanaimo, B.C., some anti-Chinese hate graffiti was found on bus-bench real estate ads. It recalled for Tran a trip to Bolzano, Italy, the previous year where he encountered anti-gay graffiti on benches. For this work he installs snapshots of himself on those Italian benches on a bus bench from Nanaimo. Visitors are invited to sit on that bench, where they face a screen flashing a slide show of Tran in various get-ups, to the soundtrack of his father flipping channels on the TV remote.

More than political commentary, this exhibition provides a comprehensive snapshot – if that's not too much of an oxymoron – of the art scene in Vancouver during a seminal transitional moment. The title *Ambivalent Pleasures* speaks to the ever-present gap between where the city (and presumably its artists) is and where it would like to be. This exhibition provides a wild and exciting space in which to contemplate that gap.

*Vancouver Special: Ambivalent Pleasures is at the Vancouver Art Gallery Dec. 3-April 17*  
([vanartgallery.bc.ca](http://vanartgallery.bc.ca)).