**Live and Direct**

**ERIKA BALSMON ON CINEMA AS A PERFORMING ART**

THIS PAST MAY, “Memories Can’t Wait—Film Without Film,” the theme program of the 2014 International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, began with a blank screen. No celluloid ran through the projector; instead, light was transmitted without intermediary, bright enough to bounce back and partially illuminate the faces of the seated spectators. Soon enough, members of the audience started to throw crumpled balls of paper in the way of the beam, causing shadows to appear on the screen. Others joined in, and paper airplanes began to soar, with laughter and conversation filling the room. The old cinema flyers that had been lying on the auditorium seats—fittingly enough, advertising a 3-D screening called “Aktivkino” that had taken place a month before in the very same space—took to the air and flew toward the emptiness ahead. It was unclear exactly how the commotion began; no instruction had been given to the audience as a whole. Presumably, a few knowing spectators had been planted to set off a chain reaction. In the absence of the image, one’s attention was focused more on the series of playful interactions between spectators than it was on the shadow play. When the ruckus subsided, the program moved on to curator Mika Taanila’s next selection. Our collective re-creation of *Hell’s Angels*, 1969, the expanded-cinema performance conceived by Austrian filmmaker Ernst Schmidt Jr.—and originally dedicated to Howard Hughes—was over.

The expanded-cinema practices of the 1960s and ’70s—which gave rise to a headily diverse body of work ranging from Stan VanDerBeek’s *Movie-Drome*, 1963–65, to Hollis Frampton’s *A Lecture*, 1968, from Ken Jacobs’s Nervous System performances (1975—) to Tony Conrad’s “Yellow Movies,” 1972–73—have been the subject of significant curatorial and scholarly attention in recent years, much of which has interrogated how these works negotiate the antipodes of intermediated expansion and reductionist specificity. To approach *Hell’s Angels* in this way, one might say that it offers a degree zero of cinematic exhibition: projector, screen, audience. Such considerations are of particular relevance today, as the cinema mutates and migrates under the pressures of digitization. But to stop here would be to neglect an issue arguably more central to Schmidt’s piece and one that plays a key role in accounting for the intensified interest film festivals and museums have recently shown in certain historical and contemporary works of expanded cinema: the liveness of the event. *Hell’s Angels* forgoes an understanding of cinema as founded in the sameness of mechanical reproduction in favor of activating the auditorium as a space of chance occurrence and encounter. Liveness is a way of cultivating the unforeseeable: One never knows precisely what might happen. Though the piece takes place within a stable set of parameters, it will never be the same twice; it will always be a re-presentation rather than a repetition. And perhaps most important, it will never be able to be downloaded from Karagarga or streamed on UbuWeb—at least not without devaluing to the status of mere documentation.

Taanila elaborated his theme of “Film Without Film” in a number of ways, including via videos constructed entirely of text (Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries’ *Hyperbole on My Mind*, 2014) or of still images (Edgar Péra’s dubious rendering of Auschwitz in 3-D, *Stillness*, 2014). But the overwhelming majority of the program followed Schmidt’s posthumous lead, integrating performative components in order to transform cinema from an art of reproduction into one of singularly and contingency, whether through magic-lantern shows, projector performances, film actions, or live musical accompaniment. Figures such as William Raban, valle export, and Tony Hill represented the 1960s and ’70s generation, while younger artists such as Aura Satz, Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder, and Daniel Barrow testified to the ongoing vibrancy of this area of practice. The Oberhausen program thus joined events such as the celebration of Ken Jacobs’s work...
at this year’s Courtisane Festival in Ghent, Belgium, and Tate Modern’s fifteen-week “Art in Action” season in 2012 in making a strong claim for the conjunction of a pair of terms not often thought to have much to do with each other: cinema and liveness. The proposition that cinema might be a performing art clearly exerts a strong appeal today. But what are the precise contours of—and what exactly is at stake in—the recent liveness of live cinema?

“LIVE CINEMA” sounds like a contradiction in terms. After all, if liveness is considered in relation to technological media at all, it tends to be thought to be the property of broadcast television and the Internet much more than of cinema, which depends on regulated repetitions of the prerecorded. Televisual “flow,” to use cultural critic Raymond Williams’s term, gives the impression of a ceaselessly unfolding now, even when the content being transmitted is not in fact live. As film theorist Mary Ann Doane has put it, “The temporal dimension of television . . . would seem to be that of an insistent ‘present-ness’ — a ‘This-is-going-on’ rather than a ‘That-has-been’, a celebration of the instantaneous.” Web browsing inherits this temporality while exacerbating it through increased interactivity and customization. Not only is content often updated in real time, but the user possesses the ability to navigate through it at his or her volition, thus experiencing the liveness of a self-directed desire. By contrast, though bound to the present-tense unspooling of the film through the projector, cinematic exhibition is more properly located in the domain of the That-has-been. The spectator encounters an already-completed artwork that exists within an economy of the multiple as a copy without original.

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By: Carolin Vesely
Posted: 03/5/2013 1:00 AM

Daniel Barrow, a Winnipeg-born visual and performance artist best known for using overhead projectors and other antiquated technologies to bring comic-book narratives to life, has been named 2013 Canadian Glenfiddich Artist-in-Residence.

Barrow, 41, is one of eight artists from around the world chosen to live and work at the famous scotch distillery in Dufftown, Scotland, for three months. He was among 150 applicants vying for the prestigious prize.
The Glenfiddich brand, founded by William Grant in 1887, is known for its single malt scotch whisky, began its artist-in-residence program in 2002. Once in Dufftown, the artists live in "crofts" (traditional little Scottish farm houses) and are given about $20,000 worth of resources and materials and encouraged to find inspiration for new works in the pastoral setting of the Scottish Highlands.

One of the highlights is the opportunity to work in an international artists' community, Barrow, who resides in Montreal, says during a phone interview.

"It's amazing. You're living in a community with all these incredibly talented, successful artists who are divorced from their personal lives, and even to a certain extent from their active career lives, so you become instantaneous best friends," he says. And there's just so many opportunities to meet different curators and programmers."

Barrow was recipient of the $50,000 Sobey Art Award in 2010 and also represented Canada at the International Studio & Curatorial Program in New York City that same year.

He has a few shows booked in Europe in May and then will participate in the Venice Biennale contemporary art exhibition before heading to Scotland in June.

The former Winnipegger, whose work -- he also does video, film, print-making and drawing -- has been described as "wry," "politically astute," "virtuoso" and "strangely heartbreaking," says he has visited Scotland, but never to its highlands.

Any fringe benefits associated with living at a scotch distillery may be lost on him, however.

"I'm a bit of a cheap date, so it wouldn't be my first choice," Barrow says of the malty libation. "I'm more of a wine person."
"The new creed of the obscenely rich: sorrow for sorrow's sake alone." Daniel Barrow’s The Thief of Mirrors is a wry takedown of the upper class, positing that "crying is a class privilege." The wealthy victims of the story's protagonist, a harlequin "kissing bandit," wake one morning to find that they've been robbed of their jewels, their wealth, and with it their ability to express sadness. What they're left with is a kiss, a simple red rose, and the sad clown visage of the thief etched permanently into the glass of their mirror, a symbol of their new status.

"Dear Mom and Dad," begins each letter which serve as the narrative device in Barrow's second piece, Looking for Love in the Hall of Mirrors. Inspired partly by Harper Lee’s classic novel To Kill A Mockingbird and partly by the gay cruising park known as “the hill” in Winnipeg, where the story is set, this piece is a melancholy tale of an aging, closeted man who moves from the farm where
he's lived all his life to the big city searching for a new life in art and love. He likes the city, is fascinated by the cruising culture in this park (though he never quite fully describes this to Mom and Dad), but ultimately seems to be stuck on the outside looking in.

What I appreciated most about this performance, which was co-presented at the Whitsell Auditorium by the NW Film Center, is Daniel Barrow's innovation, and his multimedia approach. It is rare to see someone creating a completely new and different form of performance, and surprisingly when it uses such a familiar and utilitarian piece of equipment as the overhead projector.

Barrow layers and manipulates his own illustrations on mylar transparencies (and, I think, some digital content) while narrating the story himself over a musical soundtrack. Barrow is obviously quite inventive, a talented visual artist, writer, and creator, and he employs these talents here to explore and comment on the relevant themes of economic inequality and the closeted gay experience.

At times though, especially in the second piece, Barrow's flowery prose got too dense for me, and his allusions to artists and writers I'm not terribly familiar with (Antoine Watteau and Quentin Crisp are each mentioned more than once) distanced me from the narrative and, paired with Barrow's soft tones and lulling score, found me struggling to stay awake, let alone engaged. And I was personally a bit creeped out by the style of the illustrations at times; clowns and wandering eyeballs just aren't my thing.

![A victim of the Thief of Mirrors: bit creepy, no?](image)

So although I was torn on how much I enjoyed this particular performance, it was definitely worthwhile, if only to be exposed to Barrow's distinctive artistic style and techniques.

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**COMMENTS (0)**

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Comments are closed.
The installation artist and performer, Daniel Barrow, remains an elusive figure despite his affinity for linear narratives and direct audience engagement. You’d think we’d have a clearer idea of what he’s up to, for all that. But the 2010 Sobey Art Award recipient, and the recently-selected Canadian representative for the lush Glenfiddich Artist Residency, seems to be capitalizing on a practice born of whimsy and ethereality while also firmly rooted in the architectures of installation, technology, and relationality.

The Winnipeg-born, Montreal-based Barrow works in video, film, printmaking and drawing, but is best known for his use of antiquated technologies, his “registered projection” installations, and his narrative overhead projection performances. Barrow describes his performance method as a process of “creating and adapting comic narratives” and is known for his use of antiquated computer technology, as well as magic lanterns, slide projectors, and video. His performances have been described as, “wry” and “strangely heartbreaking.”

Upon the recent news that Barrow has been selected to join seven international artists at the coveted 2013 Glenfiddich Artist-in-Residence (which provides its artists with stone cottages in the highlands, access to the distillery in Dufftown, Scotland, and a three-month residency valued at over $20,000 per artist), ARTINFO Canada sat down with Barrow at Toronto’s tony Spoke Club to discuss the artist’s evolving career and aesthetic. The interview falls on the cusp of an anticipated announcement regarding Barrow’s forthcoming fall performance at a major contemporary art museum.

You’re frequently choosing antiquated technologies to screen your work. What do you gain from working within these set limitations? Is there a kind of freedom to be found in it?
I think for me, it’s an engagement with another part of my brain – I have these ideas, and suddenly I have something to funnel them into. The process takes on the quality of a crossword, where you’re translating complicated ideas or gestures into simple technology. It’s the reason I continue to use the overhead projector. And then the question arises, how would I produce a fade-to-black (like you would on film or video) on this? To create a complex cinematic language with simple means is, for whatever reason, very inspiring to me.
With regards to the technology, and the nostalgic ethos of your work, do you ever think you should have been born in another time? Or is there a significance to understanding contemporary technology’s effects, and, as you say, translating them through these more primitive forms?

I am a nostalgic person, and I am drawn to nostalgic images, and my imagination stems from childhood, certainly. But I’m less interested in the nostalgic qualities that they have, and more interested in simple technologies. So for instance I’m interested in using Photo Booth on the Mac. It doesn’t yet have any nostalgic associations, but it has a very limited means and effects, and it’s really interesting to work within a grid of that kind.

What are you working towards, aside from the Glenfiddich Residency?
My new performance will premiere in the fall, and I’m in negotiations about the dates for this with a major Canadian museum. I’m working on a couple of videos, and a slideshow comic book, which I’m producing using my Amiga computer [a computer popular in the ‘80s and early ‘90s, one of the first computers that specialized in editing video].

What is the Amiga’s value for you, or is it simply aesthetic?
The reason I’m still attached to using it is that it’s like printmaking – you’ll create an image and bring it into this program and it opens something that’s slightly different; there is this element of surprise.

I’m also really familiar with it; this is the software I was trained on in art school. It’s slightly nostalgic. But further, I like working within a series of limitations, within a grid of some kind. And of course, I like the way it looks – slightly antiquated.

A lot of your work revolves around narrative, and your stories are often brought to a place of allegory. Can you speak to the significance this facet of your work, and where your stories come from?
Story has always been connected to drawing, in my mind. I would spend hours and hours drawing as a child, and there was always a narrative at work in my mind, and a backstory. That’s still true. These stories come to me, and one of the challenges for me is to filter out the extraneous details and find a simple, comprehensive story.

Who are the best storytellers, for you?
Probably Daniel Clowes, the comic book artist. I also love the filmmakers Fellini, and Sam Raimi, and Brian de Palma.

Do you see narrative inhabiting a neglected state in contemporary art practice?
I definitely see less of it in the contemporary art world. But my primary frame of reference is cinema, so that’s kind of secondary to me. Probably one of the most important and frequent audience for my work are film festival audiences. I perform in them to this day, even though the work lands in a gallery atmosphere.

There isn’t a lot of narrative in contemporary art, though, you’re right; but then again, Shary Boyle is representing us at Venice …

I’m sure that comparison gets made quite a bit, between you two. Do you see the parallels? What do you see as the important differences between your practices?
Yes, absolutely. We’re of the same generation, and we became friends ten years ago, now. Our work has developed along many parallel lines. The difference is that my work is more explicitly narrative, but our work is far more similar than different.

Since your 2010 Sobey Award and the freedoms it may have afforded you, has your work changed in any significant way?
I don’t think so, because I’m always working three years late. I have these ideas for work, and they’re all put in queues, so the ideas I had at the time of the award are the ones that I’m developing now. But I think more importantly the Sobey Art Award affected the way I think of myself as an artist. I have less of a martyr complex now, and I feel much more acknowledged and supported, which is really important to me personally. But I don’t think the award affected the work, no.

Your installations maintain an invitation to interact with the work. When you’re not performing, and the piece becomes, simply, installation, do you see it as incomplete – or does it take on a different resolution in your absence?
It’s not incomplete, because I created the installation in such a way that the viewer will complete the circle. In art school and for a decade following, I only made performances and screened film and videos; I had never exhibited in a space, I was always thinking about the screen. But in 2004, Mercer Union invited me to have my first solo exhibition, and my best idea at the time was to translate my ideas as a performer and bequeath it to the viewer.

I am still really interested in that idea and have expanded on that idea, to the point where I now rely on the audience for the actual performance. For instance for the piece that I’m developing, I’m using the silhouettes of the audience, projected with masks over their shadows, so that they’re further implicated in the work. My installation work is similar – it requires animation.

Are you consciously walking a line between the romantic and the grotesque?
Yes, but I wouldn’t describe it that way. I think what I’m conscious of is wanting to lead an audience into an experience of conflict but in a way that feels reassuring. And that often translates into the contradiction that you described.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=BxvEvU4WcAM
Scottish Whiskey Distiller Glenfiddich Has an Artists in Residence Program

We consider ourselves experts on strange and unconventional artist residencies, which is why we were surprised to learn that the world-renowned whiskey distiller Glenfiddich has just picked the eight people who will be participating in its 12th annual artist-in-residence program. The three-month residency, which is valued at about $20,000, brings an international slate of artists to Dufftown, in the Scottish Highlands.

Most years the selected participants come from North America, the U.K., and Asia, and this summer the 2010 Sobey Award-winning Canadian artist Daniel Barrow will be one of the resident artists at the distillery.

“I love scotch,” Barrow told the Globe and Mail. “I can’t wait to enjoy a scotch while I’m sitting in the middle of the Highlands. It’ll be paradise.”

Barrow, who works primarily in drawings and projections, anticipates that whatever project he develops during the residency will be inspired to a great extent by the landscape surrounding the Glenfiddich distillery. “The initial appeal of the residency, apart from its prestige, was the landscape,” he told the Globe and Mail. “Working with a landscape that epitomizes the melodrama of natural beauty was a primary inspiration for applying. I imagine that will take center stage in whatever project I decide to develop.”

— Benjamin Sutton
Imagine being paid to make art in a distillery – and no, this is not an unpublished William Faulkner story. Montreal artist Daniel Barrow, 41, is the Canadian recipient of this year’s Glenfiddich Artist-in-Residence prize. He and seven other artists will spend three months this summer working in the Scottish Highlands at the Glenfiddich distillery in Dufftown.

The scotch manufacturer has been inviting artists from around the world to its arts program in the northeast of Scotland for 12 years. The residency is valued at $20,000, and more valuable is the fact that the artists are free to work without limits or deadlines, inspired by the landscape of the Highlands.

Glenfiddich is only one of many companies to realize the potent symbiosis of commerce and art. Another whisky manufacturer, Jura, runs a writer-in-residence program at its distillery in the Hebrides Islands. In London, England, Heathrow Airport also hosts a writer-in-residence, and underprivileged art students receive mentoring through the Louis Vuitton Young Arts Project. At Shanghai’s Swatch Art Peace Hotel (its actual name), the manufacturer of whimsical watches invites a “limited number of artists” to live and work at the hotel every year.

The Globe and Mail’s Elizabeth Renzetti spoke to Daniel Barrow, whose vibrant work combines drawing, video and performance, about his upcoming residency.

**How do you feel about scotch?**
I love scotch. I can’t wait to enjoy a scotch while I’m sitting in the middle of the Highlands. It’ll be paradise.

**Do you have a connection to Scotland?**
My parents are from Scotland. My dad’s from Glasgow, and he moved back to Scotland in 2003. I’ve visited him, but I’ve never been to the Highlands.

The initial appeal of the residency, apart from its prestige, was the landscape. Working with a landscape that epitomizes the melodrama of natural beauty was a primary inspiration for applying. I imagine that will take centre stage in whatever project I decide to develop.

**Although a lot of your work takes place in the dark.**

Yes, I mostly work with projections. I’m stationed behind an overhead projector manipulating drawings while I’m telling a story, and the drawings fit together in some registered way. But I’ve also been inspired by landscape artists – I’ve been spending a lot of time looking at [British painter] John Robert Cozens.

**While you’re at Glenfiddich, do you get as much free scotch as you want?**

I can only imagine, but yes, I think so. I talked to Damian Moppett, who was the Canadian artist in residence a couple of years ago, and he said he had access to the absolute finest whiskies.

**Glenfiddich sponsors this artists’ program, and Jura has a writers’ residency at its headquarters in the Hebrides. Are whisky distillers the new Medicis?**

I didn’t know about the writers’ residency, but the Glenfiddich prize has a huge reputation in Canada. I can only hope that every whisky company will get in line.

**Tell us a little bit about what you might get up to this summer.**

I submitted a proposal that was kind of vague, but focused on the landscape of the Highlands. It’ll definitely involve drawing. I didn’t want another residency with any specific deadline. What often happens is that I’ll be racing toward a deadline that has nothing to do with the place where I’m actually working. I’d like to arrive in Scotland and be inspired by everything – the community and the people and the landscape, and let the project grow out of that environment.

**Will leaving Montreal inform your art?**

It will. There are both good and bad aspects. At home, I know where my pair of scissors is and where my measuring tape is. It’s more convenient to work at home, but there are more interruptions. In Montreal, I have a social circle, friends coming into town to play. In Scotland I’ll be quite isolated. I’ll have a community of artists I’m working with, but we’ll all be divorced from our personal lives and our careers, so we’ll be forging new relationships.

**Is alcohol good for art?**

In this case it is. This year I can safely say that alcohol is very good for my art.

**Finish the sentence: “A drunk artist is ...”**

... a funded artist.

*This interview has been condensed and edited.*
Montreal - Daniel Barrow's first defining moment as an artist came as a child in front of the television, watching Mr. Dressup tell stories about the pictures he drew.

Barrow, the winner of the Sobey Prize for contemporary art, is now telling his own stories at the SBC gallery on Ste. Catherine St. He is a performance artist who provides narration for drawings that he animates and projects onto a wall. His show at the SBC includes a set of drawings that is the basis for a performance he will give at the Musée d’art contemporain on March 16, two overhead projectors with transparencies that a gallery visitor can manipulate as Barrow does, and a narrated video artist statement.

Barrow uses an overhead projector, itself an outdated technology to simulate an even older technology – the magic lantern, which entertained Victorian audiences with images projected from painted glass slides. The magic lantern was capable of dissolving from one image to the next, or changing part of the image to create movement. This is how Barrow animates drawings made on sheets of transparent plastic with coloured papers, inks, felt pens, pencils and pencil crayons in a style based on Victorian illustration and comic books. As he moves through the images, he tells a story.

Mr. Dressup (played by Ernie Coombs on CBC) was an early influence on the talented young artist. Barrow entertained his classmates with his drawings – they were his first performances, he says – but storytelling developed when he was by himself. He drew contestants in beauty contests, and they would talk about themselves, until he crowned one of them the winner.

In the story Barrow will perform on March 16, Every Time I See Your Picture I Cry, a garbage man tries to create an independent phone book by chronicling the lives of each person in his city. He goes through their garbage for information and traces their pictures on their bedroom windows as they sleep. Unfortunately, a deranged killer follows him from house to house. The garbage man is overwhelmed, but makes an attempt to come to terms with his own fears and self-loathing.

Barrow’s stories are, as he says in his artist statement, “gratuitously honest.” Their honesty and openness is what draws in the viewer. “I just try to say things that people in their daily lives find hard to express,” he says. Such as sexual fantasies. In his video artist’s statement, a finger goes into a person’s anus and then starts drawing. “I would risk public humiliation” to express myself, he says in the video.
Daniel Barrow: He can tell a story

The risks he takes by being so honest are part of what is most attractive about his art, and undoubtedly played a role in his being long-listed for the Sobey Prize five times, and shortlisted twice, finally winning the award in November. He represented the Prairies in the Sobey awards, but now lives in Montreal. He has performed and taught all over North America and Europe.

The jury of curators who awarded Barrow the Sobey prize commented on the fictional world he has created over the past 15 years. “The crux of Barrow’s practice is the problem of how we are all obliged, in order to proceed with our lives, to continually strive to better ourselves and the world around us, in ways misguided or not, transforming the abject into the sublime, heartbreak into redemption.”

But the main reason his art is so engaging is because of its empathy – his stories are about love and loss, told with humour and tenderness. “Ideally, I just want to make people cry,” he said.

Daniel Barrow: Good Gets Better continues at SBC Galerie d’art contemporain, 372 Ste. Catherine St. W., Suite 507, until March 19. For information, see www.sbcgallery.ca. Go to danielbarrow.com to see his drawings for performances, exhibitions and trading cards.

Barrow gives a talk and slide show at 7 p.m. Thursday at the launch of his book No One Helped Me at Drawn & Quarterly bookstore, 211 Bernard Ave. W. For information, visit 211blog.drawnandquarterly.com.

Barrow gives a performance at 7 p.m. on March 16, titled Every Time I See Your Picture I Cry, at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, Salle BWR, 185 Ste. Catherine St. W. Admission is free.

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Daniel Barrow’s absorbing narratives ache in a satisfying way, layering common types of loneliness and social anxiety with those much sharper and horrifying. The Winnipeg-born, Montreal-based artist is best known for his live manual animations, plays of light and sound that reference pre-cinematic technologies. ‘Good Gets Better’, his first solo exhibition at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects focused on collaged drawings from three such performances, offering a closer look at the imagery with which they are composed.

Viewing the show was a solitary, intimate experience, in line with Barrow’s graphic style: slowly scanning and connecting the images felt like reading. People and objects alike have a wizened, foamy texture, and everything glows through a distinctive palette of dirty acid pastel. Soft details and delicate layering convey Barrow’s tender affection for his materials, as much as for the wounded individuals in his tragicomic plots.

Eighteen works from ‘Every Time I See Your Picture I Cry’ (2007–8) comprised the largest series in the show, a pared-down selection of scenes from a complicated tale (an hour long when performed). The male protagonist, nicknamed Helen Keller due to his chronic and isolating eye infections, sets out to forge connections by spying on his neighbours, digging through their trash and compiling their portraits into a unique telephone directory. Trailing him is the vengeful Bag Lady, mercilessly bullied as a youth, who violently murders each resident as they are added to the book. Through humour and terror, ‘Every Time…’ achieves a palpable sense of aloteness in the focus it provides for both creation and destruction.

A much simpler vignette plays out in ‘Trying to Love the Normal Amount’ (2009), a series of five drawings in which an elderly woman, longing for companionship, makes herself a baby out of a bag of onions. Collaged images from Barrow’s most recent performance, ‘Good Gets Better’ (2011), depart from narrative order; heraldic and dramatically symbolic – gold, mirrors, skulls and snakes – they reel vanity, greed and deceit into compact circles. Alongside the drawings was a new overhead projection piece, relating back to ‘Every Time…’, that viewers could animate themselves with a sliding mechanism, revealing a transformed image and solemn monologue (‘I also listen, almost exclusively, to the same, beautiful songs I did in high school’). However, the tracked movement felt controlled next to the swirling, expanding energy of the works on paper.

This exhibition coincided with Barrow’s deserved win of the 2010 Sobey Award, Canada’s top prize for artists under 40, which should lead to more international visibility and demand. These drawings and the performances they develop into can’t be rushed – they evince the same methodical, obsessive engagement of many of their characters, a dense, exacting process that takes time to work its way through.

Rose Bouthillier

and white, the visual clarity contrasting with the thematic muddiness of which sequence is ‘true’. So its obvious antecedent is the austere yet surreal Last Year at Marienbad (screenplay by Robbe-Grillet, direction by Renais, 1961).

Unless it’s Sunset Boulevard (1950) – ‘All right, Mr. DeMille, I’m ready for my close-up’ – whose faint campiness links to Husain’s quiet flamboyance. In Husain’s show, the hand-painted silk scarves trailing down from a hatch from upstairs and the ostrich-feather finials recalled other moments of elegant silliness, such as the hats that floated around his 2007 film/performance Two Half Reasons before settling down to interfere deliciously with that night’s screening. But if in Two Half Reasons our desire settled on a cake that Monika baked, in Cusky Number it landed on a still of Monika from Dear What’s Your Face – those striking features, those enormous eyes – and which, placed just inside the gallery office, was almost certainly overlooked. The deliberateness of this image and its placement – and of the show – belies the exhibition’s title. There’s nothing ‘cusky’ about Husain’s calculating approach to his art.

Charles Reeve
Daniel Barrow
by Emily Falvey

Last November, Winnipeg artist Daniel Barrow (now based in Montreal) was named winner of the 2010 Sobey Art Award. The website of the Musée d’art contemporain posted the comments of the curatorial committee for the award that praised Barrow’s virtuoso performances. They felt his work addressed the problem of “how we are all obliged, in order to proceed with our lives, to continually strive to better ourselves and the world around us, in ways misguided or not, transforming the abject into the sublime, heartbreak into redemption.” While this is a perfectly apt (although slightly rambling) description of Barrow’s work and its exploration of forms of social isolation, desperation, sexual uncertainty and self-loathing, his most recent exhibition, “Good Gets Better,” provides a timely opportunity to consider his practice a little more closely.

A modest but concise exhibition, “Good Gets Better” offers a respectable cross-section of Barrow’s practice, including drawing, video, installation and performance. It thus functions as an engaging aperçu of his unique aesthetic approach, which combines illustration, collage, video, storytelling and obsolete technologies such as overhead projectors and Commodore computers. Thanks to exquisite craftsmanship, the viewer is quickly caught up in Barrow’s fascinating and peculiar universe of beauty and ugliness, virtue and transgression, optimism and desperation. Ballet, 2011, for example, uses an overhead projector to blow up a sinuous drawing of a ballet dancer’s leg bound romantically with ribbons. As is often the case with Barrow’s work, the viewer is invited to alter the image by sliding sheets of acetate back and forth across the projector bed. Doing so creates an alternation in which the foot seems to both writhe and dance, thus emphasizing the paradoxical grace and deformity that results from a lifetime of ballet practice. Along with the image, this action also changes an idiom written across the dancer’s ankle: “It’s never too late for a happy childhood” becomes “It’s far too late for a happy childhood,” thus producing a more obvious hesitation between hope and despair.

Contrary to prevailing statements about Barrow’s practice, his work does not transform ugliness into beauty, or abjection into pathos, but holds these opposing forces together in the same moment. Similar strategies of contradiction often motivate works of art that question aesthetic categories and modes of social conduct, and especially those associated with the grotesque and its subgenres, including the baroque, Gothic, absurd and carnivalesque. While critics often describe Barrow’s work as grotesque, it is important to remember that this word is more than just an adjective. Historically, the grotesque is an aesthetic category that undermines the very notion of categories. “a
species of confusion”—to borrow a phrase from American Literary critic Geoffrey Galt Harpham (On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature)—that calls into question “the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world.”

Where Barrow’s work diverges from the grotesque is in its relationship to the sincere. Lionel Trilling once observed that the ideal of a sincere and honest soul has, since the 19th century, slowly lost its status as a virtue, becoming instead a hollow and almost self-negating image. Historically, sincerity is the opposite of the grotesque, which reveals in hybrid forms, impossible complexity, and absurd or elaborate fantasies. What is so fascinating about Barrow’s work is the way it knits together these traditionally opposing forces, producing what he refers to in his video Artist Statement, 2006, as “gratuitous honesty.” This earlier work, which is projected in its own space at scc Gallery, is among Barrow’s most successful. A brilliant critique of the inane and bureaucratic importance placed upon written artist statements, it is also a funny, poignant and moving meditation on the struggle to make art. And while Barrow may now be considered by most “a winner,” as the inclusion of this video in the exhibition reminds us, he remains devoted to “risking public humiliation” in an effort “to say those things that people in their daily lives find so difficult to express.”

“Good Gets Better” was exhibited at scc Gallery in Montreal from February 12 to March 19, 2011.

Emily Falvey is a Montreal-based, independent art critic and curator.

VISUAL ART

Bruce Nauman
by Christine Walde

There’s a compelling sense of history in the restaging of Bruce Nauman’s “Audio/Video Piece for London, Ontario,” curated by Christopher Régmimal and recently exhibited at London’s Forest City Gallery. Originally shown in London in 1970 for the 20/20 Gallery—largely considered Canada’s first artist-run centre and RCC’s parent gallery—“Audio/Video Piece for London, Ontario” was developed at the invitation of board member and artist Greg Curnoe, who had written to Leo Castelli in the summer of 1969 asking if Nauman would be interested in showing at 20/20. Since its first showing, “Audio/Video Piece for London, Ontario” has been included in several major surveys of Nauman’s work, including “Topological Gardens” at the 2009 Venice Biennale, where Nauman—now considered one of the world’s most influential living artists—walked away with the Golden Lion.

Roughly speaking, “Audio/Video Piece for London, Ontario” contains the same elements as it did 41 years ago. On the floor against the wall of an empty gallery sits a TV. Adjacent to the TV, an empty chair. On the screen of the TV, the broadcast of a live feed from a camera tipped on its side to film the interior wall of a closed-off space located directly behind the chair. From within the closed space, behind the wall, the sound—a rhythmic, lulling, looping hum—of Nauman slapping himself with the palms and the back of his hands.

At Forest City Gallery, Régmimal kept the original schematics of the exhibition—as detailed by Nauman in his original instructions—but altered the materials to the current day to avoid any sentimentalism or nostalgia. The television, for example, is not vintage. Nor is the chair. But the wall follows the exact same dimensions. And the sound of Nauman slapping his hands against his body is the original recording he made with Robert Fones and Greg Curnoe when Nauman visited London in 1970.


Of these, Régmimal considers the piece that “Audio/Video Piece for London, Ontario” mirrors most closely is Audio-Video Underground Chamber, which was commissioned from Nauman in 1972. For this piece, Nauman buried a coffin-sized chamber containing a video camera and a microphone, feeding the signal of the buried chamber to the nearby Wide White Space. Régmimal comments in his notes about the show that “this piece, like Live/Taped Corridor and Audio/Video Piece for London, Ontario, employs simple surveillance technology and basic architectural forms to explore complex themes of antagonism, claustrophobia, and bodily control.”

While it reflects contemporary issues such as surveillance and technology, perhaps what is most dynamic about Audio/Video Piece for London, Ontario is the sound element of the exhibition. Nauman’s tape loop of his hands slapping himself is both rhythmic and resonant, attuned to another
clumsy use of various DIY materials (industrial glue, for one) is evident. The ends of the logs, if your tip toes allow this vantage point, show the frayed edges of cardboard tubes beneath rivulets of glue “bark.” Whub-whub—you’ve been had again.

But it’s not just the blatant artifice of the objects in this semblance of a hunting camp that makes it seem more than a little, well, campy. Though I know Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” is now considered old hat (old tuque?) by some, I can’t help but see correspondence between several of that essay’s points and Diviney’s pieces. Certainly in the log works, the exaggeration and artifice approach Sontag’s ideas around travesty, for which one definition is “a grotesque misrepresentation or imitation.” The log sculptures are, at their core, a mockery of nature, as though Diviney decided to take Sontag’s point that even “rural camp is man-made” rather close to heart. Every bit of every piece in the exhibition is has been constructed by “man,” nothing is taken directly from nature—not the plastic duck decoy nor the latex “water” in which it’s half submerged nor the “log” pieces and the plethora of plywood sheathing (true, the latter is made of real wood, but it’s been altered to fit man’s needs). Not even the show’s taxidermy components are truly natural—least of all the expression frozen on the lynx’s face, which renders the animal a caricature of its former self.

Perhaps the pieces in Head for the Hills comprise a new genre of camp—one that I’m inclined to dub “hoser camp” after the Bob and Doug McKenzie schtick of the early 80s, even though Diviney is originally from the US, and the hoser aesthetic, if it can be called that, is Canadian. In fact, the Styrofoam used in Lodge (2010) is a pyramid of five or so coolers; this is no home for beavers after all, but a cache for beer. The only items missing from the picture then are empty bottles, a pair of earmuffs and a scrap of plaid.

Though replete with travesty, derision isn’t the impetus of Head for the Hills. A critique of rural male culture underlines much of the work, but it’s upstaged by a sense of humour that won’t yet allow itself to be fully satirical. Thus, a statement made by a character in Christopher Isherwood’s novel A World in the Evening (1954) is perhaps more relevant to Diviney’s works than any of Sontag’s points: “You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it.” Head for the Hills does make serious fun out of not only the rural male experience, but also out of art. Diviney winks at DIY and hunting traditions with one eye, and at art history with the other (Duchamp’s use of everyday, mass-produced objects, for one). In the end, he has persuaded them to join forces in a whole new game, one that amuses and entertains while it provokes and confounds.

Jone Affleck teaches writing at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University.

2 Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” in Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Picador, 1966), 279.

DANIEL BARROW: GOOD GETS BETTER

JESSICA BRADLEY ART + PROJECTS, TORONTO
NOVEMBER 20 – DECEMBER 23, 2010
BY RACHEL ANNE FARQUHARSON

Forty-eight hours after winning the prestigious Sobey Art Award, Daniel Barrow unveiled Good Gets Better, his newest series of drawings, in conjunction with a handful of other recent works. Two long rows of 18 drawings from Barrow’s 2008 performance

Every Time I See Your Picture I Cry confront visitors entering the gallery. Dusty, muted colours in each image are enunciated against rich black matting, enhancing the two-dimensional relationship between the figures pictured and the ground. Each collaged element hovers away from the ground at its edges, giving the appearance of phantasmic suspended within the invisible plasma of the picture plane.

Take note of the fourth image in the top row of Every Time, Sculpture Garden (2008). This piece appears in the prologue of Barrow’s performance and illustrates an excerpt from Helen Keller’s diary that exposes the deafblind author’s inner battle with one of contemporary society’s expectations of the disabled: celibacy for life. As Keller wanders through a sculpture garden experiencing male nudes with her fingertips, her interior dialogue finds a voice where in life she had none. Cleverly, Barrow merges this use of a historical figure as a metaphor for disability in sex and life with art historical knowledgeness by grounding the scene with a canonical reference to a Picasso assembly—Woman with Outstretched Arms (1961)—according to an alpha-Braille letter. Keller’s heightened tactile reaction is translated into a visual mirage for viewers: a half-mask floats through the air, carried by

† David Diviney, Untitled (Diptych), 2007, altered steel and plastic buckets, rope, wood, paint
PHOTO: STEVE FARMER; IMAGE COURTESY OF DALHARSS HOUSE ART GALLERY, HALIFAX

† David Diviney, Lodge, 2009, Styrofoam coolers, pvc piping, caulk, construction adhesive, corks, paint
PHOTO: STEVE FARMER; IMAGE COURTESY OF DALHARSS HOUSE ART GALLERY, HALIFAX
a disembodied hand in a way that recalls the phantasmagorical performances popularized by Étienne-Gaspard Robertson in 18th-century France. As in previous works, Barrow foregrounds the phenomenologically acute quality of these collages; he describes his recent images as "cartoon [representations] of an erotic dream." And as a final visual illusion, Barrow has cleverly doubled the pad of the hand's middle digit to use as an eye in the mask's empty socket.

Beyond this first set of drawings, an overhead projector—something of a calling card for Barrow's practice—registers on the far wall an image of a figure, head upturned and a hand administering tear solution from a bottle onto a distended eyeball. It is like witnessing weeping in reverse. An archaic-looking, primitively drawn computer reads "No Tears To Cry" in bold ribbons of purple—an early indication of Barrow's fascination with people who, despite their misery, have no tears. Accompanying the installation, named Good Gets Better (2010) is an audience-manipulated sliding device that makes text mobile across lined yellow grade-school paper. Barrow's frequent use of yellow legal paper and overhead projectors speaks to the didactic materials commonly associated with classrooms. This imagery smacks of fraught adolescence—particularly the shame and loneliness of the outsider—at this turning point in life. It also shows Barrow to be both artist and engineer, as does his use of a frame from a desk drawer to recreate the 18th-century "slipping slide" technology that generates the moveable text effect.

Barrow's unique ability to transform obsolete technologies and quotidian objects may have been what elevated him above the other contenders for this year's Sobey. Like French modernist playwright and poet Raymond Roussel, Barrow concocts his projected tableaux from an unwieldy and conflicting fusion of animate and inanimate figures—not unlike the Surrealists over whom Roussel exerted powerful influence. Displayed in the hushed darkness peculiar to art galleries, Good Gets Better establishes an equivalency between the optical qualities of Barrow's transparencies and the percipient disruption experienced by viewers due to the artist building on his longstanding interest in anachronisms. Flatness, amorphous forms, bright colouration and the awkward movements of slipping slides, therefore, emphasize feeling here.

Good Gets Better is not just a series of drawings but also a performance, and the gallery's east wall displays five circular collages from the premiere in Vancouver on February 4, 2011. Several of the collages were originally conceived as keyhole-shaped images surrounded by stark black paper (the contorted body in Gay Secrets (2010) enunciates the intended outline). The choice to widen the voyeuristic lens of the viewer from an oversized keyhole to an undersized rondelle does not diminish the strong theatrical timbre of the series and resembles uncannily works of the Venetian master Tintoretto, whose dramatically foreshortened compositions and emphasis on bodily contortion also find a second home in Barrow's mordant scenes.

Barrow's appeal stems partly from his familiar and startlingly smutty visual vocabulary, his lexicon drawing from a canon of art work focused on the mutability of the representational form and eyes akin to those of a small-town gay boy, fantasizing about wealthiness. The anachronisms in the artist's fabricated landscape, where Baroque harlequins and masked jewel thieves comeling with 20th-century kitsch and outmoded educational equipment, lend a desynchronized complexity to this fantasy. In contemplating this strange, homosexualized parody of high-society perversity, I can only imagine the accompanying score to be faux Baroque—perhaps a caricature of the champagne-infused vernissages frequented by the very types of people from whom Barrow's jewel thief steals.

Rachel Anne Farquharson is a Toronto-based essayist and curator who recently completed a Master's thesis on the phenomenological effects of two-dimensional, paper-based art.

1 Daniel Barrow, Kiss Me Before I Die, 2010, mixed media, 16 cm diameter. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JESSICA BRADLEY ART + PROJECTS

2 Daniel Barrow, Trying to Love the Normal Amount, 2009, five framed collaged mixed media drawings, 49.5 cm x 41 cm. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JESSICA BRADLEY ART + PROJECTS

C109 Spring 2011
Back to Sobey Prize winner checks into Toronto for small gallery show

Sobey Prize winner checks into Toronto for small gallery show

November 24, 2010

Murray Whyte

A week ago tonight, on a mezzanine high above the atrium at the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art, Daniel Barrow was busily fidgeting his way through a world-class case of nerves.

A crowd of about a thousand — a who’s who of the Canadian art world, from National Gallery director Marc Mayer, to recent Venice Biennale superstar David Altmejd — had clustered for the big reveal: Who, among five finalists, Barrow among them, would win this year’s annual $50,000 Sobey Art Prize.

“It's nerve-jangling,” Barrow said this week, safely decompressing in London, Ont., on a mercifully work-free excursion to visit friends. “You try to temper it, but there’s this constant imagining of what it would be like to win — you just can’t help it.”

Barrow would know: In 2008, he stood in the same place and watched as Vancouver’s Tim Lee accepted the prize, which has fast become the Canadian art world’s premiere event and again last week, when his name was broadcast over the museum’s sound system as the 2010 winner, to a surge of cheers.

But there was little time to savour the win, as he was gone the next morning to install a new show at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects in Toronto, where it opened Saturday. From a summer residency in New York to installing his work in Montreal for the prize and then on to Toronto for another new show, “it’s been a pretty insane couple of months,” Barrow says.

Part of the insanity is simply the demands of Barrow’s unique oeuvre, which uses overhead projectors — the kind people who went to high school before Power Point will remember from geography class — as the medium for his darkly fantastical drawings, which he shows in multiple layers of transparencies and animates by hand.

In performance, as his work is undeniably best experienced, Barrow, who is from Winnipeg but now lives in Montreal, builds frank, confessional, heartbreaking stories, setting his drawings to music and narrating them live.

In Montreal last week, he performed 2008’s Every Time I See Your Picture I Cry, a work whose dizzying technical complexities — hundreds of drawings, dozens of scenes, a full hour in length — disappear completely in the immersive, camp-tragic intimacy of the experience. Barrow’s protagonist, a failed-artist-turned-garbage man, identifies with no one so much as Helen Keller, the famous deaf and blind woman whose sensory isolation has become a towering metaphor for the triumph of the human spirit.

For Barrow’s garbage man, though, she becomes not so much a heroic figure as a flawed touchstone for his own desperate loneliness, which he soothes by acquainting himself with the people on his route by spying through their windows and sifting through their trash. The goal, he explains, is to create a phone directory of the people he’s developed this odd intimacy with, but he finds himself undone by a serial killer in his wake who slaughters anyone whose entry he completes.

Take it as an extended metaphor for the estranged isolation our detached modern lives can produce, but Barrow, in his way, makes a
common theme uniquely his.

Partly through his distinctive medium and partly through fresh treatments of readily identifiable visual touchstones — his drawing is a sensual hybrid of lurid underground comic artists like Robert Crumb and remarkable, delicate watercolor painting that he cuts out and pastes in seamless collage — Barrow creates a world both familiar and fantastical, and entirely his own.

While you could be forgiven for leaving a performance of Every Picture feeling the urge for a good cry, "It's not as though I'm completely without hope," Barrow says. "I tend to think of my art as a way to explain the world around me to myself. It's about this contradiction that life can be this really scary, horrible place, but also really beautiful at the same time."

At Jessica Bradley, his set of concerns converge in a small projection and a suite of drawings, some from Every Picture, and some from Good Gets Better, a new performance Barrow's assembling for February in Vancouver. All bear his trademark handcrafted intricacy: Vibrant collages so seamlessly assembled that you need to be nosed up to the glass to spot the technique. But the new ones, circular on black matting, have a self-consciously baroque levity.

"It's about the theft of sacred objects by a masked, romantic figure," he explains. "You remember, in the '70s, that fascination with the glamorous cat burglars, kissing bandits? This is kind of that archetype — a Harlequined bank robber."

Barrow calls it "a kind of parody, the way a kid might think of what it means to be rich," but don't let that fool you into thinking Barrow's gone lightweight.

"Oh, it's definitely political," he says. "It's about greed. A really romantic, distorted rendering of what it means to be greedy."

Still, a little lighter, no? "Oh, it is. For sure," Barrow laughs. One week and $50,000 later, these days, maybe, so is he.

JUST THE FACTS

WHAT: Daniel Barrow, Good Gets Better

WHERE: Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, 1450 Dundas St. W.

WHEN: Until Dec. 2
MONTREAL—Daniel Barrow is the winner of the 2010 Sobey Art Award, receiving $50,000 and an acknowledgment that, this year, at least, he’s the best among an increasingly accomplished field of young Canadian artists whose careers are expanding rapidly beyond our borders.

Each of the four runners-up receive $5,000.

In a rambunctious prize ceremony at the Montreal Musuem of Contemporary Art, where the work of all five finalists is on view until Jan. 4, Barrow, 39, grinned broadly. “I have so many people I want to thank,” he said in his very brief remarks, “but I especially want to thank the other artists.”

In a lucky confluence of events, Barrow opens an exhibition of new work at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects in Toronto this Saturday.

He was also a finalist in 2008. That year, the prize was won by Vancouver’s Tim Lee.

In the eight years since the Sobey, which awards $70,000 annually to five finalists, was established, its influence has grown significantly in major art centres around the world.

“When I was nominated, people in New York called to congratulate me,” said Brendan Fernandes, the nominee for Ontario (Sobey finalists each represent one of five regions) recently. “It’s something curators there really have on their radar.”

Fernandes, 31, who was born in Kenya, raised in Toronto and now lives and works in New York, is part of a generation the Sobey zeroed in on from the start: Artists under 40 whose careers were poised for the next level. The prize, established by Nova Scotia grocery magnate Donald Sobey, became a much-needed push, helping to vault previous winners such as Brian Jungen and Annie Pootoogook to greater international acclaim.

Apart from the cash award, the Sobey Prize also injects a much-needed sense of ceremony to the Canadian art scene.

“The goal, when we started this, was to raise the profile and spark conversation about contemporary Canadian art,” said Robert Sobey, Donald’s son, speaking at the presentation ceremony.

There’s little doubt that’s been achieved. In an affair attended by such disparate luminaries as National Gallery of Canada director Marc Mayer and Fashion TV host Jeanne Beker, who served as emcee, the Sobey has become a glittering, star-studded affair.

Loosely modeled after Britain’s Turner Prize, now a full-blown sensation both in the U.K. and abroad, the Sobey unabashedly portrays Canadian contemporary art as both an exciting and central part of the national cultural conversation.

Taking its cue from the Giller Prize for literature and the Polaris Prize for music, the Sobey vies for a place at the cultural gala table, and in Montreal, no expense is spared, and makes the argument that Canadian contemporary art is a field central to our national cultural makeup.
Winnipeg’s Daniel Barrow wins Sobey Art Award

JAMES ADAMS
From Friday’s Globe and Mail
Published Thursday, Nov. 18, 2010 7:05PM EST
Last updated Thursday, Nov. 18, 2010 11:07PM EST

Winnipeg native Daniel Barrow is the 2010 winner of the $50,000 Sobey Art Award, given annually by a jury to the Canadian it considers the best visual artist in the country under 40 years of age.

Mr. Barrow, 39, prevailed over four other finalists Thursday evening at an awards ceremony at the Musee d’art contemporain de Montreal. Each of the runners-up received $5,000 from the Sobey Art Foundation, which created the award in 2002 to heighten awareness of contemporary art and younger Canadian artists. To be considered for the award, an artist has to have shown work in a public or commercial gallery within 18 months of his or her nomination.

It was Mr. Barrow's second try for the Sobey, having been short-listed in 2008. In a release, the five-member jury described Mr. Barrow as its “unanimous choice. Over the past 15 years [he] has created a unique, self-sustaining fictional world composed of drawing, storytelling and manual animation of the antiquated technology of the overhead projector . . . Wry, politically astute and strangely heartbreaking, his comic narratives address love, loss, gender and media culture.”

The Sobey divides its nominees by geographical region. This year Mr. Barrow, who’s now based in Montreal, was the representative from the Prairies and the North. Kamloops’ Brendan Lee Satish Tang was the B.C./Yukon finalist while collaborators Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby, both graduates of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, represented Atlantic Canada, Montreal’s Patrick Bernatchez Quebec and Torontonian Brendan Fernandes Ontario.

The five finalists were chosen from a long list of 25 announced last April. Works by Mr. Barrow and his four competitors are on view at the Musee d’art contemporain in Montreal through Jan. 4, 2011.

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NATIONAL POST, June 3, 2010

THE AMPERSAND

Questions and Artists: Daniel Barrow’s lovely projections

Installation views from Daniel Barrow’s Emotional Feelings. The artist encourages viewers to play with the projectors for some of the artworks in the show.

By Leah Sandals, National Post

Ideas of projection — whether cinematic and psychological — get a compelling art treatment in the work of Daniel Barrow. Now, with a new book, a Toronto exhibition at the Art Gallery of York University and New York performances on the go, the Winnipeg-born, Montreal-based artist talks about drawing, drama and the unexpected divine.

Q Your current Toronto show is called Emotional Feelings, your new book is titled No One Helped Me, and Kleenex boxes are a recurring icon in your art. Are you trying to be maudlin, ironic or both?
A I would definitely say that I’m being both. I’m pointing to more serious emotions, and using irony and humour to get people to open up to what I’m really trying to say.

Q Diaries are another recurring image. Why?
A The diary is a visual way to point to a certain mood. Almost all my performances include an interior dialogue; the text takes the form of a diary entry. And I always have a diary with me. It’s also a sketchbook, so those two books are the same in my life.

Q Technically, you’re kind of a maestro of overhead-projector art. How did that begin?
A I started working with overhead projectors in art school in the early ’90s. I was particularly inspired by a teacher who taught Byzantine and Renaissance art history and used the overhead projector in her lectures. She’d been teaching for 50 years, so her lectures were incredibly rehearsed and staged — very theatrical. In my studio classes I started presenting performances that were parodies of her lectures, and I was encouraged to do more. Gradually, the work became more cinematic. And because I’m being asked to do more and more gallery shows, I’ve started reimagining installations so that viewers can also take on a performer role, and alter the projectors themselves.

Montreal-based artist Daniel Barrow hovers over the projector of one of his pieces in the Emotional Feelings installation.

Q Music also plays a big role in your art: Most of your pieces have a soundtrack, including your new book, which comes with a seven-inch record. Do you think we’re more accepting of extreme emotion in music than in art?
A I’m sure that’s true. I think our response to music is more tied to our emotions than our response to visual art, or even our response to the written word. So I think it’s a really important tool if you’re creating work that’s specifically designed to address the emotional life of a viewer. Now, I don’t seem to have any musical talent myself — I took one piano lesson and was completely mystified — but there’s so many incredible musicians I’ve been lucky to work with, people I’ve just cold-called based on the fact that I’ve loved their CDs.
Q On a page of your website devoted to “healing,” you have a Thich Nhat Hanh quote about “garbage that can transform into flowers if you hold it in your hand long enough.” Is this what your art is about in general?

A Well, Buddhism is really a big part of my work. In my performances, all of my protagonists are in a process of spiritual transformation — but ones that our culture doesn’t recognize as such. I love to write characters who are very intelligent but who are nonetheless very confused; starting with a character like that, I can create a kind of spiritual transformation that, for me, feels real. I guess that reflects my own experience of spirituality, that a healing transformation can kind of come from anywhere. You don’t have to be on a Zen retreat — though of course, a retreat does help a lot. But I’m more interested in representing transformations that take place in a city, amidst the confusion of interpersonal drama and depression.

Q You’ve written, “I don’t have enough things from my childhood. Over the years, I have thrown out so much in various attempts to reinvent myself.” What do you wish you still had?

A It’s not that I long for any particular items; I just regret the way I let go of certain ones. So often I was throwing things away in the spirit of self-contempt, like throwing away diaries solely out of the fear that, someday, someone somewhere else might read it. Which doesn’t seem like a really great rationale for, you know, destroying a really personal record of who I was. But I have kept a lot — I don’t want to mislead anyone, I have a lot of stuff.

Daniel Barrow, Tracing, 2008, projection from the performance Every Time I See Your Picture I Cry.

—Daniel Barrow: Emotional Feelings continues to Sunday at the Art Gallery of York University while Barrow’s new book No One Helped Me (Ace Art Inc.; $50) is available through artmetropole.com.
Daniel Barrow: "Emotional Feelings"
Celebrated Canadian artist Daniel Barrow wants you to share the shame

BY DAVID BALZER

One of the best artists working in Canada today, Daniel Barrow makes intensely personal — at times mortifyingly narcissistic — art that, at the same time, defies the kind of navel-gazing we are used to seeing in contemporary galleries. Why? He is fascinated with beauty, both formally — as an illustrator and multimedia artist beholden to the colourful and the elaborate — and conceptually, marrying the most grotesque aspects of introspection (especially body hatred, gay-male and otherwise) with its most romantic ones. He understands that the careful creation of beauty, however solipsistic in origin, can be an act of supreme generosity.

His new show at AGYU has the hilariously redundant title “Emotional Feelings,” which speaks to the febrile, stuttering type of sensitivity he privileges. Best-known for manually animating his illustrations on overhead projectors, Barrow constructs four impressive works that are paeans to the analog — not in a meaninglessly antiquated way, but which suggest the power and intimacy of speaking through technological obsolescence in 2010. Like a magic-lantern show or phantasmagoria with all the backstage bones showing (as an artist, Barrow deliberately positions himself as the proverbial man behind the curtain, perpetually
revealed and concealed), the works are kinetic, multi-layered wall projections, all using a variety of separate machines placed in full view. The subject of these moving light-paintings is misery: in one, a king, dressed in pink cross-garters and high-heeled shoes, rapes a mermaid on his four-poster bed; in another, bedroom curtains blow open to reveal mass, 9/11-style suicide-leaps from skyscrapers.

Most of the works have interactive components that implicate you in the atrocities. You can move the king on the overhead projector, for instance, dictating the rhythm of his humping. In the second room, for a work in which tissues fly out of a Kleenex box (pictured), you can change the design of the box — a selection of maudlin motifs, from crying babies to the entirety of USA for Africa. (Lionel, Cyndi, Bruce: they’re all here.) In fact, there’s a Kleenex motif, with tissues providing baroque bordering (Barrow makes them look like abstract shapes from Hogarth’s The Analysis of Beauty) and a thematic conflation between crying and masturbing. (The show’s subtitle might have been “crysturbation.”) The smallest work — digital, but done with dinosaur software — is a two-frame self-portrait: in one, the artist gets chained to his overhead projector; in another, he cries over it, his right shoulder moving up and down in what could be a simultaneous sob and jerk-off. Mercifully, Barrow is always funny — the inevitable, satisfying result of a brilliant artist who has devoted himself to emotional excess.
Daniel Barrow: Emotions in motion

Artist is back at Images with his intimate, sometimes campy but always moving visuals

Murray Whyte
Toronto Star, Wednesday March 31, 2010

Artist Daniel Barrow with a projected image from his art installation Emotional Feeling at the Art Gallery of York University.

Two years ago, Daniel Barrow arrived at the Images Festival harbouring feelings of dread. His piece, the self-consciously titled Every Time I See Your Picture I Cry, was set to premiere at Toronto’s annual festival of the art of moving images, amid high expectations; it had taken him three years to make, and was darker, more complex, than anything he had attempted previously.

Not long after Barrow first presented it, his worst fears vaporized: it won him the Images Prize for best piece that year, and helped kick his rising career into overdrive. So two years later, back at Images, which opens Thursday and runs to April 10, Barrow is calm, cool and collected. Right?

Wrong. “I’m very, very nervous,” Barrow said earlier this week, in the midst of a set-up at the Art Gallery of York University that’s likely the most complicated of his career. His show there, called “Emotional Feelings” — Barrow has a flair for campy melancholy; a book he’s launching here Saturday is called No One Helped Me — opened Wednesday night.
On Monday, the scent of wet paint hung heavy in the air; a dozen or so overhead projectors, like the kind from your junior high science class, were scattered throughout the room, as Barrow explained some of the mechanics: Multiple projections and videos overlapped on the wall, some of them through water. “We’re using everything we have, practically,” said gallery director Philip Monk — and then some: A few more projectors were due to arrive the following day. “Emergency purchase,” Monk explained with a smile.

Barrow has often engaged obsolete technologies for his work. Typically, his sweetly sinister drawings are projected as transparencies while he tells the accompanying tale live and in person. Every Time, for example, was the story of a trash collector in Winnipeg — Barrow’s hometown — sifting the city’s cast-offs, trying to compile a directory of people on his route, but who is repeatedly undone by a serial killer trying to murder people as he adds them.

Laying drawings over one another, Barrow creates animations that are strikingly intimate and hand-wrought; this time, though, Barrow hands over the controls to the viewer.

While perhaps not as grim as Every Time, Emotional Feelings has its macabre moments: An anatomical diagram of a skinless body, all crimson muscle fibre and pale tendons, grins broadly, its hide peeling off at the ankle. It’s apropos of Renaissance anatomical drawings, where disassembled bodies were never portrayed as corpses. “They would show a live human holding his skin,” Barrow said. “It was always very poetic.”

To that convention, Barrow adds a little poetic license of his own. An accompanying transparency, laying beside the projector, invites the viewer to introduce an element of gender specificity: slide it over top and it adds female bits to the androgynous anatomy.

In the other room, Canopy Bed projects a romantically entangled couple — this time, very gender specific, naughty bits on full display — within a window frame. The pair being a prince and mermaid, it’s projected through water. It’s Barrow’s most complex projection, but it’s nothing without you: The point of entry belongs to the viewer. “If they want to see it animated, they have to do it themselves,” Barrow grins.

Slide the transparency ever so slightly, and mission consummated.

**WHAT:** Daniel Barrow’s Emotional Feelings

**WHEN:** Thursday to June 6

**WHERE:** Art Gallery of York University, Accolade East Building