

Review: MOCCA's Ineffable Plasticity

Review of winter exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian art, provocatively called "Ineffable Plasticity: The Experience of Being Human."



Jordan Laura James MacLachlan's "Unexpected Subway Living," an installation of Terracotta miniatures, part of "Ineffable Plasticity: The Experience of Being Human," at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art.

(courtesy of MOCCA)

It goes without saying, then, that this is a tightly-edited version of the same, further honed by the exhibition title proper *Ineffable Plasticity*, which, if you'll allow me to translate, works out to something along the lines of "Mission Impossible."

Good qualifier, because if you don't have to stretch in every direction in an effort to divine some sort of relation between the disparate works here, which span drawing, painting, sculpture, photo-collage, installation and in one completely enthralling moment, terracotta figuration, then you've got me beat.

So let's stretch a little, shall we? My first thought here was of Singh's stated intent being less a sincere ambition than a wry, tacit acknowledgment of the futility of such pursuits in general. Throughout human history, a good chunk of the (ahem) experience of being human has been trying to figure out what being human actually means; every iteration of spirituality — pagan or otherwise — philosophy, science and even art has been at least tangentially geared towards just that kind of futile figuring.

So it's easy — maybe too easy — to grasp the cosmic joke represented by the piece that greets you at the exhibition door, Faith Laroque's elegant, menacing *Crystal Ladder*. Glittering crystal spikes are bound with wiry grey rope in a blunt metaphor of just that futility — climbing, only without end or goal in sight. It's a beautiful, menacing, consternating thing. If you're like me, your own experience of being human is at least all of those things; if not, you're either lying or you should check your pulse.

In any case, the metaphor of a ladder is both leaden and spiritually loaded; it's not much of a leap to such notions as Jacob's Ladder (Old Testament version, not creepy 1990s Tim Robbins movie), a path to heaven as dreamed by Jacob, on the run from his murderous brother, Esau. I say this only to steer us across the room to the intense, sprawling work of Mat Brown, *All Within the Circle of Willis*, which begins with a block of text decrying scientific and evolutionary theory, supplanting Biblical creationism as humanity's guiding developmental narrative (unless you live in certain parts of Tennessee or Alberta, I suppose).

But Brown's conceptual challenge is less literal and more, well, ineffable. "The origin of life on Earth has been the focus of both religion and science for as long as they have existed," he writes, which is only the truth. "We have not made our world. Man does not have dominion over nature," he continues, offering pushback to Darwin's notions of a super species (that's us.)

But Brown's principal gift isn't as theoretician but draughtsman, and the drawings that follow the text are dizzying in their extremes of intricate detail and representational virtuosity. They're also screamingly lascivious juvenilia, all over-ripe genitalia and splayed nakedness, oversexed nymphs prancing through 36 specifically chosen historical periods (Jurassic, Pliocene, you name it) alongside dinosaurs, woolly mammoths and host of others over the last 4 billion years.

Brown's work evokes underground comics of the early-countercultural '60s, its wild fusion of

social concern and sexual obsession reminiscent of figures like Robert Crumb. Brown seems to be positing — remember, stretching — humanity's primal impulses to be eternal and immutable, however many layers of polite socialization we heap upon ourselves.

The work is also resplendent, virtuosic wanking. My experience of being human will be just fine without him: In his thorough and thoroughly naughty vision, Brown's work is captivating and resolved, on his own terms, but I wouldn't want to live with it.

Speaking of impressive things I wouldn't want to live with, there's Jordan Laura James MacLachlan's *Unexpected Subway Living*. An array of terracotta figurines, the work is remarkable both in its craft and variations of horror, from the fantastical to the mundane. To be completely honest, I'm not able to stretch far enough to fold this work into even the colossal breadth of the show's conceit, but breadth being the hallmark here, I'm not sure that it matters.

On a long table in the middle of the gallery, MacLachlan unleashes a cavalcade of twee horrors on a set of transit seats: Slimy slug-like critters ooze out of a shirtless Santa Claus's bag; a pack of wolves set upon a rider prone on a bank of seats; a headless bride walks a trio of plump sows down the middle of the car; a man grips a young woman in a violent headlock. These are just a few of the scenarios — and there are dozens — playing out in MacLachlan's nightmarish underground, and I suppose to really stretch — because that's my job — you could think of these as the kind of distracted dark fantasies that rise to mind unbidden as the daily below-ground trundle to and from work on the TTC grinds the rider down to a grim, absent numbness. But maybe that's you. Me, I just think of flowers and butterflies.

There's some window dressing to this show, some of it over-obvious in its relation to the thesis. In the former camp are Susy Oliveira's intricately folded pieces, in which she disassembles photographs of natural phenomenon — flowers and grasses, fronds and stems — and rebuilds them in hard-edged mechanical seeming sculptural representations of themselves. This seems a pretty clear statement, and one we've heard a lot: That the experience of being human is to be out of step with the natural world that spawned us (their catch-all title, "Nature Stoned," says a lot.) There's a lack of mystery, though, that for me makes them less-than-impressive one-liners, though after works like Brown's, this is a comforting counter-point.

After all this, welcome mystery comes in works here by Sherri Hay. One, a tiny, crafty diorama

— think grade 6 art class — of a cutesy tree in a bright green field, placed dead-centre on a black wall, stands in sharp contrast to the intricate, intense and occasionally monumental works around it. (Laroque's *Salt Ramp with Celestial Children*, a giant structure tiled with glowing salt crystals, qualifies). Similarly, a cube of dangling wire forms a mountainous landscape that slips in and out of view as you move around it.

That's more like it: Best attempts to bring the world down to knowable size with the tacit understanding that we never could, or will. Hay's work savors mystery without trying to solve it, and that's an experience of being human I can get with. You might even call it ineffable.

Ineffable Plasticity: The Experience of Being Human runs to Dec. 31 at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 952 Queen St. W., www.mocca.org.