

BORDER CROSSINGS

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VISUAL ART

"Not Bad For London"

by Christine Walde

Composed of paintings, drawings, sculpture, textiles, zines, sound and video, the group exhibition "Not Bad For London" at Michael Gibson Gallery in London, Ontario was no ordinary group show. Packed beyond capacity on opening night—which is extraordinary by London standards—with multiple generations of Londoners, artists, as well as curators from major institutions and collectors from beyond the community, "Not Bad For London" was a benchmark exhibition that signalled an emergence from the long shadow of London's artistic past while celebrating the vibrancy and importance of the city's contemporary art scene.

The core group of Londoners—Marc Bell, Jason McLean, Peter Thompson (all former classmates at H.B. Beal Secondary School)—has been collaborating and exhibiting together for decades. With younger Londoners James Kirkpatrick and Billy Bert Young, along with recent additions to the community Amy Lockhart and Jamie Q brought into the fold, the participating artists have been working independently and collaboratively for several years, exhibiting their work nationally and internationally. This was the first time the entire group has shown together.

The exhibition was installed in two rooms: the front gallery featured solo works by the participating artists, and the middle gallery featured collaborative drawings made by the group, all of which were bought by an out-of-town collector on opening night (this is equally extraordinary for London).

With their immediately recognizable graphic style making references to classic illustration and comic books, the work of Marc

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Bell and Peter Thompson has an absurd sensibility that was evidenced by Bell's drawing *I am not part of the Dorito Chip Bag Collective*, 2009, and Thompson's acrylic transfer painting *Master Blaster*, 2011. In his introduction to *An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons & True Stories* (Yale University Press, 2006), in which Bell is prominently featured, editor Ivan Brunetti suggests that cartooning is both writing and drawing. Like all the artists in the show, Bell and Thompson impel us not just to look, but to read the images of their work, to enter into their peculiar and fascinating animated worlds. By extension, Amy Lockhart's stop-motion animated video *The Collagist*, 2009, made in collaboration with Bell, echoed this, utilizing drawing and cut-and-paste assemblage to interpret narrative while engaging the viewer with the composition of images.

This connection to reading and image making was also reflected in the text-based work of Jason McLean, the kingpin of the core group, who recently returned to London where he has become an important catalyst and scenemaker in the community. Of his many memorable pieces in the show, *P.C. Fight*, 2009, consisted of a pair of black boxing gloves hung on the wall, marked with the words "Satan's Choice." As in much of his previous work, McLean's negotiations of text in his quest for meaning through language and the object (whether in 2D or 3D) was both poetic and poignant, ultimately suggesting that words and their configurations are nothing but pure image and abstraction. Billy Bert Young, who at 25 is the youngest of the group, complemented this with his own intricate language



1 of black-and-white drawings of shapes, tubes and drips in works such as *Eccentric Force*, 2011.

Converging with these elements of abstraction was the sculptural work of Jamie Q and James Kirkpatrick. Jamie Q's intimate paper-mâché forms, like *The Money Tree*, 2011, with its bulbous aquamarine shapes, alluded to the organic nature of the non-verbal; while James Kirkpatrick (who is also known as graffiti artist and rapper Thesis Sahib), constructed playable sound sculptures like *Homebase Command Center*, 2011, made with DIY circuit bending and arcade button controllers painted in lush, melted ice cream colours. Kirkpatrick and his musical collaborators, Peter Thompson as Brain Trust and Jamie Q as Dusty Peas, performed with Kirkpatrick's sculptures at the opening, transforming the gallery into an auditory manifestation of improvised gesture.

Positioned between Toronto and Detroit, London is a city that is named after that other London, and it struggles to define itself within the external challenges of its colonial namesake and geographic location. The self-effacing exhibition title, taken from Jason McLean's drawing of a lone tree rooted at the forks of the Thames



River, wryly belies the crux of the struggle and what this important exhibition signifies: that for London, Ontario this exhibition was a self-defining moment. That is "Not Bad For London," not bad at all. ■

"Not Bad For London" was exhibited at the Michael Gibson Gallery from November 4 to November 26, 2011.

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