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GALLERY GOING

A pop confection so sweet it hurts

GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Alexander Irving

at Diaz Contemporary

\$1,500-\$6,000. Until July 23, 100 Niagara St., Toronto; 416-361-2972

In the skillful hands of artist Alexander Irving, *Political Science* -- for such is the title of his latest exhibition -- has never seemed either so madcap or (and this is surprising for Irving, who has hitherto come across as a bit of a wag) so exquisite.

I remember Irving's work in the past as consisting mostly of cartoon-like drawings with wisecracking captions (and there are a few in this show too).

But for this new exhibition, now at Diaz Contemporary, the Toronto-based artist and teacher has clearly been rummaging through 20th-century art history and popular culture and, like the well-behaved postmodernist he is, harvesting what he finds both appealing, provocative and revealing: a few isolatable Picassoid moments, a foot or two from American painter Philip Guston, and a pneumatic, glove-like hand here and there, apparently culled from legendary and maniacal Warner Bros. animator Tex Avery.

All this high- and low-cultural fallout is then homogenized by a pretty pastel palette (all pinks and blues, greys and yellow-creams) that is confection-sweet enough to make your teeth ache. The paintings are presented, as the artist's statement so mellifluously puts it, "through a muted palette warmed by Naples yellow, or made chilly with flat blacks and blues to create absorbing panoplies of limbs and facial features flailing through blocky landscapes."

I like "flailing." Well, I like it as a word. But not so much as a description of Irving's work. Because, to tell you the truth, there really is very little flailing in these laconic, hieratic paintings. These clearly are "blocky landscapes" though. In *Summit*, for example, which is all quiet, powdery blues and bluish greys, a smooth, paddle-like thing arcs up over the painting from the left, where it is delicately touched by a chubby finger belonging to a chubby hand that is itself balanced, with its sculpted arm, on another sculpted arm, ending in a similar chubby hand that just neatly reaches to the very bottom of the canvas.

Next to this tower of arms and other indeterminate shapes lies a thoughtlessly abandoned, rather cubistically rendered foot -- the precipitate from a synthesis of Picasso and Guston (and Disney and Warner Bros.?).

Partly comic and partly stirring, this handsomely composed pile of body parts and other orphaned shapes somehow succeeds in evoking art history, pop-cultural history and, as a bonus, the rarefied art of putting oil paint on canvas.

Other canvases in *Political Science* are just as lush and witty. A few, like *Exit*, *The Somnambulist* (which is at least funny) and the clownish *Temptation*, just don't have enough going on either to provide either painterly or minimalist interest: Instead, they are so emptied out they disappear. But for the most part, with delicious canvases like *Barbeque Circuit* and especially the gorgeous *Cry Cry Cry*, with its pale, balloon-ish, Picasso-derived head (from *Guernica*) swooping down through the middle of the picture, you come to feel that Irving's version of a garage sale of art-historical moments is made up more of an almost guileless affection rather than of ennui and that kind of emptiness visited upon anyone who thinks we're at the end of the road, culturally speaking.

Yes, you can slap Irving on the wrist for so wantonly lifting iconic art moments from their proper matrix (it really is sort of upsetting to see a hunk of *Guernica* bedded down in a pink, pleasure-generating confection like *Cry Cry Cry*). But at least it appears to be done with love, and not with the little-boy malice that smirks through many of his previous cartoon-esque works.

Scale at InterAccess

Electronic Media Arts Centre

Until June 29, 9 Ossington Ave.,

Toronto; 416-599-7206

Scale, co-presented by Subtle Technologies Festival and InterAccess, and curated by Camille Turner, brings together three projects that,

as Turner puts it, in the monograph-catalogue *Responsive Technologies* (Riverside Architectural Press, 2006), "explore the principles of the emerging field of nanotechnology," a term that emerged in 1959 when Nobel Prize-winner Richard Feynman speculated that "tiny things could be engineered to build big things."

Scale is an exquisite-looking, mind-boggling and exuberantly imagination-expanding exhibition. A nanotech Milky Way by Philip Beesley and Will Elsworth called *Implant Matrix*, for example, is a sparkling geo-textile, a subindustrial, large-scale skin that, as Turner suggests, "can reinforce the Earth or the surfaces of buildings" and can do it responsively, touching back what touches it in the way any attentive epidermis can.

Utility Fog: The Stuff that Dreams Are Made of, by nanotechnology pioneer John Storrs Hall, is an enormously charming and seductive video loop that extols, as a hypothetical advertisement, the wonders of Hall's theoretical building material in which tiny, programmable nano-robots he calls "Foglets" can be made to link themselves together "to instantly create reconfigurable objects of various sizes," thereby becoming anything you want them to be. You can even (hypothetically) sign up to receive a (hypothetical) free sample of *Utility Fog*. I, for one, can hardly wait to get mine.

The third project is by AElab, a Montreal-based collective working, as Turner explains, "to trace the topography of objects one billionth of a metre from their surfaces," a topography they then project as large-scale visual images -- in this case on InterAccess's wall.

Scale is altogether superb: deeply stirring, and the stuff of which previously unimaginable dreams and gloriously liberating visions are made.

Tom Hodgson

at the Christopher Cutts Gallery

\$2,500-\$35,000. Until July 19,

21 Morrow Ave., Toronto; 416-532-5566

Tom Hodgson: A Survey is a small but informative memorial exhibition limning the trajectory of paintings by this founding member of Painters Eleven, Canada's first, and then radical, group of postwar abstract painters (members included Harold Town, Jack Bush, William Ronald and Kazuo Nakamura), who died of Alzheimer's disease last winter.

The exhibition consists of one room of Hodgson's early work (from the 1950s and early 1960s) and another of works from 1989 to 1992. Unlike the case of American super-painter Willem de Kooning, whose work suffered profoundly from his accelerating Alzheimer's affliction, Hodgson's last works, like the beautiful *Phthalo Blue* from 1989 and the surprisingly fresh and fine *Payne's Grey Wash* from the same year, seem stronger than anything that came earlier. I never cared much for Hodgson's work -- he was my least favourite artist of Painters Eleven. But I'll give him this: He sure came on strong at the end -- like a candle flaring up before it goes out.

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