

VISUAL ARTS

DIGGING YOUR OWN GRAVE

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Sitting on the floor of the Or Gallery, I've spent about 45 minutes watching *Plot* -- a six-hour and 15-minute video of Vancouver artist Derek Brunen digging his own grave -- when a morbid sense of despair sets in.

Brunen has already excavated about five feet of the six-foot-deep plot at Mountain View Cemetery. Occasionally, he wipes his brow and glances at the camera, which only heightens the uncomfortable feeling that I'm a willing participant as he digs himself deeper into the hole.

Then, Mountain View gravediggers appear to check his progress and mug at the video camera. Their walk-on relieves the build-up of tension - - not to mention of dirt -- since Brunen takes one of many cigarette and water breaks to chat with the gravediggers about technique and equipment. After they leave, Brunen returns to the task.

The sun does a cameo just as the artist walks into the dark room of the gallery, in the flesh. He sits down beside me to discuss *Plot*.

"When I was at [Emily Carr Institute], I started collecting clichés on scraps and in notebooks," Brunen explains. "I was also thinking philosophically about suicide and death as a continual life process rather than as a binary opposition to life. But we're socialized to avoid contemplating death. Our society prescribes an ideal lifestyle, a sort of American dream of social pressures, including imperatives of how not to kill yourself. I was thinking about recreating suicide scenes, then this cliché of digging your own grave came up. What would happen if I tried to realize that cliché to affirm the presence of death in our daily existence?"

Brunen expected logistical troubles in pulling off the work. But the manager of Mountain View Cemetery, Glen Hodges, was receptive; he even offered to lend him a plot free of charge that had been dug up for a film about 15 years earlier.

"They probably thought I was nuts," Brunen says, and laughs. He questioned his own sanity periodically, as well as his physical stamina -- particularly in the most taxing and final hour of digging, which could also be a symbolic archeological dig into clichés of the suffering, alienated, starving artist.

This 33-year-old artist hasn't exactly been toiling away in obscurity. A founding member of the lively artist group Inter-Mission, he has exhibited at Third Avenue Gallery, Western Front and CSA Space, and has a day job doing graphics work in the basement of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Next, he will show in the windows of the Contemporary Art Gallery, starting March 30.

"But the creative process is extreme," Brunen says. "I'd have panic attacks and anxiety, particularly when I was in the depths of trying to invent something. I always wind up at a sort of void, a ground zero."

"Other issues come in, like the evolution of the spectator, subjective taste, what it takes to get recognized. The pressure isn't new, but since the birth of modernism, the avant-garde and academic work, I think it's become more acute. But I always want to appeal to as wide an audience as possible."

Plot is striking because it's thematically rich, yet easy to grasp. Even so, it's worth parking yourself in front of the screen for a while because the bond between artist and viewer gets increasingly dramatic, provoking a greater appreciation of art's importance in affirming life.

Plot runs until March 3 at the Or Gallery, 103 - 480 Smithe St., 604-683-7395.

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