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Adventures in unhappiness

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Dana Claxton's Tatanka Wanbli Chekpa Wicincala series focuses on twins holding a buffalo and an eagle—two powerful symbols in Lakota culture.

Why I'm So Unhappy

At the Or Gallery until March 25

Perhaps it's a mistake to send a depressive art critic to review an exhibition titled Why I'm So Unhappy. Perhaps it's inevitable. Unhappiness is endemic to some professions, as it is to some cultures. But misery is also particular. While viewing this perversely delightful show, I kept thinking of the famous opening line of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, which translates roughly as "All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion."

Based in Canada, the U.S., Colombia, and Holland, the 25 artists represented here range from new and emerging to established and, in one instance, irrelevant. Media include video, sculpture, and photography, and scale varies from a miniature inkjet print of words and footsteps in snow by Debra Baxter to a highly enlarged shot of a crumpled Kleenex tissue by Kelly Lycan. A few works are blatant, such as Bas Jan Ader's silent video *I'm Too Sad to Tell You*, in which the artist cries and cries and cries, and thinks about crying, and cries some more. Not everything here directly addresses the question of unhappiness. Still, the various approaches to grief, anxiety, pain, loss, disillusionment, and discontent are herded together by curator Michèle Faguet.

The Or Gallery's director since last July, Faguet has a short but intense history of overseeing artist-run and independent spaces in Mexico and Colombia. The seeds of the current show were sown at Espacio La Rebeca in Bogotá, which Faguet founded in 2002 and operated until 2005. In the exhibition brochure, she observes that a deep pessimism permeates Colombian society, rooted in chronic conditions of violence, conflict, and underdevelopment.

A bleakly humorous example of this abiding mood is Rolando Vargas's video projection, *Agonia* (Agony). In it, the camera pans over a page of small head shots, reminiscent of those in a high-school yearbook, and locks onto brief,

handwritten notes about what became of each individual. All the outcomes register physical pain, psychological suffering, existential gloom, or early death. Then the viewer realizes that this could not possibly be a group of students who shared a graduation date: their ages vary wildly and, hey, there's Cary Grant, there's Marlene Dietrich... Celebrity infiltrates the sorry field—or vice versa.

Vargas's short video is one of six on a reel that also includes Elkin Calderón's oddly upbeat ode to the dodginess of urban life and cultural dislocation, and Derek Brunen's tear-your-hair-out document of his panting and whining dog having a panic attack within the confines of a moving car. The dog's hyper-anxiety stands in for the artist's—and for contemporary angst at large.

North American unhappiness, Faguet suggests, originates in overproduction, overconsumption, and the impossible promises of advertising and popular culture. In the "developed" West, we live in a chronic state of intense competition, unmet yearning, and perceived failure. These conditions are hinted at by Khan Lee's *Bye, Bye*, a twisting, floor-to-ceiling stack of old cassette tapes (arranged in alphabetical order), together with a circle of homemade tapes. Lee's sculptural work is a witty and poignant monument to obsolescence, waste, and ever-changing technologies.

The theme is echoed in Juan Mejía's series of line drawings on old vinyl pop records, mounted on the wall. Executed in white-out, Mejía's cartoonlike drawings include an astronaut, an octopus, and a knockoff of the RCA Victor dog, sitting with head tilted, not toward the horn of a gramophone but within it. The horn or cone covers the creature's head and neck, like the e-collars veterinarians use to keep pets from worrying their wounds or incisions. It's a nifty metaphor for the condition of forced inaction and thwarted desire in which entertainment culture binds us.

A sense of cultural loss and attempted reclamation informs Dana Claxton's three photographs of twins (part of a longer series). Two near-identical young women stand side by side facing the camera, eyes open, eyes closed, and rapidly twisting their upper bodies so that their faces are obscured by their long hair. Each holds a toy animal, a buffalo and an eagle, symbols of power and trust within the Lakota pantheon, infantilized and drained of meaning by the colonizing marketplace.

One of the wittiest works here is James Nizam's *Flower Bed*, which consists of a framed letter of rejection from Faguet and, below it, a photograph of Nizam's failed submission. The latter is a small sculpture consisting of a young tobacco plant fashioned out of silver cigarette foil, planted in an Export "A" Extra Light package. Conspicuously posted on the package is a government warning that tobacco use can cause impotence. The dialogue between letter and artwork is lively and ironic.

The work that should have been excluded from the show is Neil Wedman's

Hallmark card-style kitsch: a watercolour drawing and an oil sketch of a crumpled, pain-racked rodeo clown. If the triteness and smarminess of the imagery are intended as a satirical joke, they don't work. That's because most of Wedman's paintings and drawings are trite and smarmy. It's tired art that has no place in an exhibition of smart and adventuresome unhappiness.