

Visual Arts Reviews

The Georgia Straight, May 17, 2007

By Robin Laurence

Derek Brunen, Robin Peck, Pavel Pepperstein

At the Contemporary Art Gallery until June 10

It's curtains—not for the Contemporary Art Gallery, but at it. Curtains of many colours, textures, patterns, and lengths. In his project *Blind*, Vancouver artist Derek Brunen has installed a series of drapes in the gallery's 12 exterior display windows. Through their back-to-front installation and their enticing refusal of access to what lies behind them, Brunen's curtains play with ideas of public and private—and the role of art. Viewership and voyeurism, exhibitions and exhibitionism, retail presentation and domestic décor, function and inutility: the work subtly stimulates our imaginations and curiosity.

Inside the gallery, separate shows by Pavel Pepperstein and Robin Peck engage us with varying degrees of success. Pepperstein, a Moscow-based artist, has produced a range of text-based and neoconceptual works, individually and with the collective known as *Inspection Medical Hermeneutics*. In the recent series of drawings and paintings on display here, *Landscapes of Future*, he combines hand-drawn images and texts in a way that brings together a subjective style with larger considerations of history, politics, literature, art, and popular culture.

The works depict science-fiction scenarios in a variety of future worlds, from a few decades to a few millennia hence. As CAG director Christina Ritchie writes in the exhibition's brochure, the mood is "at once apocalyptic and whimsical". In some scenes, clouds talk to each other, planets grow on trees, and a giant red cube is erected in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

Rendered in an intentionally awkward style, the obvious and obscure references here include Russian poets and politicians, and figures of European art, literature, and religion, together with the histories of abstract and

landscape painting. Each image includes often lengthy text, handwritten in an old-fashioned script. Pepperstein's English, obviously not his first language, contains odd phrasing and errors of spelling and grammar, with scratched-out words and other inconsistencies, the whole effect paralleling his drawing style.

Like most sci-fi writers, the artist casts us into a freaky vision of the future in order to philosophize about the present conditions of humankind and our planet.

Peck's minimal-conceptual sculpture installation is leagues removed from Pepperstein's drawings and paintings. A Shallow Flight of Stairs consists of eight standard sheets of commercially manufactured Plexiglas, laid flat and placed side-by-side in a line on the floor. Each rectangle is approximately four by eight feet, but they vary incrementally in thickness, from one-16th of an inch to one inch, thus creating the effect, as the title indicates, of very broad, very shallow stairs made of a very unlikely material.

With its glasslike transparency and mirrorlike reflectivity, the Plexiglas reconnects us with the architectural components of the gallery: the raw concrete floor, the rows of fluorescent lights on the ceiling, the high windows in the room's south wall. Unfortunately, the piece is undermined by apparent flaws in the components. The thickest panel is a couple of centimetres shorter than all the others, creating a weird formal disruption—the sense that a mistake has been made—and the fifth panel in the progression of eight is warped in such a way that it appears to sit higher than the panels on either side of it, ruining the gradually stepped effect.

Unlike Pepperstein's work, in which errors are intrinsic to the aesthetic, these glitches mar Peck's production. One longs for the perfection of Donald Judd's stainless-steel boxes.