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VISUAL ARTS

MOCCA feels pinch as trendy restos, boutiques, move in

By Murray Whyte Visual Art Critic
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"HOW MUCH ART CAN YOU TAKE?" reads the dangling sign suspended over the driveway of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, and the answer, in Queen St W., the heart of the so-called Art and Design District, seems to be less and less.

The text is a piece by Jasan Harris, and it helps capture an anxious moment. With only a handful of exceptions, galleries and artists have all but packed up and moved on, making way for designer coffee, crudes and a growing complement of haute-denim boutiques and rarefied foodie restaurants.

MOCCA itself is feeling the pinch. At the tail end of a 18-year lease — it expires in September — even a beloved institution could prove to the ruthlessness of the downtown Toronto property market.

When its lease expires, MOCCA will move out just as the bulldozers move in to make way for — what else? — condos. Its future — location, facilities, you name it — is uncertain, and that's the spirit embossed by "To Be Determined," the museum's current offering.

The moment is ripe for reflection, and TBD offers equal parts navel-gazing and head-wringing about both the museum's immediate future and long-term prospects.

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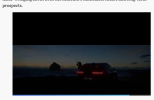

And late enough. At the tail end of a predictable process that has seen the forces of culture work merrily along as unintentional gentrification often, spreading and pressing until their grassroots urban renewal revealed those with skyrocketing rents and a one-way ticket out, the question hangs as heavily as ever: Culture has been thrust into the role of cure-all for a litany of urban ills, but what happens when culture outlives its creative function?

The answer, for the most part, is what MOCCA faces now: A forced waywardness to parts unpeopled to start the process anew fit the indignation of Lenny, former city councillor Kyle Rae once referred to art communities as "beneficial bacteria" that should be encouraged to move from neighborhood to neighborhood, leaving a legacy of pricy real estate and designer expenses in their wake.

Whatever the case, TBD stirs up the ghosts of past forced migrations at the same time as it tries to imagine possible futures. The balance matters. You're not allowed to complain if you're not willing to do something about it, and this is something the show takes to heart.

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Harris's question seems almost like a dare, and if you take it, you find yourself faced with a down-to-the-vocals declamation in height, sassy letters: "Sometimes artists work here," reads a banner pinned to the exterior brick of the building near the entrance, and it seems almost a pre-emptive lament.

The banner is a piece by Tomas Chaffe. It was made for an artist-run centre in Nottingham, England, in 2018, but its eminently transportable nature — here and now, maybe Hoor and Lansdowne next year, Britain in London or the deep Bronx in New York, take your pick — speaks to the relentless universality of the forces at play.

But no one complaining, really, the show seems to say, and as you slip inside you find your way to the moral of its problem-solving protection.

Practically hardly origin, but an identity crisis can be a productive thing for institutions, which have traditionally relied on their fritills-and-mortar as the overarching context for what they do.

Cut loose, free-thinking becomes not only possible, but necessary, and Anabella Campbell's work turns right just for the footer. It's little more than a set of directions, cut the door and down the street, to see what you might find.

The piece is a blunt metaphor for the museum's core, impending forced march, but its poetic implications, of openness to a world beyond the quiet tyranny of a museum's always-white walls, gives a pause of a different kind.

Art isn't just what hangs on the walls or sits in the room, and hasn't been for a good many decades. Recently and increasingly, though, art isn't something apart from the big world Out There. The nebulous zone of social practice in recent years has seen art seep into previously sacrosanct territory: workshop challenges of local communities and settlers.

A museum can hardly exist as an ad hoc social practice experiment, but its elements — community engagement, an erosion of the barrier between audience and artist — are worth considering, and TBD, to its credit, does.

Maggie Groen's poetic work, "Forces Will Turn Into Tables," seems a nice little outlook of exactly this. The title is literal. A table balanced from old house bricks, the transformation from interior into communal meeting ground is spry at the crux of the museum's current identity crisis.

These are growing pains not unique to MOCCA, which has the added urgency of a soon-to-be-no fixed address. But museums all over the world are struggling mightily with a world where virtuality, particularly of images, seems to threaten their very function.

Smartphones are a gateway of instant self-directed research, meaning museums can still exert connections with their displays, but if they spark an interest — which is a good thing — they can rarely finish there. Not having that last word is probably a good thing for museums, though they're still trying to figure that out. Art they shift from a role of sinibed cultural authority to merely a leader voice in a growing chorus, that's a tall order.

It's also what makes TBD worthwhile. The heart of the exhibition, to my mind, is a grid of five dozen 8" x 10" sheets, each one teasing out a possible future. They're the result of an open call the museum made to artists-to, designers, and artists, and while they're more blue-sky dreams than real-world proposals — a mobile Gallery, a primarily-visa contemporary art institution, Further west on Queen Street, a condo development stretch a-bird with a coalition of local arts agencies to include a purpose-built facility that will become the Toronto Media Arts Centre, the collective roof over the heads of the Images Festival and Interlaces, to name a couple.

But those are the exceptions, as the saying goes, that prove the rule, and such larcens can be far free to save all that for fortunate or well-timed. MOCCA is proving to be outlier, at least so far, but looking at TBD, I can't help but think it might be better that way. There's nothing like expanding doors to sharpen one's priorities, and MOCCA, poised on the knife's edge of absolute necessity, is pushing forward, not looking back.

TBD continues at MOCCA, 952 Queen Street West, to Oct. 26.

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