

Staking out new territory

EXHIBITION | Local and international artists explore urban themes in Territory

TERRITORY

Curated by Melanie O'Brien and Helga Pakasaar

At Artspeak, 233 Carrall in Vancouver and Presentation House Gallery, 533 Chesterfield in North Vancouver, until Aug. 6

BY CLINT BURNHAM

Timed to coincide with the World Urban Forum later this month, Territory is a multi-site exhibition organized by Artspeak in Vancouver and Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver. Curated by Presentation House's Helga Pakasaar and Artspeak's Melanie O'Brien, the project features work by an impressive roster of local and international artists, including Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Roy Arden, Walid Raad, Yael Bartana, Cao Fei, Germaine Koh, Gonzalo Lebrija, Jayce Salloum, the Seripop collective, and Ron Tera-da.

Territory also features a dazzling variety of artistic formats, from billboards (Arden) and mobile signs (Tera-da) to soil transplants (Koh) and video (Allora and Calzadilla, Raad, Bartana, Fei, and Lebrija), photography (Salloum, Raad) and posters (Seripop). Works will be at the two galleries and also by BC Place, in Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside. Finally, the series includes films to be screened at Vancity Theatre, and walking tours of Vancouver.

Pakasaar and O'Brien say their vision for Territory includes ideas of how the city is changing due to globalization, and how artists from around the world portray urban and civic space. Perhaps the most striking work in terms of grappling with the local and the global is by Cao Fei, who is based in Guangzhou, China, where she was also born. One video work at Artspeak, *cosplayers*, depicts Chinese youth in Guangzhou who dress up like Japanese anime characters to pose and perform ritualistic battles around the city.

The Guangzhou that we see in Fei's video is both futuristic and surreal, with replicas of 19th-century buildings and the Roman Coliseum cheek-by-jowl with block after block of shiny skyscrapers. The kids, in full regalia that includes capes, helmets, swords, and pink or blond hair, stand on the edge of buildings like gargoyles or Batman, or play soccer with unwilling security guards. Later we see them at home, in cramped quarters where their shirtless father reads the newspaper, as if oblivious to his costumed progeny.

Gonzalo Lebrija, a 34-year-old artist based in Guadalajara, was leaving a soccer game in that city when he spotted groups of male fans swarming the few women in the crowd. Shooting from a walkway overhead, his video



Cao Fei: Deep Breathing (COSPlayers Series), 2004, digital c-print, courtesy of the artist and Lombard-Fried Gallery, N.Y.



Germaine Koh: Transplant, 2006, soil transplants in nine sites. Above: a plaque for transplant.

has the perspective and angle of a surveillance camera. As the men circle in on women and then are pushed back by protectors, we as audience want to be able to do something. At one point we see police behind a security fence: they seem unable, or unwilling, to do much themselves. Shown at Presentation House, Lebrija's video is called *Aranjuez*, and depicts civic spaces as sites of mass trauma.

Trauma is also the subject of Walid Raad's video at Presentation House, *We can make rain but no one came to*



Roy Arden: Condominium Advertisement, Vancouver, B.C., 1992, 10 x 20-foot billboard, on Expo Boulevard at Nelson Street.

ask. Raad is Lebanese and, under the rubric of the Atlas Group, assembles fictitious archives of the civil wars in Lebanon. This video is supposedly concerned with a car bomb demolition expert — lamentably, a profession

in demand around the world today — but eschews the voyeuristic for the lyrical.

In an extreme letterbox format, as if we are looking through the slot of a bunker, the video depicts architectural

drawings and buildings in ruin, photographs of explosions and documents with signatures. Raad has said that he is interested in public forms like photojournalism, but also realizes how difficult it is to really represent the history and trauma of his country.

Other works in Territory aren't such a downer. Roy Arden has a large billboard at Expo Boulevard and Nelson that shows a photograph of a billboard from 1992. That image was selling condos... plus ça change. Germaine Koh has buried soil samples from around the world all over downtown and North Van, re-enacting British colonialism and Hong Kong developments. A walking tour by Nell Wedman will map the dates stamped on sidewalks, as a way of feeling, with our feet, the history of the city.

Indeed, Territory can be seen as a form of what geographer Kevin Lynch once called "cognitive mapping," or the way in which we visualize our urban spaces. By bringing together artists from Vancouver and abroad, Presentation House and Artspeak can help us to think about how we are similar to, and a part of, the rest of the world, and also how Vancouver is unique.

Clint Burnham is a Vancouver author and educator.

visual arts

Urban Territory brings art to the people

Presentation House Gallery hosts reception June 16

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"IT'S a very slippery kind of thing, an urban landscape," says curator of Presentation House Gallery Helga Pakasaar sitting outside on a sunny afternoon in North Vancouver.

Pakasaar was discussing the upcoming visual art project Territory, concerned with urban experience, civic space and contested terrains, opening June 10, in a partnership between the North Vancouver gallery and Vancouver's Artspeak.

Throughout the conversation Pakasaar frequently gestures toward Lower Lonsdale and across the Burrard Inlet to Vancouver. Both areas have undergone many visible and invisible changes over the years in terms of increased development and a changing social climate, making the topic incredibly timely, she said.

"We have all kinds of different boundaries or borders in our lives and we were hoping that this project would kind of provoke questions about that very thing, how we think of territory in terms of social identity and how cities set that up in different ways," she said.

"Territories are something that are always changing," she added.

The exhibition is a unique collaboration, co-curated by Pakasaar and the director of Artspeak — a non-profit artist run centre in Gastown — Melanie O'Brian.

In their development of the project, one of the things the curators continued to think about was how their venture could complement the United Nations World Urban Forum that will take place in Vancouver from June 19 to 23.

Territory will bring together 10 local and international artists, some being shown in Vancouver for the first time.

Topics investigated include political conflict, violence in cities, fantasies, urban alienation, change and decay, surveillance, security, and communications systems. "It's quite a global perspective," said Pakasaar. "Their works are responses to changing urban landscapes, how cities really are in states often of intense development or shifting economies and it's that state of transition that they're often trying to negotiate in a way."

Artists featured include Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Roy Arden, The Atlas Group / Walid Raad, Yael Bartana, Cao Fei, Germaine Koh, Gonzalo Lebrija, Jayce Salloum, Seripop and Ron Terada.

Contemporary art media works by five international artists including video and DVD installations and photographic series will be on display at Presentation House Gallery as well as some at Artspeak. Content at the North Shore gallery covers a variety of issues from post-civil war Beirut to street demonstrations by Israeli and Palestinian youth to the life of a milkman in Guangzhou to the potential violence of collective behaviour in street culture.

What sets Territory apart from other art exhibitions is that the project extends beyond gallery spaces to public sites and actual landscapes in North Vancouver and Vancouver.

"Given that the theme of the exhibition was the city...

it really seemed important to make sure that these artworks got into the cities in some real way," said Pakasaar.

Aspects of Territory will be brought to an unassuming audience, like commuters or those in the midst of a daydream.

"As a curator I like to think of art as having an impact to the community as a whole but not everyone makes their way to galleries or knows about them so it's always a challenge to bring people to the art and this is in a way bringing art to the people," said Pakasaar.

In North Vancouver artist Ron Terada will engage with residents through signboards.

"Their messages will change and they'll move," said Pakasaar.

"They're really meant to provoke curiosity," she added.

Other public aspects of the project in Vancouver include photographs taken by Roy Arden of Vancouver a decade old that will be blown up on various billboards.

"What it really brings to the foreground is just the nature of the change in Vancouver's downtown core," said Pakasaar.

Photographs of the city will also be distributed through various means, including the Carnegie Newsletter in the Downtown Eastside.

"They'll have many, many lives and that's part of his idea," said Pakasaar, referring to the intention of artist Jayce Salloum with his contribution, that they could potentially be used to roll cigarettes, be put on fridges, or simply fall to the ground.

"I think discovery is a key aspect of all of these works," she said. Another component to Territory are guided walks. Writer Michael Barnholden will lead those interested on June 24 and July 22 to visit sites of past riots in Vancouver; architect Annabel Vaughan will trace one thread of Vancouver's story on June 17 and July 29; and artist Neil Wedman will tour significant dates based on poured sidewalks on July 15 and



photo Cao Fei

A still from Cao Fei's single-channel video Hip Hop Guangzhou (2003).

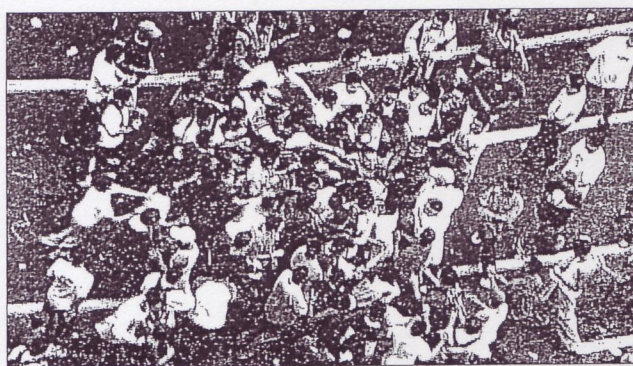


photo Gonzalo Lebrija

A still from Gonzalo Lebrija's DVD installation Aranjuez (2003).

August 5.

A film series has also been planned for July 19 and 20 at Vancity Theatre at 1181 Seymour Street.

Territory runs from June 10 to August 6. The opening reception will be held at both gallery locations on Friday June 16 from 7 to 9 p.m. at Presentation House Gallery — featuring a talk by Vancouver architecture critic and curator and urbanist Trevor Boddy — and from 8 to 10 p.m. at Artspeak.

Presentation House Gallery is located at 333 Chesterfield Avenue and Vancouver's Artspeak is located 233 Carrall Street. For more information on the project and for a map of placed works and routes, visit www.presentationhousegall.com.