

Visual poet finds lyricism in life's prosaic moments

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ROBERT REID
RECORD STAFF

CAMBRIDGE

Toronto artist Kelly Mark is preoccupied with the common, everyday things in life we generally take for granted or routinely execute without much thought.

Stupid Heaven is Mark's first major survey exhibition, assembling her multimedia work from the last decade.

On view through Feb. 24 at Cambridge Galleries, the exhibition consists of installation, photography, drawing, sculpture, video, audio work and television-based projects.

Blending wit, humour and satire, Mark examines ordinary and mundane experiences in all their unconscious, uncritical monotony. These are the banal rituals that define our ordinary lives.

Not surprisingly, television plays a big role in Mark's conceptually based investigations.

The exhibition's centrepiece is REM, an installation consisting of four different living rooms. Each room has its own retro personality, created by the specific couch, coffee or end table, area rug and lamp, and accent items (wall clock and ashtray) she has selected.

Despite their differences, the rooms are united by the presence of a television tucked in the corner. This underscores the fact that since the 1960s television has been the great cultural leveller and conformer, transcending status, class, social and cultural, education and religion.

With regards to the television itself, Mark has edited 170 different TV shows and films into a single narrative, accurately described in gallery notes as "a tour-de-force, dreamlike narrative where characters lose themselves in others, where time warps, reality turns into dream and back again."

This not only gives new meaning to channel surfing, but acknowledges that television -- that most mundane of cultural transmitters -- is still the most powerful conduit of our collective dreams and aspirations, anxieties and nightmares.

The Kiss consists of two televisions that are placed screen to screen. It really does look like the objects are kissing. Each screen gives off a rose glow produce by filtering the light from a pornographic film. Pornography, of course, exploits, manipulates and commodifies human sexuality, much as television exploits, manipulates and commodifies human culture.

Modern society is dominated by the automobile. This is no more apparent than in our cities. Broken Meters is a collection of 24 coloured photographs of broken parking meters, an implication that the social and cultural infrastructures of our cities -- and, by extension, our country -- are broken.

I don't know how common they are now, but there was a time not too long ago when most blue-collar workers punched a time clock indicating when they entered a factory to begin a shift and exited after completing a shift.

Most people unfamiliar with artists and artmaking don't view artists as workers. Mark obviously does. Since 1997 she has been punching in and punching out of her studio. She intends to continue this practice until 2031 when she reaches the "normal" retirement age of 65.

She has assembled her punch cards in metal holders and mounted them on the gallery wall under the title of In and Out.

We have all said it, many times: "I really should" . . . you can finish the sentence any way you want.

In I Really Should, Mark compiles a list of a 1,000 things she should do, many of which are trite, hackneyed, mundane kinds of things. Others are more significant.

You can hear her reciting her list through a couple of pairs of headphones mounted on the gallery wall.

Mark returns to her childhood days of drawing with Letraset Drawing, a group of eight ink on paper drawings done with the mechanical drawing templates which produce busy abstract images resembling maps or floor plans.

Multiples and Projects features a museum-style, glass, display case containing miscellaneous, mundane objects associated with Mark's artmaking and exhibitions including posters, CDs, rubber stamps and buttons.

Mark is a kind of visual poet who seeks out the fleeting moments of lyricism in our otherwise prosaic existence. Call it fun with intent or sly humour with a message.

rreid@therecord.com

