

Your eyes will explode in Canada Council's new gallery space

PETER SIMPSON June 6, 2014



Robert Sirman, director and CEO for the Canada Council for the Arts, shows the art in the council's new public space at 150 Elgin St. The installation to the left is by artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Stare at the screen and your eyes begin to "smoke." (Photo by Wayne Cuddington/ Ottawa Citizen)

Smoke gets in our eyes, and pours out of them, in a giant piece of art beneath the new offices of the Canada Council for the Arts on Elgin Street. It's a spooky work of video, and it's adjacent to a new public art gallery.

The new gallery is called *Âjagemô*, an Algonquin word for crossroads that accurately describes the busy space on the ground floor of the new Performance Court building at 150 Elgin. People file through from two entrances, and go to or from the floors above via stairs or elevators. I spent 45 minutes in the space and the pedestrian traffic was steady.

The inaugural exhibition, titled *Land Reform(ed)*, features pieces chosen from the Canada Council Art Bank's collection of 17,000 works of contemporary Canadian art. However, if you enter the building through the main door on Elgin the first thing you'll see — it's impossible to miss — is the video installation of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, titled *Close-up and The Year's Midnight*.

The large, irregularly shaped screen is a permanent fixture that for hours each day is given to the council for a rotating series of interactive video installations, of which Lozano-Hemmer's is the first. It is described as a "high-resolution interactive display with built-in computerized surveillance system." When you walk past, hidden cameras project your image onto the big screen. If you stop and look at the screen for a moment, "smoke" suddenly bursts from your eyes, and doesn't stop even if you move around. When I tried it started out as comic, as I watched my eyeballs explode into wafting streams of white smoke, but it became creepy when I shifted from side to side and couldn't escape the smoke. What seemed a gimmick soon had me thinking about the unseen surveillance that permeates our modern world.

It's a startling work of art, and it's the first time the Montreal-based Lozano-Hemmer has displayed it in Canada. It continues in the lobby to at least July 27, but may be held over for a longer stay.

The new art space formally begins with an exhibition that considers “the way we impact the land and the way the land has an impact upon us,” says Canada Council director Robert Sirman, during a tour. Curated by graduate student Stanzie Tooth, the exhibition includes works by Governor-General award winners Carol Wainio and Kim Adams, along with Shuvina Ashoona, Dil Hildebrand, Michael Snow and others. The space is appealingly fluid, with geometric shapes that contrast with the curving lines on the ceilings and floors, an allusion to aboriginal design.

Sirman says programming the space gives the council “much greater ground-level access to the public. . . .This is a way for us to strengthen our connections to Ottawa, and to extend our civic footprint in the city.”

There’ll be several art exhibitions each year, and also performances and concerts. “It has good acoustics,” Sirman says, and snaps his fingers for effect. “It’s great for jazz, it would be good for chamber music, and good for vocal music.”

Land Reform(ed) continues in Âjagemô to Oct. 31. Admission is free.



HI, HOW ARE YOU?

I've previously written that Anne Wanda Tessier's text affirmations, though printed finely on luxurious paper, were too generic in a world tediously full of I'm-good-enough reminders. Now Tessier has found a more effective place for her affirmative art — on city bus shelters.

As part of the festival Hintonburg Happening (June 21 to 29), Tessier has rented ad space on two bus shelters on Wellington, between Somerset and Parkdale.

One sign is a letter: "Hey you. How are things? . . . Are you happy? . . . I just wanted to let you know that I have been thinking of you lots." It's signed only "XO." The other sign is a long list — "your smiling eyes," "live music," "listening to my grandparents' stories of when they were young," and many others, all provided to Tessier by people in Ottawa.

Nothing explains the letter or the list to passengers or passersby. I watched a bus stop with a half-dozen people waiting. They stood apart from each other, isolated by choice or anxiety. Even when they're together they're alone, I thought. Into these passing moments of self-segregation, Tessier's letter and list extend an anonymous hand of caring, one that is more substantial than any platitudinal poster, and more successful.

What: Land Reform(ed), works from the collection of the Canada Council Art Bank, and Close-up and The Year's Midnight, by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

When & where: Âjagemô, ground floor of Performance Court at 150 Elgin St., to Oct. 31. Close-up and The Year's Midnight to July 27, with an extension possible.