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FIELD OF DREAMS

Works probe architecture's promise

BY **LEAH SANDALS** JULY 22, 2010 12:00 AM



Dan Bergeron's faux storefronts, like Defunct Front, show the power of facades.

EMPIRE OF DREAMS at MOCCA (952 Queen West) to August 15. 416-395-0067. Rating: **NNN**

MOCCA's big summer show, Empire Of Dreams, unites 22 mostly local artists to riff on architecture and urbanization. Though the title sounds aspirational, Empire tends to bring notions of perfect, heavenly cities down to earth - and sometimes down to darker places.

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Empire's best artworks play off the architecture of the museum itself. These lend physical immediacy and real-life cred to the show's jargon-bleary tag line, "Phenomenology of the built environment."

For instance, Dan Bergeron's terrific trompe l'oeil storefronts on MOCCA's exterior demonstrate how streetscape facades communicate power, hope or despair. (They work a lot better in this public context than in the indoor Lisgar show of a few years back, where the effect was more hipster Disneyland.)

Inside, on the gallery walls, Josh Thorpe sands through several years of paint layers, creating appealing abstractions from the space's history. Jade Rude and Bruno Billio's sculptures go from floor to ceiling, sometimes held in place by same. They make overlooked volumes of "empty" space feel very concrete.

Some more conventional works also shine. An Te Liu's elegant cloud of air purifiers reminds us how complicated our relationship to natural and artificial environments can be. Samina Mansuri's dystopian diorama ain't perfect, but its wide view and scale are fun. Tristram Lansdowne's watercolours of dreamy yet decrepit buildings gain new gravitas in this architecture-focused context.

Unfortunately, not all the work reaches the level set by Bergeron, Thorpe, Rude and Billio. Yvonne Lammerich's styrofoam feelers are particularly disappointing. Some works, like Liam Crockard's makeshift table, seem shoehorned into the theme, which is bad both for the show and for the individual piece of art.

Overall, the must-see works in Empire of Dreams do a great job of deflating some of the more utopian promises of architecture and city planning. But the unevenness of the show itself also comes across as - what else? - a bit of a municipal letdown.

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