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Gastown Follies Michael Turner

Abigail DeVille
'Gastown Follies'

Artspeak
233 Carrall Street
Through October 26

For her most recent exhibition, the "Artstar" alumna has fashioned a distressed structure comprised of locally-sourced found materials, including wooden 2x4s, drywall, plywood, tar paper, black plastic and leftover paint from previous Artspeak exhibitions. The dimensions of the structure correspond with former Gastown bartender "Gassy Jack" Deighton's nineteenth century Globe Saloon. But is the accumulation and re-articulation of extraneous building materials and historical research enough for this work to transcend the sum of its parts? Does it achieve the kind of sensorial or propositional overtone we hope for when entering the amber of the gallery?



Let us begin with the title. “Gastown” is a historic tourist district in Vancouver, redesigned in 1972 to keep the hippies from mingling with unionized resource workers, while Google defines the singular form of “Follies” as: 1) *lack of good sense; foolishness* 2) *a costly ornamental building with no practical purpose, especially a tower or mock-Gothic ruin built in a large garden or park*. With that in mind, how might we consider DeVille’s installation? Is it “lacking in good sense”? Is it “foolish”?

What is evident upon experiencing Gastown Follies is that its materials were not foraged willy-nilly from nearby alleys, like in DeVille’s past site-specific exhibitions, but from a construction site behind the gallery, thereby allowing the artist to avoid the inevitable accusations that has her garbage as someone else’s bedside table. So in that sense, the installation is not lacking in good sense -- it is grouted with it.

With respect to the second definition of *folly*, the exhibition does not appear “costly,” though I am sure there were costs associated with bringing the artist to town, not to mention the ongoing cost of running the gallery. Whether the exhibition conforms to what we consider “ornamental” is dangerous, given the tendency to associate ornament with decoration. But on that note, there are some rather decorative instances of chiaroscuro that appear by way of the ceiling’s rear-lit stabbed black plastic drapery. Pretty how the light falls onto the wall’s thinned paint drips and soft washes. As for the exhibition’s “practical purpose,” it does include an installation, and because its public funders require that Artspeak house objects, then yes, the installation does serve a “practical purpose.” But is it disingenuous to suggest that a work whose title promises follies, yet is categorically devoid of them, something of a folly? Or maybe the artist’s installation is not a mark unto itself but a pendant to its source.

What saves this exhibition, what makes it worthwhile, is the presence of a similarly condescending bricoleur installation by Mike Nelson at Yaletown’s Contemporary Art Gallery. Here, the British artist gives us what those who arrived on the West Coast saw when “Gassy Jack” was slinging pints at The Globe: a romantic Eurocentric landscape devoid of those who were here before them. Only in DeVille’s case, it is not a landscape she provides but a cynical still-life based on a good-natured bartender’s attempt to bring people together and, through booze and food, get them beyond the sum of life’s nasty, brutish and short experiences.

Michael Turner