

Charting new paths to contemporary treasures

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A major new display of contemporary art — about 60 works by dozens of big-name artists from here and abroad — is now up at an important Canadian museum, and there's not a poster or a banner to be seen for it.

That's because it hasn't been gathered from the four corners of the Earth at vast expense. Instead, the curators at the Art Gallery of Ontario have looked deep into their own vaults and quietly set out some of the treasures contained therein — and they deserve some fanfare to proclaim it. Special exhibitions are fine, but a museum lives, or dies, by its permanent collection.

And the AGO seems more alive than ever, now that contemporary curator Jessica Bradley and her team have rejigged almost the whole wing that's under their care.

In fact, you don't even have to trek upstairs to the tucked-away world of Bradley's domain to get a feel for what she's been up to. Her project starts right on the entrance wall of the AGO's grand lobby, where she's installed a recently acquired work by James Carl, a

ART REVIEW

In a new show of works from the Art Gallery of Ontario's permanent collection, curator Jessica Bradley and her team find fresh ways to make art accessible.

38-year-old Canadian now based in New York.

Carl is best known for corrugated-cardboard versions of household appliances that let him poke and prod at the icons of Western consumerism. But this time, riffing naughtily on the corporate feel of the AGO's atrium space, Carl has dished up a couple of craft-paper-brown bank machines. At first, visitors may read Carl's work, tucked seamlessly into the wall, as models for actual cash dispensers awaiting delivery. But once they twig to the piece, its goofy edge should tell them that a trip to the living art of the AGO's second floor may not be as scary as they fear.

There's Mona Hatoum's *Socle du Monde* (1996), for instance. A giant magnetized cube awash in swarming iron filings, it's one of the most interesting, and popular, works at the AGO, appealing to novices as much as to art-world experts.

Even more complex contempo-

rary works can be just as approachable. Take *Whispering Room* (1991) by Janet Cardiff, an artist based in Lethbridge, Alta., whose multimedia work has been heating up the international scene for a few years now.

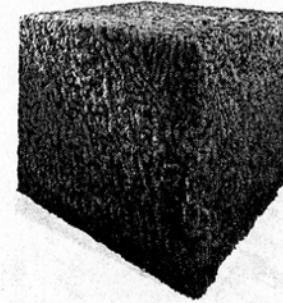
Across the expanse of a medium-sized gallery, Cardiff has scattered 16 little speaker cones perched about ear-high on spindly metal stands. When you first enter the barely lit room, the soft female voices coming from the speakers create a gentle cacophony, potent as sound sculpture but unintelligible otherwise. But as you wander the space, your ear catches snippets of narrative that beg your brain to do more work: from one speaker, a few seconds of a woman driver worrying about getting lost; from a pair of others, a couple of women discuss a chance encounter in the woods. You can never actually piece together the whole story that Cardiff seems to have pulled apart

here. But our desperate effort to find beginning, middle and end even in the most scattershot bits of babble keeps the experience engaging for hours.

Cardiff's piece is typical of the kind of creative vim that sparks right through the AGO's new installations. Even when you don't like a piece — and there are going to be few unlikable pieces in any mix — you always feel that it's part of a worthwhile effort to encourage energized looking.

To that end, Bradley has set aside traditional ordering by period and school, instead building her rooms around loose themes and visual ideas, interspersed with a changing roster of micro-shows by single artists she admires. (Until January, the spotlight is on Calgary conceptualist Eric Cameron and B.C. painter Sandra Meigs.)

Among the themed rooms, there's the "tourism" gallery, where various contemporary Canadians — such as edgy artists as Joanne Tod, Gerald Ferguson and Arlene Stamp — try out what it means today to make pictures of our world-famous natural wonders. And in the middle



Socle du Monde (1996), by Mona Hatoum: perennially popular.

of these walls of scenic mark-making, we get the solidity of a concrete-wheeled, doorless RV by Robin Collyer, *The Zulu* (*European Version*), 1985. In its metal and smoked-glass glory, the vehicle seems to stand in for all the other techno-threats to Canada's natural order.

In a nearby space, Bradley gives us a whole different approach to organizing the collection. Here, we find an eclectic roomful of objects by artists ranging from senior Bri-

ton Tony Cragg to young Canadian Magdalen Celestino. The one thing the works have in common? A reference, more or less evident, to vessels or containers. In these days of high-concept curating, it was a brave move to bring objects together because of what they look like, but it makes good intuitive sense.

Of course, there are costs as well as benefits to any gallery reorganization. As the new pieces come in, old favourites have to go into storage. (It was smart of Bradley to hang on to a few landmarks — Claes Oldenburg's soft hamburger, for instance — to avoid total visitor disorientation.) And art lovers wanting to take a trot through the major movements of the 20th century are going to have to rethink what they're up to. But then, no goal has been closer to the heart of our century's art makers than getting us to do just this kind of rethinking — of art, and life, and the contact between them. Bradley seems happy to help her artists along with that project.

Works in the AGO's rehung contemporary galleries will be up for varying times. Call 416-979-6648.