

# Gallery lives up to Promises



MICHAEL SCOTT

## Exciting possibilities fuel new exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery

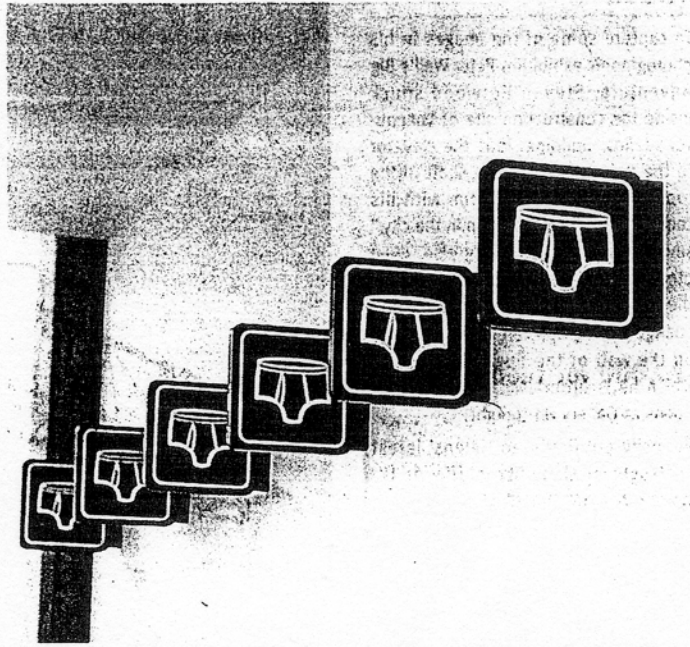
Like a bank account flush with money, the current exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery sparkles with possibility. The gallery's new director, Christina Ritchie, draws on ideas of intention and what-might-be in her inaugural exhibition here: The results are polished, brainy and true to the exhibition's title in several ways, not least of which is in the form of promises of great things to come.

Ritchie, who was a curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, had to pull this exhibition out of a hat when a previously scheduled exhibition here fell through. So onerous was the deadline that she was required to think of a title during the same telephone call in which she agreed to put a show together. But Ritchie's perspective on contemporary art is a worldly one, and even with a short lead-time the results have the poise and breadth of something much longer in the making.

Her central idea here is exploring work that is "somewhere in between one thing and another," as she explains in a brief curator's statement. That gives her a wide mandate, including work that crosses media boundaries, work that is suggestive of more than its physical form, and work that stands as both household object and theoretical artwork. (You might argue that all art is a variety of promise between artist and audience, a suggestion to which Ritchie turns an enigmatic smile.)

"What a promise is, is really only a declaration of intent," Ritchie explains. "It is not a realization of anything. You can think of it as the as-yet-unrealized."

Her cross-section is frankly delicious, including work by a number of artists not well known here, including England's Jemima Stehli, Toronto's Daniel Olson and New Yorkers Jill Henderson, Joseph Scanlan, Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg. Ritchie also includes two Vancouver-



Artist James Carl's vinyl-on-PVC *International Briefs (Hebdomad)*, part of the *Promises* exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery.

based artists who measure up well to the international competition: Geoffrey Farmer and Ron Terada.

Terada's work takes pride of place in the show, a flickering neon sign that blinks out the message "Promises" in the CAG's foyer, with all the noirish underpinnings of a sleazy motel sign. Farmer's contribution is a promise in a box, a set of Muppet-like puppets in a large travelling case, pregnant with implied possibilities. For this exhibition, Farmer (who has a major installation this month at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery on South Granville) arranged a video monitor and viewing stool in front of the puppet crate. The loop on the video shows a woolly green puppet sleeping, his flanks gently rising and falling, his contented snores providing a soundtrack. (As Ritchie archly points out, it's Andy Warhol's seminal film, *Sleep*, as interpreted by Oscar the Grouch.)

Artistic duo Hanson and Sonnenberg are sculptors and photographers. Their *Between Show-and-Tell and Bigger-Show-and-Tell* is a gauzy image that captures the space between two Alexander Calder mobiles, duplicating the arithmetic of Calder's original geometry. Two other handsome photographic works show fruit, arrayed about strange, playdough structures. Olson provides two works, including a very engaging shelf of used books, all of which were written by authors named Olson, the piece entitled *Enti-*

*tlement*.

James Carl displays his own sense of humour in *Border Patterns*, a faux-Martha Stewart wall stencil in palest blue and yellow. The garland shape looks perfect for a nursery wall until you look more closely at the pattern, which is an endlessly repeating image of two hands tearing open a condom package.

Stehli works with photographic self-portraiture, including mirrors and mistaken perceptions in her life-sized images. Scanlan finds considerable promise in everyday objects. (Egg shells and cigar butts are among his working materials, according to Ritchie.) For this show, he couriered a longish package to the gallery, made of brown paper and wrapping tape, which now occupies a corner spot on the floor. It looks like any other parcel, complete with shipping instructions and waybill, but with one difference. Scanlan has punctured a viewing hole in one end and supplied an electrical cord to power a small interior light.

What better visual metaphor for a promise, than a package waiting to be unwrapped?

Sun Visual Arts Critic  
mscott@pacpress.southam.ca

## Promises

Curated by Christina Ritchie.

Contemporary Art Gallery, 555 Nelson, until Nov. 25.