

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Whyte, Murray. 'Clearer voices found in a the smaller spaces at Power Plant: Whyte'. *Toronto Star* Online. 7 October 2017



Clearer voices found in the smaller spaces at Power Plant: Whyte Show in Power Plant's big gallery overshadowed by more relevant and pointed offerings nearby.



A detail image of Michael Landy's Demonstration, now at the Power Plant.

Call it force of habit, some form of conditioning or just the obvious spatial cues, but I've always seen whatever's been installed in the Power Plant's big southwestern gallery as the main event.

With its towering ceilings, voluminous footprint and windows streaming in the daylight, everything about it seems to say: this is important, and the other stuff in the little room upstairs or across the hall is somehow secondary.

So it's more than a little strange to find Amalia Pica's big, spare structures here. Not that there's anything wrong with them: they're finely made, vaguely absurd and dryly witty, cardboard cut-out versions of the acoustic radar stations that once lined the British coast. Pica describes them as a reversal, highlighting the shortcomings of listening, and understanding, through technology.

But don't they feel more than a little tone-deaf to the moment? I was at a talk recently, put on by Fogo Island Arts, where creative director Nicolaus Schafhausen, a seasoned international curator for more than 30 years and the

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director of the national contemporary art museum in Vienna, made a telling if not particularly surprising statement. "I used to believe art could exist apart from the world; art for art's sake," he said, smiling grimly. "Not anymore." Indeed, in this suddenly explosive era of divisive politics and clashes along social, racial and economic lines, the fast track to irrelevance runs directly through the chilly agnosticism of oblique conceptual work like Pica's.

We can stretch, and far, to connect these self-consciously obtuse cardboard structures — with more enigmatic context, this time materialist: cardboard deadens sound, creating a paradox between form and material — to the deafening maelstrom of miscommunication propagated by such online screaming arenas as Facebook and Twitter. But that's a serious reach.

Pica's work is an ambivalent void at exactly the wrong time, saying next to nothing when there's so much to talk about.

It might simply be that the Power Plant was seeking a counterpoint to its other exhibitions. The first, from British artist Michael Landy, occupies its long, narrow clerestory, stretching two generous storeys high. All along it, nappy little sketches in red and white, most of them populated with stick figures, rough out a world that's instantly familiar: "Canada 150 is a celebration of ongoing land theft" reads a sign stuck to the handleless arm of a skirted women's washroom figure. "The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong with the world," reads another.



A detail of one of the many drawings of Michael Landy's 'Demonstration' at the Power Plant. Landy solicited sketches and slogans from the local public to make the work. (Murray Whyte)

Ambivalent it's not: Landy solicited slogans and sketches from the local public with the promise of transforming them into drawings for the show. The conceptual frame here is slim, indeed. In strikingly literal terms, it reads as a temperature-taking of a moment fraught with division.

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(Though it's not so pious or strident as to be humourless: "Mommy, what's a Canadian?" reads a sign held by a smaller stick figure. "It's an unarmed North American with health insurance, sweetie," reads her response). Landy, seeking to connect not obfuscate, calls it simply *Demonstration*, and its unvarnished sincerity beguiles. Not to be outdone in grassroots clarity is what amounts to a sprawling documentary project on the Congo. It's an odd kind of thing to find here, in a high temple of contemporary conceptualism, as we tend to imagine the Power Plant to be. But these are different times.

The show is drawn from *Suturing the City: Living Together in Congo's Urban Worlds*, a joint effort between Sammy Baloji and Filip De Boeck. It comes via the Wiels Contemporary Art Centre in Belgium, which of course would have a personal stake (Belgium, Congo's colonial overlord, remains a standout among its brutish colonial peers for its outright viciousness and depravity).

Still, as we in Canada stumble along our own uneven path toward reconciliation with Indigenous people, dragging our own gruesome history along behind, there's no small amount of resonance here. Congo, like Canada, is resource-rich. Unlike Canada, its wealth has been haphazardly extracted over decades, first by Belgium, then multinational corporations and then, in a violent fracturing of splinter groups, rebels and warlords, by whoever could get their hands on it.

Colonialism, infamously, has always left behind ruins, though in a tightly managed country like Canada, they're largely of the psychological and emotional kind; hard to see, even harder to repair. But much of urban Congo is a full-fledged imperial modern-era ruin; cast-concrete brutalist buildings decay like so many Roman coliseums and are often no less spectacular.

Even so, the spectre of renewal teases here. In one of few moments where the installation strays off its plain-spoken documentary path, one wall of a low-ceilinged gallery is papered over with posters salaciously advertising "the good life": babes in bikinis, Ferraris, McMansions.

As an aspirational trope it makes sense, and the distance between the ideal and the actual — a common real-estate trope, as observers of the Toronto condo market will attest — is an absurd bit of hyperbole to make a point. Returning to the photographs, we see modest, partly completed, semi-occupied cookie-cutter villas perched next to a swamp. As is so often the case in the ruins of colonialism in Africa, the reach exceeds the grasp and a brilliant, riveting video here lays it bare. In a ramshackle concrete tower in the Limete district of Kinshasa, an ebullient, heavy-set man in hospital scrubs gives a tour of the building's 11 floors.

Describing himself as a "doctor of aeronautics and spatial medicine," he describes the building's rough cinder blocks and crumbling concrete in vividly fantastic terms. Here, a newly tiled bench for patients waiting to see a doctor, there an examination room. Occasionally, he stops to admire the view over the shanties below and the river beyond. None of this, of course, will ever happen. The building has been under construction, of sorts, since 2003, without any architectural plans or instruction. It teeters above Limete like the dark palace of a dystopian ruler (not that Congo has had any shortage of those), a symbol not of hope and progress, as Modernism imagined such things, but dysfunction, abandonment and delusion.

It speaks a brutal truth, unfiltered. If it's there as counterweight to Pica's main event, then so be it. But to me, it's a portal to another truth: that sometimes balance is less an admirable goal than a merely ambivalent one, and the time for ambivalence is past.

Amalia Pica: Ears to Speak Of; Michael Landy: Demonstration; and Sammy Baloji and Filip De Boeck: Urban Now: City Life in Congo continue at the Power Plant to Dec. 31. See thepowerplant.org for more information.

<https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/visualarts/2017/10/07/clearer-voices-found-in-the-smaller-spaces-at-power-plant-whyte.html>