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Present Tense 31: Seth
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
June 29 to October 23, 2005

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By Miriam Jordan and Julian Haladyn

As the Art Gallery of Ontario undergoes an extensive renovation, the mood of the institution is in flux, a mood that is utilized in terms of the exhibitions chosen for this period of transition, in which the gallery itself is treated as a *swing space*. Navigating our way through the temporary side entrance, as the front is closed off for construction, we find the makeshift ticket counter and proceed into Seth's first solo exhibition. As a prominent Canadian cartoonist, Seth has received much acclaim for his graphic novels and comic books, particularly *Clyde Fans* the two part book, that centres on the old Clyde Fans Company store at 159 King Street, that is the focus of this show. It is this imaginary metropolis that literally confronts us as we enter the environs of the exhibition space.

A miniature model of the fictitious town of Dominion – which the character Simon Matchbook passes through in the pages of *Clyde Fans* – dominates the centre of the gallery, allowing access from all sides. Constructed mostly out of corrugated cardboard, this paper town is arranged in neat rows upon a large lowered surface that we cautiously bend over, in order to investigate the finer details of each structure. The most unsettling part of this vista is the feeling that we have been to this town before; several of the cartoonishly painted corrugated structures looked uncannily familiar. There is the Northern Matchbook industrial building, with an actual book of matches attached to the roof as a kind of billboard sign, as well as the Canadian Toboggan Works building with a clock tower and the matching head office beside it in painted red brick. Even in the reduced semi-cartoon state presented in the gallery before us, we felt a definite

disconcerting connection with reality, a reality that was difficult to pin down. We then came to the almost schizophrenic realization that we had actually seen several of these buildings before throughout various cities and towns scattered across the province; we could vaguely recall encountering them somewhere on our journeys, possibly in Toronto or London. Seth's adaptations of reality acted as a bridge between our world and his imaginary graphic realm; seemingly fragile pieces of paper carefully constructed into a microcosm of simulated reality.

Surrounding this diminutive construct was a series of Seth's larger-scale framed comic strips, each of which were hung in sequence around the walls of the gallery – the show was concentrated into a single room, but not minimized in terms of content. Before we could allow ourselves to indulge in these images, we found that we were irresistibly drawn to look at the battered sketchbooks displayed, like relics, under glass on pedestals methodically positioned around the space. These well-worn documents contain the original scenes that Seth sketched, erased and sketched again; the early working cells for his comic books and graphic novels. These documents bear witness to the rarified working process that is undertaken for each individual segment of what will be a larger story. Seth's hand can be found in the multitude of corrections and mistakes that mark the beginnings for the rest of the works on display. Often it is annoyingly redundant and unenlightening to show the sketchbooks of an artist with completed works on exhibit – all too often these sketches illustrate a need to fill space and the posturing of the artist as artist – in Seth's case these notebooks show the honesty of his creative endeavors and form a useful component for decoding the exhibit as a whole.

We begin navigating our way through the exhibition in a perpetual maze of back and forth examinations of drawings, sketches and three-dimensional facsimiles. It is not uncommon for us to return to the sketchbooks as we compare the variances that occur throughout the various stages of Seth's images: interacting with the visually active language of cartooning, a constant play of images and words through which we pieced together a narrative, like detectives deciphering a trail of paper. Seth uses a seemingly low-tech means of telling a story to construct an engaging narrative of disconnection in a world of ever-evolving machines and technology that leaves the past behind like so many dusty black and white photographs. These are the themes that run through the chronicles of the Matchcard brothers, as they struggle to keep their antiquated fan company afloat in a sea of encroaching advances in technology that threatens to render them obsolete. This theme is also doubled in Seth's other undertakings, including his anachronistic use of cardboard in the construction of the charmingly unsophisticated industrial city on display.

Seth draws attention to the construction of a graphic landscape that moves from a rough to an ever increasing polished presentation; this is the art of cartooning in which an unlimited amount of time is spent by the artist formulating and refining each individual element of what will become a deceptively simple comic. This is evident in the transition from the warped bases and uneven corners of the corrugated buildings, to the repeatedly corrected sketchbooks and the minute pen strokes, which are occasionally adjusted for errors even in the final framed images of the larger drawings adorning the walls. This visible process of correction is the most fascinating aspect of the show for someone who is intimately familiar with the flawlessly arranged frames presented to readers in Seth's comic books. The opening frames of *Clyde Fans* presents a cinematically cropped and

montaged sequence populated with waking pigeons and sleeping buildings as we witness this quiet cityscape change from night to day; a panoramic scene which homes in on the window of a building and reveals an elderly Abraham Matchcard sleeping snugly inside. A close inspection of our copy of these pages in the graphic novel itself fails to communicate the texture of Seth's drawing techniques, visible in the framed images of the show.

This process from rough to smooth is mirrored and contrasted by the ongoing state of architectural refinement to the gallery that is taking place during the time that this display is up. Perhaps unintentionally, Seth's work caused us to think about the relationship we have to the buildings that surround our act of spectatorship; a building initially takes shape drafted on pieces of paper and constructed as models, a meticulous procedure that is stylistically repeated in Seth's exhibition and the transformation of the AGO itself. There is a corresponding intelligence governing both of these architectural constructs that begs the question of where reality finds its origins; is it in the cardboard models of the imaginary structures that begin in pen and ink or is it in the flawed depictions drafted and corrected into books? The more we wandered around comparing details the less concerned we were with answering this question. This exhibition of Seth's work left us pondering the social need for simplicity and tactility in a world of ever increasing complexity, not in terms of antiquated or nostalgic memories of an idealized past, but instead through focusing on the simple moments that make up our present tense – the soft sounds of pigeons cooing, the corresponding rustle of their wings as we turn pages. Before leaving the show we had to take one last look at Seth's artfully constructed city and the people in the gallery who inadvertently animated it.

Seth imbues the architecture that populates his imaginary kingdom with the same intelligence that he uses to craft his characters. One would be hard pressed to say which plays a larger role in the stage that he sets: the buildings, such as the Clyde Fans store, or the characters, such as the failed salesman Simon Matchcard. In truth these two elements are so intertwined – like the viewer in a museum or gallery space – that it is an arbitrary gesture to examine them separately; they work together in Seth’s cartoons to create a startling life-like portrait. As we walk around the area designated by the exhibition, around the town of Dominion, by the sketchbooks and graphic images, we are faced with the continuing question of human utility. How do we make use of the natural skills and talents of people, rather than just forcing them into a juggernaut of technological advance that denies our human fallibility and individuality? Within the ordered grids of the work on display we see the Matchcard brothers overtaken by progress in the hand drawn panels full of subtle errors that are removed in the mass-produced graphic novels. The exhibit displays the imperfection that underlies all of the perfect worlds that we continually imagine ourselves living in.