

Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

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Review of David Hoffos [Scenes from the House Dream, Phase Two. Gallery TPW. Toronto]

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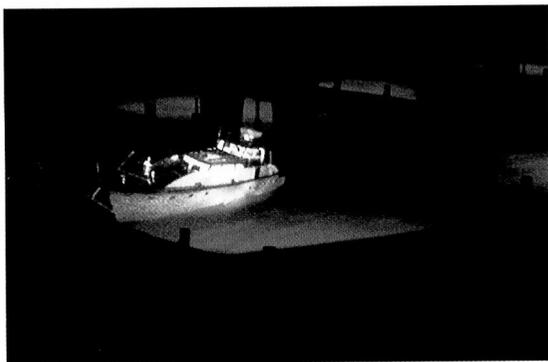
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EDDO STERN *Vietnam Romance* (still) 2003 Digital video, TRT 22 min 45 sec

DAVID HOFFOS *Scenes from The House Dream, Phase Two: 65 Footers* 2003–04 Two-channel video installation with miniature model, mirrors, glass portal, 3 TVs, 2 VCRs, 3 tables, TV brace, freestanding/false wall
COURTESY TRÉPANIERBAER GALLERY, CALGARY



buster “Turner, Whistler, Monet” exhibition), the Los Angeles-based Israeli artist’s indelicate series of video works and kinetic sculptures pounded, machine-gunned, chopped and blasted out their own strangely sublime cacophony.

Stern’s videos are not easy to watch. *Vietnam Romance* pairs muzak-like MIDI samples of 1960s rock anthems with digital images of landscapes meticulously reconstructed from classic Vietnam War films. Doubly filtered through the lens of popular media, the realities of combat remain out of sight, a footnote to the eerily rendered Hollywood references.

Deathstar, by contrast, leaves little to the imagination. Using images poached from home-crafted animations posted on the Internet, Stern has compiled a disturbing collection of death scenarios for Osama bin Laden. A host of crudely animated bin Ladens meet as many gruesome ends in sequences that are both horrifying and morbidly amusing. The work reads like a poor man’s (or, at least, poorer man’s) war on terror, evidence of a disturbing folk movement trickled down from televised war imagery and political rhetoric. Embedded in the impossible twists of contemporary media, Stern’s video works depict the intersection of high-tech representation and unresolved, crudely expressed cultural anxieties.

His sculptures bring these anxieties into three dimensions. *Fort Paladin: America’s Army* takes the shape of a medieval castle, crafted from computer hard-drive cases and uniformly coloured hard plastic. A monitor and keyboard are mounted where the drawbridge should be. The work is described by Stern as a “castle automaton” built to master the U.S. Army recruitment/training game *America’s Army*, and its keyboard is controlled by custom-built software and rapid-fire pistons. The game plays out to completion on a flat-screen monitor as the incessant hammering at the keys recalls machine-gun fire. Stern’s cutting-edge software yields a robotic marvel whose questionable achievement undermines any bright, technologized future we might previously have envisioned.

Stern is an expert in contradictions, and his *Fort Paladin: America’s Army* displays the technological capabilities and the violent, caught-in-the-Middle-Ages motivations that together define our current global conflicts. A former Silicon Valley computer programmer, Stern gives us work that is smart, timely and, importantly, immersed in the high-tech culture that it seems to critique. It is unapologetic about its contradictions. Stern takes considerable steps towards articulating the issues, despite the hard-edged first impressions. VANESSA KWAN

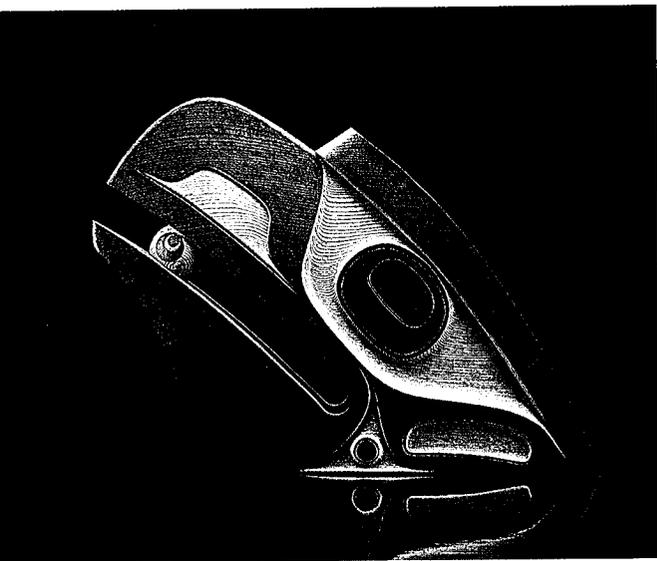
David Hoffos

◀◀ GALLERY TPW, TORONTO

The figures in David Hoffos’s *Scenes from The House Dream, Phase Two*, like insomniacs, are occupied with middle-of-the-night activities. In one of several tiny dioramas, watched through a window set into the wall, a woman walks back and forth in a hotel room, distractedly holding a drink and watching TV. Behind her in perpetual night there’s an airport where the only visible activity is a light traversing the docking area. This miniature tableau provokes an uncanny experience of dislocation, as my mind shifts perspective to project myself into this scene.

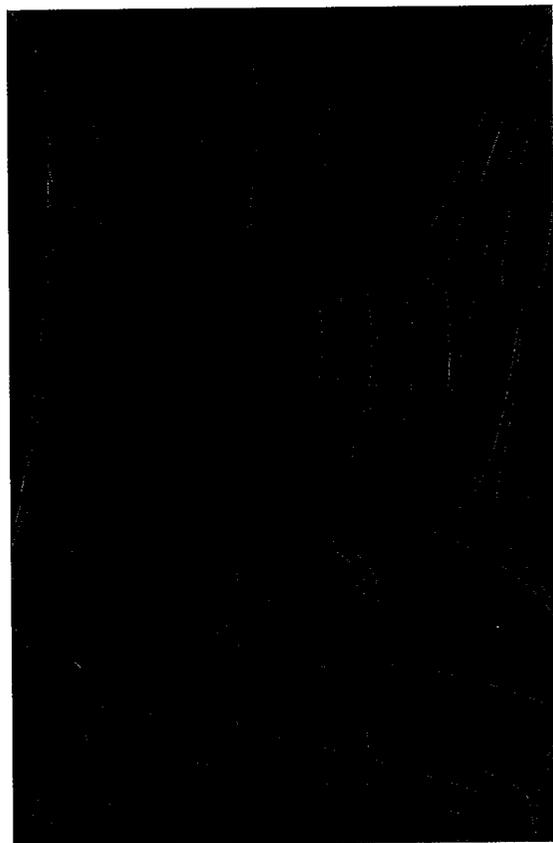
The show is constructed so that one must cautiously avoid television sets placed on plinths like sculptural objects; the TVs, along with projectors and DVD players, are part of its technical wizardry. The woman in the hotel room, it turns out, is not in the hotel room. She is a video image that appears on a TV in the gallery, which reflects off the tilted pane of glass separating the viewer from the room in which she appears. The airport is another optical trick—a miniature model surrounded by mirrors to create the illusion of a three-dimensional landscape. Similarly, the docking area’s tiny moving light is another reflection from a TV monitor.

There are at least two technical antecedents to this work: the phantasmagoric lantern shows of the 18th and 19th centuries, which created moving, ghost-like illusions that were often accompanied by sound effects or music; and the 19th-century miniature dioramic tableaux that were viewed



ROBERT DAVIDSON *Ravenous* 2003 Red cedar, acrylic
68.6 x 52.7 x 10.2 cm PHOTO KENJI NAGAI

Southeast Wind 2004 Acrylic on canvas 1.52 x 1.01 m PHOTO ROBERT KEZIERE



through an aperture. Unlike these early forms of parlour entertainment, *Scenes from The House Dream* reveals how the illusion operates, and in this is the secret of its success. At an earlier show by Hoffos, *Another City*, exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2002, audience members actually entered the dioramic space. In the darkened room there was a projection of a couple making out, oblivious to the people around them. The illusion was so convincing that viewers were afraid to disturb them. In *Scenes from The House Dream*, the illusion is more transparent. The cardboard cut-out is visible behind the phantom fidgeting at the front of the gallery; projection devices are placed in the viewing space and, on close inspection, gaps reveal the elaborate models behind the walls.

With only a skeletal narrative, the viewer has no choice but to pay attention to the mediated forms—the video images, the backdrops, the sets, the optical distortions of this dream house. In each of the piece's scenes, time stands still. Each installation creates a sense of suspense, building toward an event that will never arrive. While the viewer is forced to wait, the lonely dimensions of the spectacle unfold. AMISH MORRELL

Robert Davidson

◀◀ MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, VANCOUVER

Known in Haida as *guud san glans* (Eagle of the Dawn), Robert Davidson has found immense success in two quite disparate worlds: his First Nations community and the international art museum and marketplace. Despite the pressures of the latter, he has never relinquished the distinctive visual language of the former. As this small exhibition makes clear, however, he has recently undertaken an extended project of abstraction and innovation that suggests an art-for-art's-sake rather than traditional-ceremonial context for his work. Yet Davidson's interest in abstraction is not a nod to Western formalism but rather an investigation of a peculiarity within Haida visual tradition.

As both Davidson and the museum curator, Karen Duffek, point out, abstraction was an aspect of northern Northwest Coast art long before it glimmered on the horizon of European consciousness. This was not simply a function of its fundamental visual vocabulary, which streamlined and simplified natural forms, but also, apparently, a kind of visual and intellectual play intended to add complexity and ambiguity to the reading of a work. On view in the exhibition, alongside Davidson's paintings and sculpture, are four 19th-century bentwood feast dishes and a canoe steering paddle, all painted with designs so abstract that they cannot now be interpreted. The formlines, ovoids, U-forms and S-forms that are the basic components of northern Northwest Coast visual language are present, but they are assembled (or disassembled) in a way that precludes their interpretation as familiar crest figures.

Davidson has apparently taken these mysterious designs as his inspiration, stating that he wants to both reconnect with the cultural knowledge of his ancestors and challenge his own understanding of the art form. The show comprises some three dozen recent works, including large-scale sculpture in cut-out, epoxy-coated aluminum, small-scale and relief sculpture in red cedar, acrylic paintings on canvas and deerskin and gouache paintings on paper. In each, Davidson has altered, isolated or reduced the already abstract components of Haida art, focusing on formal dynamics and philosophical evocations rather than outright representation. Among the most gracefully ambiguous works here are carved and painted cedar panels that juggle a few design elements (and the ideas associated with them) without arriving at a predictable narrative or heraldic end.

Also fascinating are the correspondences between Davidson's inventive deerskin paintings, which take the form of ceremonial drums (apparently used), and those on canvas (intended to be mounted on a wall). Clearly, Davidson does not reserve his abstraction for Western forms and media, and dynamics bounce back and forth between the celebration of stories and beliefs and the privileging of formal elements and aesthetic principles.