

Peter Dykhuis: Cross Words and Guilty Pleasures

Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax

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I've long liked the subversive use of playfulness in Halifax-based artist Peter Dykhuis' work. In a city filled with way too much overblown and self-importantly over-hyped art, Dykhuis' paintings and video-based works have made for a refreshing and welcome alternative.

That's not to say that Dykhuis' work isn't serious. Rather, the playfulness in his art makes for a way to approach the work - an entry point or a path, if you will. It's deceptively inviting and seemingly benign, but Dykhuis has studied and learned well the lessons of political and social propagandists. The six works that made up this alcove exhibition at the Dalhousie Art Gallery are proof positive of that, for though witty and playful on the surface of things, they are anything but benign.

The overall structure and format of these works was based on a simple device: the use of a standard size square wood panel in the centre of which was painted a single upper-case, sans serif letter of the alphabet surrounded by a heavy mass of encaustic. Each individual work was composed of several such panels arranged so as to form constructed, scrabble-like phrases; the letter 'O', for instance, was shared in a work comprised of the vertically arranged word 'SNOW' and the horizontal 'JOB', and in another work by the words 'CROSS' and 'WORDS'.

Simple, clever, witty, playful - yes, all of those things. But the playful phraseology and game reference were contextualized by Dykhuis' trademark use of maps and mapping systems. I say 'trademark' because Dykhuis has a longstanding interest in maps; indeed, they were the basis of his last solo exhibition in Halifax, a show of maps of the world produced in the member countries of the G-7 nations that coincided (quite intentionally) with the G-7 summit a couple of years back. All of the pieces in this new exhibition incorporated portions of maps of North America; "CROSS WORDS," for example, depicts a vertical swath of the continent running from Quebec to Florida, and a horizontal strip extending across the Great Lakes and into the Maritimes, and "CROSS HAIRS" a vertical section stretching from the Northwest Territories to the Baja Peninsula, and a short horizontal piece running from the Aleutian Island chain into the Canadian north.

Maps are charged devices. Along with depicting a literal point of view, they latently propagandize political, social, and cultural interests and biases on behalf of the dominant geo-political composition. Dykhuis has made that latent element overt in this series of new pieces, so each of the maps depicted in each work brings forward cultural, political and social elements and references: in the use of lurid television colour bars in "GO FIGURE," in the camouflage patterns that striate the landmass in "CROSS WORDS," and in the aggressive boldness of the stars and stripes of the American flag in "NOW WHAT" (the latter a homage to the American painter Jasper Johns and his influential series of encaustic flag paintings of the mid-century).

Dykhuis' point of view image of North and Central America could only be that of a satellite; one perhaps in some geo-stationary orbit high over the continent, its electromagnetic footprint extending from ocean to ocean, from pole to equator. All the better to blanket the continent with colour bar transmissions, or something far less apparently benign.