

Artists Give New Meaning to BBs and Banal Signage

VISUAL ARTS

Germaine Koh/Ken Lum

At the Contemporary Art Gallery until July 14

• By **ROBIN LAURENCE**


I'm standing in the new Contemporary Art Gallery and it's raining. The sun is shining outside, but it's raining inside, a gentle downpour of ball bearings. They're tiny ball bearings, mind you, about the size of BBs, of tapioca beads, of water droplets. The plucking and shushing sounds they make, as they fall from the ceiling and then bounce and skitter across the polished concrete floor, are similar to those of a summer shower. Some of the BBs congregate in gleaming metal puddles or rivulets at my feet, again evocative of rain. Experiencing this Zen-like work by Germaine Koh, I can almost smell wet lawns and sidewalks.

The two exhibitions chosen by outgoing director-curator Keith Wallace to inaugurate the CAG's smart new premises (at 555 Nelson Street) are seven image-text works by Vancouver-based artist Ken Lum, and two installation pieces by the Toronto-based Koh. It's an impressive opening program that exposes us to two distinct creative sensibilities while speaking to the CAG's recent history of exhibiting both emerging and established Canadian artists. In a curious way, these shows also speak to the CAG's role as a venue for international art.

The much-acclaimed Lum brings his own brand of internationalism to the CAG: he's exhibited extensively beyond Canada's borders, in the United States, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Oddly enough, however, he hasn't had a solo show in a public gallery in his hometown for 10 years. (Note to the Vancouver Art Gallery: Isn't it time for a midcareer retrospective of Ken Lum?) Koh is much in demand nationally as an ingenious young artist of the everyday; this is her first solo show in Vancouver. Her ball-bearing piece was created for the Gendai Gallery of the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto and its conditions are intercultural and, in a sense, diasporic. Among their many subtle references and complex evocations, both Lum and Koh allude here to the immigrant experience.

Lum's text works force us to consider the increasing penetration of the public realm by what was formerly considered private/domestic/personal.

Although not exactly site-specific (both works have been exhibited elsewhere), Koh's installations engage in a dialogue with the architecture and activities of the CAG. *Prayers*, sited behind and through a window at the gallery's entrance, captures the daily production of words typed into computers in the CAG's upstairs offices and translates them, first into Morse code in a ground-floor computer and then into puffs of smoke produced by a theatrical smoke machine vented onto the street. (Visitors to the CAG can participate in this translation process by using the computer in the catalogue-reading room, just inside the door.) The otherwise unremarked labour of unseen gallery workers is thus reconfigured into an ephemeral visual poetry, a street poetry that also happens to encompass a little history of communications technology within its



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Although they at first seem anonymous or funny, Ken Lum's signs compress many sobering ideas about the immigrant experience and displacement.

fleeting dots, dashes, smoke signals, and keystrokes.

Koh's ball-bearing installation (the title of the piece is the ellipsis that would normally signify *and so on* or missing words or a trailing-off of speech...) almost disappears into its surroundings in the CAG's AIVIM BAKIND Gallery. The silvery-grey balls drop from grey tracks temporarily installed on the room's grey concrete ceiling, these tracks compatible with the pipes and lighting tracks permanently mounted there. The accommodating greyness extends to the concrete floor, too, where the ball bearings land and cluster.

These clustered and scattered BBs resemble not only puddles but also abstract beadwork, aerial photographs, or demographic maps. In a work that was inspired by a set of pachinko balls (used in Japan in a pinball-like game of chance), Koh manages to create both a space of contemplation and an allusion to mass and individual

their cultural or geographic displacement—can be read into them, and that a narrative gap exists between the permanent signage and the impermanent, marquee-like message. A considerable tension exists between these texts, too, between the public impulse of advertising and the more private impulse to tell a personal truth.

Beneath the sign for "Jim & Susan's Motel", for example, is the message "Clean & Comfy Rms/Sue, I Am Sorry/Please Come Back". Beneath "Amir Thrift Shop/Watch, Jewelry & Shoe Repairs" is the message, "Closing Out Sale/Everything Must Go/Moving Back 2 Eritrea". Beneath "Taj Kabab Palace" is "Free Pakoras/Before 7/Peace in Kashmir/End Conflict/India & Pakistan". Other signs similarly conflate business messages with expressions of political or religious belief—or domestic disturbance.

Again on first reading, Lum's fictitious signs seem very funny—what else to do but laugh at the strip-club sign that advertises wet Ts and Jell-O while also calling for an end to racism and homophobia? But on second reading, we are obliged to contemplate the more sobering conditions of social, economic, and personal contingency that lie behind the messages. In a sense, these signs represent a desire to provide a voice for disenfranchised individuals and communities.

In quite another sense, however, Lum's text works force us to consider the increasing penetration of the public realm by what was formerly considered private/domestic/personal, a trend that includes people talking on cellphones in buses, restaurants, and airports, loudly declaiming the workings of their bowels, bank accounts, or love lives and making crowds of strangers unwilling receivers of these declarations. It also includes tell-all TV talk shows and other forms of reality TV in which every traditional notion of intimacy or privacy is sacrificed on the twin altars of money and celebrity.

Although their forms, means, and methods are quite different, both Lum and Koh deliver us from places of laughter and fleeting sensation to places of quiet attentiveness and contemplation. Wow. ■

migrations of people. The demographic analogy extends, too, to the noncongregated BBs, the loners and outsiders and individuals consigned to the margins.

Lum's wall-mounted works, installed in the CAG's B.C. Binning Gallery, mimic a kind of low-end commercial signage, with both fixed and adjustable type and simple, serviceable visuals. At first glance, these works appear to be banal appropriations from the urban landscape, Duchampian homages to the signs you would see outside unprepossessing and perhaps unprofitable businesses in a strip mall or on some other unglamorous thoroughfare. (In his catalogue essay, novelist Michael Turner alludes to Kingsway as a likely site for these signs.)

On closer reading, however, it's evident that these works are compressed little fictions, that a history of the proprietors—including