

Meaning Blows in on Wind

VISUAL ARTS

Germaine Koh

At the Catriona Jeffries Gallery until June 1

• BY ROBIN LAURENCE

The first time I encountered Germaine Koh's new work, *Fair-weather forces*, was on a blustery blue day, a day for sailing and hanging laundry on the line to dry. As I walked through the front door of the Catriona Jeffries Gallery, a turnstile located about six feet inside was spinning rapidly. It seemed as if a thousand invisible visitors were racing past, on their way to some ghostly sale or spectral sporting event at the back of the building.

Subtitled *wind speed*, the work comprises a turnstile wired to a homemade anemometer on the gallery's roof. (The device is visible from the lane behind the gallery.) The wind-driven movement of the cheery yellow and orange gauge sends signals to a modest set of equipment inside the gallery, causing the turnstile to spin correspondingly. Where Koh's *Prayers*, installed last year at the Contemporary Art Gallery, translated everyday activity inside the building into puffs of smoke on the street outside, *Fair-weather forces* does the reverse: it translates the movement of air outside the building into everyday activity within.

My second visit to Koh's show took place on a still grey day, a sullen and unforthcoming day, and the secondhand turnstile merely drifted through its counterclockwise rotation. Quite suddenly, however, it picked up speed, turned briskly for a while, then slowed again, coming to a near halt. Hmmm, I thought—and smiled. Hmmm.

Koh's work often makes viewers smile, as it draws them into a closer contemplation of the mundane moment. This British Columbia-born, Toronto-based artist looks for what she calls "residual meaning" in the commonplace, in everyday objects and activities. Her work is both contemplative and process-oriented, Zen-like and Fluxus-like, alerting us to aspects of ourselves through the seemingly inconsequential elements of our daily lives. Elements such as turnstiles: the way they monitor and regulate our comings and goings, the way they signify social and economic control. Elements such as the weather: the way we can monitor it but can't control it. In *Fair-weather forces*, a natural phenomenon becomes social. Invisible forces speak to the movements of unseen masses.

Also on view are five new photographic works,



Fair-weather forces, a turnstile powered by the wind, makes it seem as if invisible guests are racing by.

mostly diptychs of juxtaposed signage, a little too cutely titled *Sighns*. In an interview with me last year, Koh described the phrases she assembles from signs encountered on the street as "very terse concrete poems". Thus, we have "IF EVER", "HERE HERE", "ONE BEGINS", "FOR GET ME NOT", and "ESTA ?", captured and conjoined from a variety of traffic and retail signage, some of it grubby, some of it bright, some of it crumpled, some of it flatly assertive. I like the contingent quality of the work, and the slivers of the world and the weather just visible in the background, behind the signs. But these photomontages feel a little too forced to me, a little too static compared with the movement and the ephemerality of *Fair-weather forces*, *Prayers*, and Koh's other installations and interventions. They feel too much like domestic objects designed to be sold in a commercial gallery, while Koh's real work, her real vocation, lies in the unmarketable everydayness of the wider world. ■