

Not just another pile of laundry

Pretense and fakery are the eye-popping hallmarks of a new exhibit at Susan Hobbs Gallery, writes Sarah Milroy

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I know we were always told that lying was bad, but sometimes it's good. Sometimes, it's even art.

Remaking the Real, at Susan Hobbs Gallery, is one of this summer's quiet pleasures in Toronto. An intelligent compilation of contemporary pieces by a variety of leading Canadian artists from Hobbs's stable, organized by curator Claire Christie, it tackles a subject close to every art lover's heart: the pleasures and fascinations of mimicry and make-believe.

The reigning diva in this department is surely Liz Magor, a Vancouver artist who has spent her career largely exploring the terrain of the decoy and the replica. One of her other favourite themes is hoarding, and her work in this show, *Carton II* (2006), she brings these ideas together. What looks at first like a pile of dishevelled clothes (and a pair of beaten-up shoes) reveals itself to be something else - on two levels.

First, the fabric is actually colour-tinted polymerized gypsum, cast from the original articles of clothing. These are fakes, and they are uncannily convincing.

But the dissembling doesn't stop there; Magor hollows out this composite object from behind, cramming it full of cigarettes in a variety of brands (Belmont Milds, Old Port mini-cigars, Peter Jackson's). It's quite the stash.

Taken as a whole, the object suggests the feverish activities of a slightly paranoid recluse, living on the fringe. Fear is the driver here, and a kind of rapacious need.

Hiding is also a theme observed in Robin Collyer's series of photographs of camouflaged transformer stations around the Toronto area, buildings that have an industrial function but masquerade, externally, as residential housing.

In one, what seems like a rather stately Georgian house, complete with shutters and an inviting gabled front door, conceals its industrial utility within. Another takes the form of a modernist bungalow, blending in with the suburban neighbourhood. (All of these prints were taken in 1988-89, and have been borrowed from the City of Toronto archives.)

Collyer delivers these observations in a kind of wry, deadpan black and white gaze, as is his custom. Things aren't always what they seem, these pictures seem to suggest, and family neighbourhoods are arguably the first place one should look for dissembling.

Kevin Yates, a generation younger than his fellow gallery artists in this show, is exhibiting another feat of pretense. What appears to be a pile of light brown extension cords heaped on the floor reveals itself, on closer inspection, to be carved from pliable beech wood, which has been diligently and expertly whittled down and then steamed into looping, random-seeming configurations. Beneath the pile, you can just discover a tiny bronze snake, its head lifting as if to sniff the air.

Personally, I regret his addition of the snake; it's as if the artist felt compelled to footnote his own visual language with what feels like a coarse literalism. In fact, the cords and plugs are miracle enough. Something utterly mundane has been elevated to the realm of wonder.

Into this somewhat comic company, Ian Carr-Harris adds a rarefied, poetic note. His light work *231 Queens Quay West* (1998) uses nothing at all - just light, projected on the wall by his custom-designed projector - to suggest the solidity of architecture, and the effect of sunlight streaming through window panes.

Over the span of 20 minutes, a grid of white light appears on the wall, sliding inexorably upward toward the ceiling as if from the late-afternoon setting sun. This grid is based on the actual configurations of the window panes on the western façade of the Power Plant, on the shores of Toronto Harbour, the site for which the work was originally made. At that location, the real windows were boarded over for the exhibition, and the streaming of light that would have been natural in the gallery was replaced with Carr-Harris's man-made variety.

These light-projection works - and the artist has made several of them over the years - have always been created in relation to specific places, but they are made to travel too. In the current show, that grid from the Power Plant has been transplanted to another Toronto locale. Time has been leapfrogged (the work is now nine years old) and space too, and an experience from the past has been reconstituted in the present of our perception. Carr-Harris's white lie is playing a trick as old as art itself.

Remaking the Real continues at Toronto's Susan Hobbs Gallery until Aug. 18 (416-504-3699).