

## FrameWork 5/13

Kathleen Smith on Oliver Husain

*gebimsel* = in German, domestic decorations hanging from the walls or ceiling.  
A word is a feeling is a lifestyle is a socio-political analysis.

On a day filled with wandering and shopping and lunching you may find yourself at Susan Hobbs Gallery just south of the Queen West strip on Tecumseth. In a skinny re-purposed building – a remnant of Toronto’s industrial past – is a tiny door set back from the sidewalk. Duck and enter.



On the walls of the ground floor space large hand-dyed silk squares flutter gently whenever the gallery door to the street opens and closes. *facade (1)* and *facade (2)* are deep yellow, superimposed with sobering grey grids. *facade (3)* is more muted in tone, presenting hints of light blue and cloud white and red brick in what must be the reflections of the sky in the windows of a tall building.

On the wall opposite a large vinyl poster advertises *Pandan Cake Mix* – a cooing Audrey Hepburn lookalike admires the lime-green fluffiness that results from someone’s efforts in the kitchen. Your lips involuntarily purse as you decide the icing on the cake is likely coconut.

These works are your entrée into Oliver Husain’s *Gebimsel* – you can see the installation and its objects laid out before you, if not the invisible path that beckons you to examine each object. There is a sense of flotsam and jetsam, the bits and bobs that litter this route. But this is not rubbish – these are precisely positioned artifacts, some constructed, some deconstructed, some found and others halfway to being lost. The embodiment of the viewer moving through their midst causes them to radiate briefly. They have been waiting for you.

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A few steps and you are face to face with two works that feature bendy pieces constructed from dowels, springs and ribbon. *Collapsables/Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* sits on a wide plinth. Pick up one of the 4 X 5 digital prints littering the base if no one's looking. Put it back, they are all the same image. Oh, but wait – they are not all the same! You can tell they are stills from a film, in this case it's a 1984 Indian cult comedy about real estate corruption. In the scene depicted construction cranes toil away on a job-site while a developer and a politician in the foreground seal a deal with handshakes and smiles. In each print the two villains express a minutely different level of glee while the cranes do their elegant building dance in the background.

Nearby *Pandy Ramada's Bendable Displex* stands solid; it's a screen that obscures exactly nothing, made from sheets of laminated corrugated plastic held together with zip ties. *Collapsables Duo* is visible just beyond - repeating and distilling the vibratory quality of *Collapsables/Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* times two. Flick the elements and they bounce, wait for an extremely heavy person to pass by (or rush past the work yourself, stepping hard) and you will see them tremble.



Continue on to the back of the gallery. A tall rolling display stand supports a mass of bundled felt. It looks like a brain and, indeed, it might as well be since this is a bundle of felt words. Husain has painstakingly cut out a portion of *Vorbemerkung (Preliminary Remark)*, the Rolf Dieter Brinkmann text from 1974 that inspired and anchors the *Gebimisel* installation.

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“The storytellers continue, the automotive industry continues, the workers continue, the governments continue, the rock ’n’ roll singers continue, the prices continue, paper continues, the animals and trees continue, day and night continue, the moon rises, the sun rises, eyes open, doors open, the mouth opens, one speaks, one makes signs, signs on the facades, signs on the street, signs on machines, which are being moved, movements in rooms, through an apartment, when no one but oneself is there, wind blows old newspapers over an empty grey parking lot, wild bushes and grass grow over the abandoned lots full of rubble, right downtown, a construction hoarding is painted blue, a sign is nailed to the blue hoarding, Post No Bills, the hoardings, the posters, the No’s continue, the elevators continue, the facades continue, downtown continues, the suburbs continue.

What a delight to walk down a street in the sunshine. The poems I have assembled here were written between 1970 and 1974, for various occasions, in various places, are they any good? You ask. They are poems. All the questions continue just like all answers continue. Space continues. I’m opening my eyes and looking at a white sheet of paper.”

~ *Vorbemerkung (Preliminary Remark)* by Rolf Dieter Brinkmann (1974), translated from German by Oliver Husain and Ken McKerrow.

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Look carefully – you can see the final word of the original German paragraph ‘papier’ dangling there.

The text continues too, literally, in the *continued* series of eight drawings lining the back wall. The ink on paper drawings trace the shapes and shadows generated by another felt word cutting-out and folding project, the word manipulated here: ‘continued’.

In this part of the room (if the gallery is quiet and you are there at the right time) romantic music insinuates itself. This is *Illusionen once per hour*. As the title suggests, this piece consists of the melodramatic folk-pop song *Illusionen* by German singer Alexandra (who died in the sixties) played in its entirety once every hour: “Illusions hover, summer blue, in the sky above your life – but you know for sure: this cloudless dream image of your fantasy will never come true.” The sound issues from a round boom box set on the floor near the staircase to the gallery’s upper level.

Float upstairs in slow motion admiring the narrowness of the stairwell (so high the risers! so sturdy the wood!), lovingly fingering the bumpy whiteness of the not quite pristine drywall. In the second-floor aerie the installation continues, sharing space with books for sale, and the business hub of the gallery.

Here you can slide behind another corrugated plastic screen – a double of the one downstairs – to sit on a plastic chair and watch the video *PARADE*. Watch it several times in order to fully understand its damning secrets or to calm down from your busy day or if you are planning to write about it. A fan will blow air down the back of your neck, a bit noisily. It’s a white noise so not disruptive.



The ideas of the first floor are reiterated and encapsulated in this 11-minute work. Husain deploys condominium sales fly-throughs (CGI promotional videos designed to seduce potential buyers by illustrating dreamy and uncluttered domestic and social scenarios), projecting and re-shooting the images on fluttering fabric to suggest pristine lives lived in elegant and austere boxes in the sky.

At times the video is populated by alternately beautiful and creepy computer-enhanced urbanites, composite characters who go from work to shopping to working out to groomed perfection to ground-floor lounge drinks with compatriots, without stepping outside – though they may gaze longingly at the moon through a window or briefly traverse a manicured courtyard. At other times, the video clips resemble an unpeopled video or computer game – *Myst*, for example – in which the viewer wanders/drives/skates through architectures and landscapes designed for people but devoid of life. These scenes are at once dystopian and deeply alluring.

In program notes written for the gallery, Husain's video is linked with French writer Marguerite Duras' concept of the *image passe-partout* (an image designed as a container or envelope for an infinite number of texts) from her 1978 film *Les mains négatives*. This linkage invites multiple readings of the material presented yet the same gloomy questions prevail – questions about human habitation patterns and how they reflect societal values. Husain's historical strategy of connecting cultural relics from the sixties, seventies and eighties with the concerns of today solidifies on the screen, these digital images making the point even more firmly than the material objects that have been teasing the viewer on the journey across the ground floor and upstairs. The Brinkmann text returns here too, further anchoring Husain's video dream of a manufactured world ready and waiting for visitors, tenants, owners, inhabitants. A continuance, since we have learned nothing.

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Retrace your steps now and notice a new weight in the delicate components of this *Gebimsel*. The objects may flutter and tremble and cast shadows for you now in a slightly more sinister way.

As you waft downstairs, out the front door (past the book for signing) and into the empty street, you feel light and unencumbered, as if you have left something heavy behind. The almost-black silk square *facade (4)* waves good-bye, darkly. The sun-dappled day stretches out before you.