

Studies in Decay negotiates a new approach to realism

by ROBIN LAURENCE on NOV 29, 2011 at 3:18 PM



Laura Piasta's *Crystallized Lee Jean Jacket*.

At the Or Gallery until December 10

Studies in Decay is a small show on a large theme. Although the making of art is usually an assertion of hope, an air of melancholy pervades the few works on view at the Or Gallery. The contemporary artists represented, Raymond Boisjoly, Jordy Hamilton, and Laura Piasta, employ very different forms, materials, and strategies, but their pieces come together here because of what guest curator Jonah Gray describes as “the *look* of decay”.

In his curatorial essay, Gray writes about reconciling “two ways of thinking about what it might mean to make politically engaged works of art”. He cites different cultural theories on the subject of decay, and also suggests that the works in this exhibition are negotiating a new approach to realism.

Piasta’s *Crystallized Lee Jean Jacket* is just that: an old Lee-brand denim jacket that has been soaked in salt water and then apparently hung on a nail to dry, so that streaks and patches of salt crystals adhere to its stiffened form. Suspended by itself in the middle of a big white wall, this altered found object communicates isolation and forlornness, if not exactly decay. While the jacket’s logo-bearing metal buttons have rusted, suggesting aging and deterioration (of a brand, of a trend, of a youth-culture marker), the larger evidence of the salt crystals on the fabric is of accretion, another condition altogether.

Piasta’s sculpture calls up some pretty powerful precedents: Liz Magor’s clothing and accessory sculptures from her series “Stores”, and Elvira Finnigan’s “Saltwatch Experiments”. Magor’s KD—the Original, a realistic-looking backpack cast in silicone rubber and leaking Day-Glo orange “cheese” powder from a package of Kraft Dinner, and Pearlwhite, a pearlescent raincoat paired with a large purse, again cast in silicone rubber, were both exhibited at the Contemporary Art Gallery in 2000. (Coincidentally, the CAG at that time occupied the same premises that the Or Gallery now rents.) Finnigan, based in Winnipeg, has used many media to track the transformation of objects immersed in salt brine and to create metaphors about the passage of time and the stages of life. Although Piasta is an interesting artist, her salty jacket looks unresolved in comparison.

Boisjoly's *The Writing Lesson: Spuzzum* is a continuation of a series he launched in September at Republic Gallery. There, he exhibited text works stencilled by sunlight on black construction paper. Here, he employs vinyl lettering applied to a nine-by-12-foot white plastic tarp. Spuzzum, the name of an unincorporated settlement and also a First Nations government near Hope, appears in black-metal-style letters, although in a paradoxically pale (as in fading) shade of gray. Allusions here are complex. Boisjoly creates parallels between black metal music's references to the forced Christianization of Northern Europe during the Middle Ages and his own reading of the imposition of European cultures, religions, and languages in the Americas.

Boisjoly also alludes here to contemporary local resistance by certain non-Native people to embracing or reviving indigenous place names they deem ugly (like Spuzzum) or impossible to pronounce (like X_wáyx_wáy). Curator Gray argues convincingly that Boisjoly's "decrepit tangles of letters" evoke a precarious state, one in which processes "are held in suspension: of translation, of naming, of colonization, and ultimately of representation". In [an interview with the *Straight*](#) in early September, Boisjoly said that the place names he employs in his art "index a relationship" between aboriginal peoples and colonizers. "The Writing Lesson" attempts to recover histories that might otherwise be lost.

Hamilton's installation *Freedom Machine* takes two forms: a set of five fading, spotted, snapshot-like colour photographs and a grainy video projection. These depict a rather odd tradition in the artist's family, in which an old motorcycle, motor running, is parked in a field, set on fire, and shot at with rifles. Both the photos and the video are appropriated from older, somewhat deteriorated images taken by unnamed observers of this harmless exercise in violence and destruction.

Better, after all, to ignite your own vehicle than someone else's, right? Better to do all this shooting in an open field rather than in a crowded shopping mall? Still, the whole performance seems so emblematic of our culture in decline—gun violence, peak oil, global warming, waste—that it's hard to be anything other than dismayed by it. Fire is the most compelling of elements, and Gray sees beauty in Hamilton's imagery. I see ruination—and decay.