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GARETH MOORE AND JACOB GLEESON

JENS HOFFMANN



St. George Marsh, 2006. Courtesy: St. George Marsh, Vancouver

WHEN passing by in a car, St. George Marsh appears to be nothing else than an ordinary corner shop, one among millions in the suburbs of North America. Yet when one actually enters the store and takes the time to look around one realises quickly that it is anything but your generic convenience store around the block.

Just over a year ago Gareth Moore and his collaborator Jacob Gleeson took over an old storefront in the east of Vancouver, a predominantly Asian suburb of the city, and opened St. George Marsh. The shop was still filled with objects the previous owners had left behind: food cans, old sodas, as well as various pieces of mostly dysfunctional furniture. The idea behind the project they launched emerged from the desire to create a community-oriented project out of a commercial space situated in a quiet, residential environment. Its location in a non-commercial part of the city is as important as the visitors' often-unexpected discovery of it. The artists are interested in intermingling museological oddities with ingestible goods and art, with the hope of confusing the roles of these

commodities. The store is in a continuous state of reformation, growth and dispersal, as items are gathered for display, passed on and reinterpreted.

In addition to this attraction to process, it is the evident love for directing every minor element of the shop that makes St. George Marsh so irresistible. The shop contains a video rental department which is a shelf predominantly stocked with very old VHS tapes of mainly 1980s action movies. There is a candy bar with sticks of rock imported from Walton-on-the-Naze in England (where Moore's grandmother lives) along with chewing gum that tastes like soap and gigantic gobstobers the size of tennis balls. Next to this is the garden centre, stocked with clippings of plants and a library with books loaned out (and rarely returned). The grocery department not only has the largest tuna fish cans ever made (about the size of the tire of a car), but also three kinds of mustard and a number of pasta dishes as well as various exotic soft drinks imported from India. In another corner of the store we find a small gallery called Decay Gallery, which holds

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the mandate of showing art made not for the pursuit of any critical, financial or institutional acclaim, but for nothing other than personal reasons. At the time of my visit, Decoy Gallery was showing the work of Karen Birch, a middle-aged woman from Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. Displayed was a vast selection of her work, forming a small survey of her production from the past 30 years.

The name of the store, St. George Marsh, was inspired by the history of the area, which was at one point a wetland holding a complex network of streams and rivers. People used to paddle through picking swamp tea for evening ingestion. If you walk south two blocks to the intersection of St. George Street and 30th Street and listen to the drain you can still hear a long diverted river churning away.

The store has become a bit of a curiosity over the last months and a lot of people slow down while driving by or look in the window for a long time trying to figure out what is going on, but do not have the courage to enter. Those who do go in can be confused by the shop's disparity, uncertain how to navigate it. Some say it reminds them of a place from their youth, while others just come in for a soda or a bag of chips and take no notice of any of the other objects or displays. Once someone entered, looked around briefly, and asked the artists what the 'business model' was.

Many of the customers of St. George Marsh are just as surreal as the store itself. Among them is a young man who comes in mostly on weekends and who has been nicknamed 'The Chef' (over the past year the artists have learned of his gradual movement from dishwasher to sous-chef and his aspirations of becoming a head chef). He is always ranting about something vaguely political; usually he buys some candy or a soda and leaves again. Another customer, a Scottish glazier, came in almost every day over the summer to buy ice cream and would each day

ask what flavour he had the previous day before making his selection. The artists figured that he was either near blind or had a very bad memory.

Moore and Gleeson have brought together an eclectic and vast selection of objects culminating in something of a cabinet of curiosities. The store is a *Wunderkammer* in which we can discover something odd and surprising in every corner and in which one could spend hour after hour browsing through all the goods on offer. Among my favourite items is a little basket with a label saying 'lucky pennies'. One 'lucky penny' can be purchased for the amount of two pennies, which then also go into the basket! It is this sense of subtle and discrete, tongue-in-cheek humour that characterises the whole project as much as the deadpan attitude of its shopkeepers who talk with straight faces about their little shop of wonders, their stock and the customers. Once one steps into the store it is as if one has entered the set of a Wes Anderson film where attention to detail is paramount and one bizarre item, one surreal display, follows another.

St. George Marsh feels as if Gordon Matta Clark's restaurant 'Food', Sarah Lucas and Tracy Emin's 'The Shop', Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Supermarket* (1998) and the Museum of Jurassic Technologies were rolled into one. Yet it is the artists' love of detail, their eagerness to involve the community, their particular sense of geeky and dry humour, as well as the store's modesty, that sets St. George Marsh apart from any of these precedents.

ON 22 AUGUST THE PROJECT CAME TO A CONCLUSION AND THE STORE IS NOW CLOSED. THE GRAND CLOSING INVOLVED A SALE IN THE LOADING BAY OF A COMMERCIAL GALLERY IN VANCOUVER WHERE ONE COULD BUY THE REMAINING ITEMS OF THE SHOP

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