

Guerrilla galleries

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Jacob Gleeson and Gareth Moore hang out at St. George Marsh, where art sits beside penny candy. Mark Mushet photo.

Not since the hip and heady 1970s has Vancouver seen so much independent- and alternative-gallery activity. Some of the new exhibition and project spaces, sprouting like mushrooms out of the rich manure of the city's visual-art scene, are artist-run. Others are shaped and driven by writers, critics, curators, art historians, architects, preparators, graduate students, and purveyors of clothing, books, food, and drink.

Many contend that art is not an object or activity separate from all others. Making art, showing art, drinking coffee, renting videos, skateboarding, buying magazines, eating Cheetos—all are intertwined. What's happening locally is a renewed impetus to think outside the big, white, institutional box and smudge the boundaries between art and everyday life. It's a movement evocative of Iain and Ingrid Baxter's legendary NE Thing Company and the Eye Scream Restaurant that NETCO ran here in the late 1970s.

Hours are often limited (best to phone ahead), since many of the new gallerists subsidize rent and labour with their 9-to-5 jobs. Most hope that modest commissions on sales will at least cover their costs. A few aspire to turning a profit somewhere down the line. In the meantime, their energy and idealism sustain them. Here, then, is not a survey but three lively examples—out of many—of the best new trend in the visual arts in Vancouver.

St. George Marsh

4393 St. George Street
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On their business card, artists Gareth Moore and Jacob Gleeson describe this place as a general store/museum/gallery, which sums it up but doesn't do justice to its beautifully choreographed quirkiness, or to the economy and subversiveness of its vision. Named for its location (at the corner of East 28th Avenue and St. George Street, between Main and Fraser, where marshlands once existed), the space and its contents seem to speak of another age. Penny candy and jawbreakers in jars on the counter; root beer and Chinese sarsaparilla in the little white cooler in the corner; canned peaches, hot sauce, chocolate biscuits, and stewed tomatoes all set out in an immaculate and spacious fashion, as if the groceries were themselves works of art.

Naive paintings hang throughout the shop. Museum specimens, arranged on shelves and in glass-topped cases, range from antique toys to a braid of human hair to a yak's tooth. The art-exhibition space is small (the southwest corner of the store, between the Frosted Malts and the Orange Crush) and is currently occupied by Murkins' Witness, a wildly unclassifiable video installation by Jeff Halladay (until September 30). The next show, to open on a still unspecified date in October, will feature the masks and paintings of Rex Roney, a 93-year-old self-taught artist living in a veterans' hospital.

Moore avoids words like naive and outsider when describing the art he and Gleeson show. Instead, he talks about bringing work created outside the critical stream into a relationship with both exhibitry and everydayness. His interest, he says, is in bridging communities and concepts, "conflating a soda pop with a painting or drawing". Then he adds: "I like the idea of having a very fragmented art practice...of art that exists in a more dissipated or invisible manner." Art that lurks in the aisle between the recycled toilet paper and the yak tooth.