

# Images of Candy and Cheap Decrepitude

Three postmodern photographers plumb the depths of existential nausea and urban decay

## VISUAL ARTS

### bonus

Photographs by Damian Moppett, Howard Ursuliak, and Kelly Wood.

At the Contemporary Art Gallery until March 15

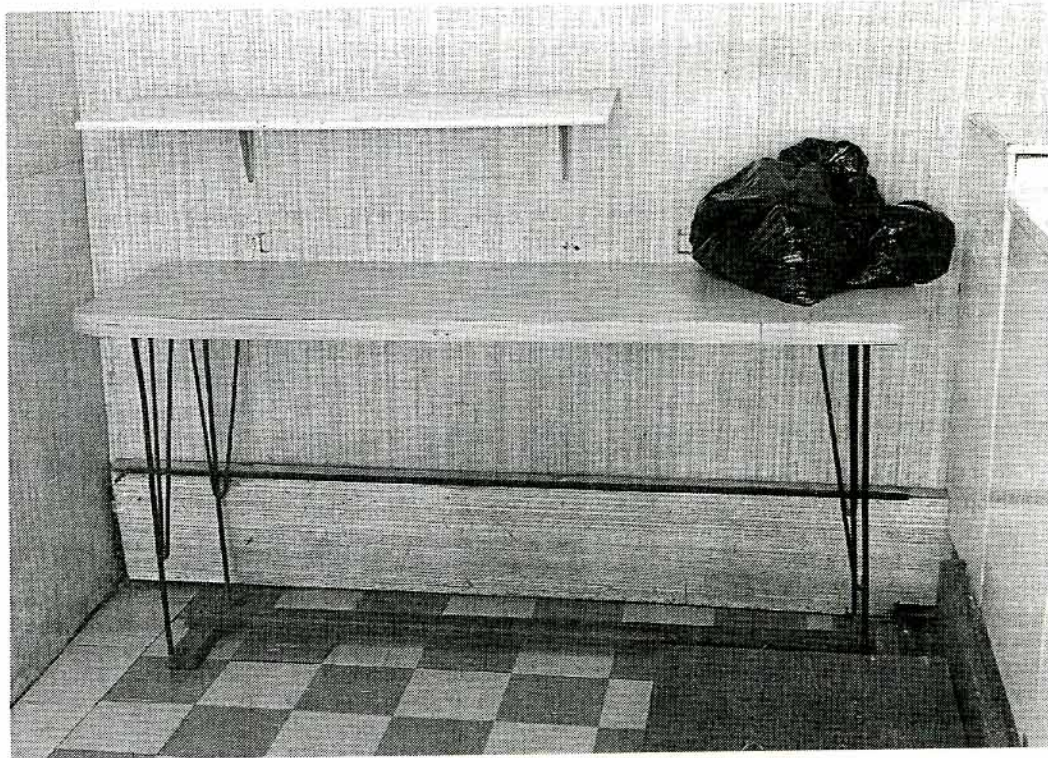
• BY ROBIN LAURENCE

Try defining postmodernism when you've got a hangover and you may actually find your way to a nonverbal understanding of the concept. It's somewhere between existential nausea and premillennial migraine—and it has a lot to do with failure. Not just the failure of modernism, not just the antidemocratic disasters of multinational corporations and postindustrial capitalism, but the inability of Vitamin C and a bottle of generic painkillers to make the yuckiness go away.

Still, this yuckiness can make for some inspired art and a wonderfully cohesive aesthetic. Or perhaps it's an anti-aesthetic—of the banal, of the dysphoric, of the grubby, trite, and trashy—that prevails in bonus. This exhibition of photographs by three emerging artists, Damian Moppett, Howard Ursuliak, and Kelly Wood, poses a mood of Gen X anxiety against the fatalistic strategies of appropriation and homage. Also posed here is the paradox of representing banal subjects in sexy, colour-saturated Ciba-chrome or in large and pearlescent silver gelatin prints. An old advertising ploy, knowingly invoked by both Wood and Moppett.

Curated by Vancouver artist Roy Arden, bonus establishes a context for itself within the long and lowly (very lowly, Arden tells us) tradition of the still life, from 17th-century Dutch painting through early modernism to contemporary popular culture. Arden's catalogue essay is clear and insightful, if a tad biased toward Marxist interpretation. He delivers close and perceptive readings of the images, and gives us enough historical and contemporary background to make sense of his assertions. (Arden argues that the work in bonus is "more modernist than 'post' ". I disagree—but it's an interesting proposition.) The only difficulty in the essay is in Arden's repeated use of two words, *rhopographic* and *megalographic*, which he seems to have borrowed from art historian Norman Bryson but which he has not bothered to define for the rest of us ignorant tits. (I'd define them for you if I could, but neither word appears in any of my dictionaries, not even my dictionary of art terms.)

Howard Ursuliak's camera seeks out the most pathetic, marginal, and forlorn still-life scenes, the interiors of small, impoverished East Side shops and businesses that, in Arden's words, "seem not to do any business, often for generations". (Ursuliak's deserted interiors are found—they exist outside the studio—as opposed to the constructed still lifes and fabricated tableaux of Wood and Moppett.) Whether we're looking at a corner store heaped with dusty cartons of junk food, a stained and sagging display of secondhand vacuum cleaners, or a laundromat furnished with a makeshift table, some splintered plywood platforms, and two crumpled black garbage bags, there's a quality to these interi-



In works such as *Untitled (laundry counter)*, photographer Howard Ursuliak wrings a strange melancholy from the hopelessly provisional interiors of economically marginalized East Side businesses.

recognized the inevitability of its own failure, its own inconsequence.

The cheap decrepitude depicted in Ursuliak's photographs—torn carpets, empty magazine stands, missing baseboards, faded plastic wall coverings, tangled wires, secondhand goods, and not a customer in sight—is wonderfully framed and lit, and yet is at the furthest remove from the picturesque. It's also at the wrong end of enterprise from the American dream, and here is where Ursuliak conveys a message broader than the banal. Here is where he communicates what Arden describes as a "melancholic apprehension of the economy". Ursuliak's found interiors and still lifes are not so much about the outright rejection of commodity capitalism as they are evidence of a slowly seeping disregard, an apathetic disinclination to fully engage with the economic program. Still, what Arden reads as protest in Ursuliak's work is probably closer to lament for an endangered species of endeavour.

Kelly Wood's relationship to the culture of consumption is at once more sexual and more cynical. Her luscious and punning images of sugar cubes, jawbreakers, cupcakes, doughnut holes, and candy floss are mounted within deep, coloured mats with matching coloured frames. (It's like being in some suffocating, Technicolor, poster-shop nightmare of bad taste from which you wake up gasping. Except that you don't wake up.) Raspberry red, pumpkin orange, pastel pink: the material surround for Wood's pictures is as glossy and delectable—and as empty of real value—as her glazed, iced, and sugary subjects. On the other side of delectable is the tooth-cracking hardness beneath the sheen—of glass, frame, and hard candy. Then there's the inevitable decay.

modernism, capitalism, and the production and consumption of art. Especially effective—possibly because its allusions to Mark Rothko are so obvious and so cheeky—is *Candy Floss*, in which a slightly compressed cloud of pink cotton candy sits on top of a slightly compressed cloud of blue cotton candy, and both hover against a featureless black ground, a void. Arden explains that the spiritual impulse behind Rothko's paintings is sarcastically disposed of in Wood's spun-sugar photos. If that's true (perhaps it's a genuine homage), it's a clever act of dispatch. Yet some little chord of sadness was struck in me. I like Wood's work, her smart-ass feminism and her youthful challenge to the patriarchal canon. But Rothko's paintings really move me, always have. Well, maybe the viewer's inconsistency is the point.

A couple of Damian Moppett's photos also make allusions to modernist painting, to Philip Guston's late, figurative work. (Arden describes the ironic flips between genres, between the upper reaches of history painting and the lower reaches of still life, between the tragic and the comic, the heroic and the banal, that these photo homages—and the original paintings—enact. He also explains that Moppett trained as a painter before taking up photography.) The most perversely appealing of Moppett's works, however, are his three untitled still-life arrangements of irredeemably banal objects and substances, including blobs of insulating foam or putty, crumpled-up scraps of Post-it Notes, broken pieces of foam-core, tacks, paper clips, rubber bands, miniature pencils, pencil shavings, cigarette butts, tobacco crumbs, and the odd suicidal razor blade—all shot in glorious, advertising colour on a blood-red ground. It's that postmodern hang-