

Power Plant shows mark a stimulating departure



KATE TAYLOR >
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Ron Terada, TL;DR, 2017-2022, at The Power Plant, in Toronto.

HENRY CHAN JR./THE POWER PLANT

I was standing at the Power Plant contemporary art gallery recently, admiring a video installation by artist Jen Aitken, when another visitor entered the gallery behind me.

The installation was large and made its presence felt in the small, low space. It was comprised of three screens that reached the ceiling and more or less surrounded the viewer, defining the room. On each screen, black-and-white animations of continually evolving geometric shapes made a clunky whoosh, like an engine releasing steam, every time they changed forms.

The other visitor, who had presumably come to a contemporary art gallery to see art, walked through the back of the room as though it were merely a corridor – apparently oblivious to this rather insistent artwork – and exited without ever looking up from his phone.

It was his loss. Aitken is an abstract sculptor, but this is her first work with video – and it's highly successful. With charm and humour, it asks the viewer to observe the changing shapes, witty combinations based on slicing up circles and rectangles.

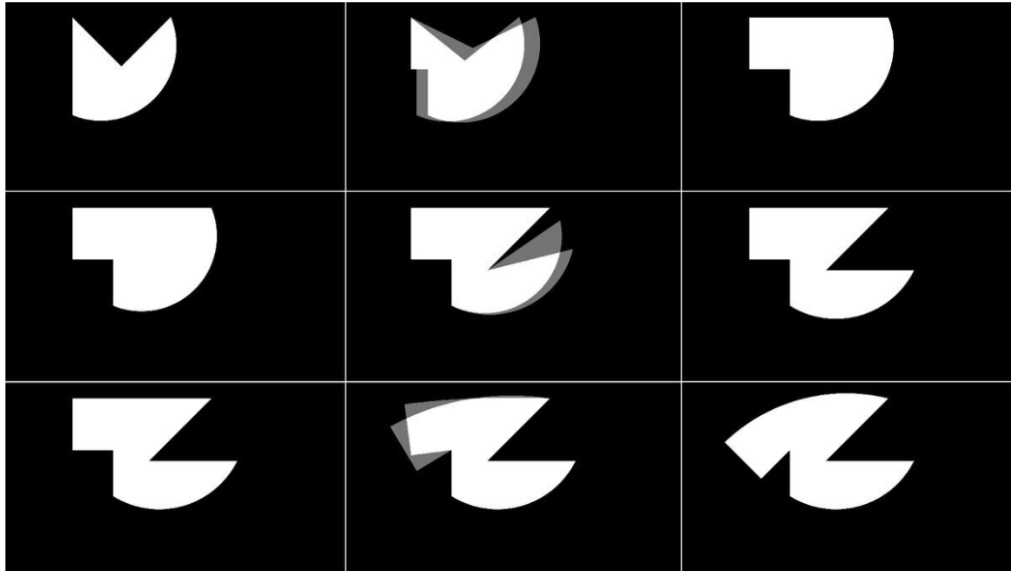


Image from Jen Aitken's video work *Lexicon!* at The Power Plant.

THE POWER PLANT

And yet, that visitor's inattention was also fitting: The other artist featured this summer at the Power Plant is Vancouver's Ron Terada, who has covered a much larger gallery with a text piece exposing our fractured attention spans titled *TL;DR, 2017-2022* – the initialism stands for “Too long; didn't read.”

Terada has taken catchy headlines from the Verge, a tech news website, set them in the Georgia font, the authoritative typeface of The New York Times, and enlarged them to billboard proportions.

So, “It's Time to Stop Debating Whether a Hot Dog is a Sandwich” or “Odds Are We're Living in a Simulation, Says Elon Musk” are lent the solemnity of foreign policy pronouncements or interest-rate hikes in a way that will unbalance the viewer at an almost subliminal level. In the vast gallery, you are surrounded by text, both discomfited and distracted by it, and probably too overwhelmed to read all of it.

These two contrasting shows, Terada's text piece and Aitken's videos plus an impressive room of her sculptures, mark a stimulating departure at the Power Plant. One is conceptual – the scale of *TL;DR* is magnificent and the execution finely tuned but it's the idea that counts – and the other is formal: Aitken's work is more concerned with the visual, physical and technical properties of art than its thematic content.



Jen Aitken, *The Same Thing Looks Different*.

HENRY CHAN JR./THE POWER PLANT

For some years now, the Power Plant has concentrated on socially aware artists whose work often relies on documentary and historical research or an exploration of identity.

The bold, semi-abstract paintings by Montreal artist Manuel Mathieu refer to painful episodes in Haitian history, for example, while Swiss artist Sasha Huber aims to rename places that honour Louis Agassiz, the 19th-century geologist who supported scientific racism. Meanwhile, last summer's fertile *Arctic/Amazon* show compared the work of circumpolar Inuit artists with that of Indigenous artists from South America.

This program, lead by former director Gaëtane Verna, was strong, but to step inside the large southeast gallery at the Power Plant to spend time with a few sparse geometric sculptures by Aitken is to sense an invitation to abstract contemplation rather than literal thought.

Her concrete pieces, about the size of small garbage cans, sit on the floor asking you to consider their voids and their forms: how they meet space and how they use it. (She calls her video piece *Lexicon!*, the title suggesting that this play with geometry is the source of the vocabulary for her three-dimensional work.)

Bigger shapes commissioned for this show are odd geometric accumulations of cones, ramps, towers and wings, all made of a fiberglass fabric that has been stretched like an animal hide. Fascinating objects, they look like sketches brought to larger life. Her armature-like wooden frames have a similar sense of impermanence. They hang high on the gallery walls, evoking and denying utility with their empty spaces and attenuated shapes.

Not to say this work lacks social engagement for all its formal or conceptual concerns. Aitken's sculptures echo our urban environment and *TL;DR* is all about the present moment. It's clever but like many conceptual pieces, runs the risk of becoming a one-liner once the viewer grasps the point. Or in this case, a 100-liner.

Great busy-ness, great quiet – all orchestrated by Power Plant head curator Adelina Vlas. It will be interesting to see what direction this important contemporary gallery might head when it eventually finds Verna's replacement.

Jen Aitken's The Same Thing Looks Different and Ron Terada's We Did this to Ourselves are showing at the Power Plant gallery at Harbourfront to Sept. 4.