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Worldly Goods

By Kay Larson

Toronto. Some argument exists in Toronto about the Canadian character of Canadian art. Peggy Gale, director of Toronto's alternative or "parallel" gallery, A Space, points out in the catalogue for "Seven Toronto Artists," organized by Ragland Watkins for Artists Space, that Canada has a far higher proportional level of government support for artists, and a lower ratio of private collectors. Marketplace-consumerist pressures are therefore not as intense as Manhattan's though I would add that they're replaced by an academy that finds itself scrambling for government purchase and art-school recognition. Not better, just different. Lack of market competition means that work (and there's correspondingly a lot of performance, video, and non-object forms) doesn't need much high gloss. The "youngness" of Toronto's scene shows up in the Artists Space selection, which includes small, witty ideas done with deliberate, postconceptual lack of finish. On the second visit (reversing my first reaction) I decided I most liked Jerry McGrath's utterly funky sculpture-satires—sticks mounted upright on flat blocks and coated with newsprint and paint. They are often topped with punning narrative devices, like the paper double scroll that converts the stick into a Greek column. I also liked Paul Campbell's photographs of tiny toy figures in aerial view—spun-sugar ice cream cones and toy soldiers, for instance—set on a field of black and pink. "Is the Tower of Babel the well of loneliness turned upside down—the pure structure of desire?" asks John Scott's mural-drawing of the edifice in question. And Shirley Wiitasalo, in "june-moon-spoon" style, makes aerial spatter paintings of mundane architecture and landscapes. Somewhat more cryptic are, David Buchan's ad satires, Susan Britton's studies for video performances, and Robin Collyer's deliberately unreadable books. (Artists Space, 105 Hudson Street, through May 10). ■