

Things that go bump in the night

Darkness Ascends
a show of terror,
dread at MOCCA

Evil revealed in
subjects including
kids and critters

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The warning sign, hastily scrawled and taped to the door, seemed too perfect to be mere coincidence: "Die Fledermaus!" it read. "Warning! Live bat on site!"

No, it wasn't a joke — there actually was a bat, flitting about the white-walled galleries at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art this week. And no, it wasn't deliberate — the airborne rodent had been tripping museum security systems all night, as museum director David Liss could attest. "I was getting calls at 3 a.m. — alarms were going off everywhere," he said.

Still, Liss could manage a smile at the notion of his unintended, live-action installation. It added a touch of accidental synergy: MOCCA's summer show, which opened last night, is called "Darkness Ascends." Bats might best fit the notion of B-grade horror movie darkness, but "Darkness Ascends" happily swings to the far end of that scale, and yaws hard just as far back in the other direction.

You could start, maybe, with Toronto artist Seth Scrivner's black strobe-lit funhouse, paneled with sheaves of bright neon bearing Scrivner's quirkily macabre cartoon renderings — floating, half-melted Muppet-like heads, air-brushed in white. Scrivner has fitted a doorway off the gallery's main space with the gaping maw of one of his cutesy nightmare critters, not unlike an entry to a campy house of horrors at the CNE.

The effect is, first, one of comedy and, later, of refuge, a sparkly sanctuary from some of the nastiness to come. I'm thinking specifically of the work of Brooklyn-based photographer Peter Beste, whose career has been spent portraying various subcultures. At MOCCA, his work with the Norwegian black metal scene is on display. The images, for the most part chilly, gruesome portraiture, are of various band members. All are clad in black, most in death's head face make-up (think KISS crossed with the Braveheart-es-



Abduction (2004), by Carlos and Jason Sanchez, in the "Darkness Ascends" exhibit at MOCCA, contributes to the show's overwhelming tone of dread.

que medieval war paint). One is smeared in his own excrement.

Darkness here is not put on for effect. It's a way of life. Liss points out that several members of the scene, for whom church burnings, murder and ritual sacrifice of both humans and animals are regular rites, are in jail. On hearing that, after seeing Beste's work, you're left with a single word of reaction snagged in your brain: Good.

Granted, it's not the kind of work people in this city might have come to expect from our considerably more proper, occasionally ponderous art institutions. But MOCCA, really, is kind of the anti-institution institution. Just over a year in its current location — it spent the first six years of its life in North York — it's a notoriously underfunded enterprise for a museum whose goal is to represent contemporary art nationwide.

Still, encouraging signs abound. With little or no advertising, MOCCA is drawing about 2,000 visitors a week, which on its own justifies both its existence and the scant public funding it receives. That outsider sheen can be helpful, too — it

gives Liss licence to step outside the bounds of what's deemed acceptable at a couple of other big institutions just a few blocks east of his Queen St. W. and Shaw St. location.

That's not to say that all the work in "Darkness Ascends" — a cheery notion for a summer group show, isn't it? — is entirely in the realm of the outsider. Just through the door, you're greeted with *The Dark Commander*, a 20-foot-tall, tar-black silhouette of a vaguely Napoleonic figure by Gov. Gen. Award-winner John Scott. Scott first made the piece for a show at the Nicholas Metivier Gallery, on King St. W., earlier this year. This version was meant to be a recreation, but grew into its own distinct, sinister form.

With its crimson accents — the eyes, for one — the obscure figure is an ominous sentry for what lies within: Such as the drawings of local artist Shary Boyle, whose recent successes include a knockout solo show recently at the Power Plant, at Harbourfront. Here, her artwork plays on the dark fears of childhood; a favourite of mine is a pair of ankles descending to

the floor at bedside, firmly in the grasp of two meaty fists from under the bed. Good for a nostalgic chuckle, sure — who didn't harbour that dread in grade school, late at night? — but disturbing enough to recall how genuine that fear was.

Boyle's work here is of a few different kinds and includes her colour portraiture, where faces distort just past realism through to cartoon, and stop short of grotesque; some simple line drawings, such as an apparently playful scene of a father set upon by three small girls, one of whom, on closer inspection, is actually holding a knife to his throat; and



Peter Beste explores the Norwegian black metal scene in his chilling work, including *Kvitraftn of Jotunspor* (2002), above.

my personal favourites, in which more oblique figures — like the fists and ankles — glow white on a black background that seems poised to swallow them in their darkness. They are tiny nightmares born in young minds, as beguiling as they are bleak.

Ixone Sadaba, a young Spanish artist from Bilbao, is an interesting parallel for Boyle. Sadaba's mind is just as darkly fertile, according to her handful of photographs in the show. In one picture, *Citeron III*, a vulture backs its way out of the frame, dragging the prone form of a young woman across a city sidewalk alongside an idyllic urban park. In another, two young women either dress or undress in a mausoleum. The first is jarring, the second perplexing, but there's a laugh to be had, however bleak. I suspect Sadaba, at 29, is still whipping her ethos into shape. But the provocative pictures here are captivating explorations in already very mature compositional form.

The curse of the group show is that you can't have enough on display to say all that you want, and with this group — there are 25 artists in total; see mocca.toronto.on.ca for the complete list

— that's more true than for most.

One final standout: Robert Boyd, whose contribution to "Darkness Ascends" will be at least one video from his *Xanadu* series, called "Patriot Act." Boyd, a New Yorker, opens with a rapid-fire montage of Hitler at his peak, parading through the streets to a chorus of "Sieg Heils!", then cuts to pro-Stalin rallies, Mussolini, Mao, Castro and Pol Pot, splices in murderous images from the Holocaust and Vietnam. Then, jarringly, the video cuts to Ronald Reagan, Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic and, inevitably perhaps, to George W. Bush.

There is no explicit condemnation here. Rather, Boyd's indictment is of us, made, incredibly and without pretence, with the poppy techno-disco tune that accompanies it: "I'll go where you lead me, wherever you want, forever and ever," the vocal croons. Leaders can do little without followers, Boyd seems to be saying. And, as a species, too many of us have been just that, for too long.

A darker notion could hardly be suggested.

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Flash Art

Darkness Ascends

MUSEUM FOR CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN ART, TORONTO



"Darkness Ascends" was the atypical summer exhibition; primarily because of its proposal that the dark side of the human psyche is intrinsic to consciousness. The symbiosis of darkness and light as analogous to other dichotomous couplings including evil/good, carnality/spirituality and body/mind; in short, the Hegelian self/other dialectic gave the exhibition a discursive sophistication that in lesser curatorial hands

could have succumbed to Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil.' Organized by MOCCA Director David Liss, "Darkness Ascends" consisted of over 100 works across all media by 25 artists.

When evil was addressed it was not the Christian bogeyman, but a deft exploration of its myriad manifestation in today's social, political, and cultural arenas. In Peter Beste's "Norwegian Black Metal" photographs (2002-2004), for example, the ubiquitous inverted cross refers not to Satan but to divesting Norway of Christianity in order to revert to a pristine Nordic Shangri-la. In counterpoint was the relentless barrage of apocalyptic imagery in Robert Boyd's excellent video in which authoritarianism — regardless of creed — was exposed as megalomaniacal cults of personality rife with Oedipal conflict. Sandwiched between these two extreme thematic registers were a plethora of works that poetically broadened the purview of darkness through metaphor including Anthony Goicolea's *Nail Biter* video

from 2002. Mesmerizing by virtue of being shot with a special filter which created a sublime darkened florescent environment, Goicolea portrayed himself erratically devouring his nails to the cacophony of his chattering teeth. Concomitantly disturbing and compelling, compulsion as sexual frustration degraded into auto-cannibalism; possibly a nod to Freud's problematic 'vagina dentata'?

Equally touching a raw nerve but in a more demure fashion was Carlos and Jason Sanchez's photograph titled *Abduction* (2004). What drove this mise en scène of potential pedophilia to a whole other level were the normative suburban setting and ensuing familial disquietude evinced in the intimacy and alienation simultaneously shared by male adult and young girl. Also riffing tangentially on childhood signifiers was Richard Stipl's series of small, hyperrealist doll-like sculptures titled *Block Sabbath* (2006). Part Ken & Barbie by way of Madame Tussauds and the Chapman brothers, the tableau of fig-

urines engaged in sadomasochistic rites vacillated between dark humor and horror, and sex and death. Whether the works were aggressive or subliminal, straightforward or conceptual, the success of "Darkness Ascends" must also be credited to its design strategy: walls were painted black, white or red; an audio piece by sunn o))) was faintly heard throughout the museum and became an aesthetic Muzak; and the general cathartic nature of the work exhibited was well exploited to curatorial advantage. —Raul Zamudio

Peter Beste, *Nattefrost of Carpathian Forest Covered in His Own Shit*, Oslo, Norway, 2004. Digital C-print, 41 x 51 cm. Photo: Walter Willems. Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto. Left: Anthony Goicolea, *Nail Biter*, 2002. Video still. Collection Sean D'andrade & Gwendolyn Healey, Toronto. Courtesy Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver/Toronto.



Into Me / Out of Me (Part 2)

By [Régine Debatty](#)
January 22, 2007

As hinted in [Into Me / Out of Me \(Part 1\)](#), the [KW exhibition](#) has absolutely no qualm at showing the crudest aspects of mankind.

The display of artistic vomit, shit, piss and other body fluids had a few good surprises in store though. [Mike Parr](#)'s "The Emetics [Primary Vomit] I am Sick of Art [Red, Yellow and Blue] photographs documents the 1977 performance for which the artist was throwing up primary color dyes one after the other in a pristine white gallery.



Semen was present through the video of [Vito Acconci](#)'s 1972 performance, "Seedbed," in which the artist masturbated under the raised floorboards of a gallery. He would stay there three days every week, for a period of 8 hours, masturbating and speaking through a microphone to visitors as if they were lovers. The

video is in fact pretty unspectacular, but i guess the work is a milestone in performance art. [Acconci](#) now dedicates his time and talent to architecture.

Urine is represented by one of Andy Warhol's elegant [Oxidation](#) paintings (1978) and faeces are present through several pieces, most notably by Mike Kelley's 1990 [Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood](#) and by [Piero Manzoni](#)'s iconic [Merda Artista \(Artist's Shit.\)](#) In 1961, the artist collected his own feces in 90 numbered cans, which contain 30 grams of feces each. He labelled them as '100% pure artist's shit' in Italian, English, French, and German. Their price depend on the current market value of gold. Some of the cans have exploded or leaked. If you've got interest in the subject, you might want to have a look at [History of Shit](#) by Dominique Laporte.



Oh! Did I mention that most of these art works were displayed in the rooms devoted to eating? The selection did indeed showcase everything but the pleasures of gastronomy. [Mona Hatoum](#)'s [Deep Throat](#), for example, is a table set with a plate whose bottom is cut out to expose a video screen playing a medical video in which a miniature camera lens travels down the artist's digestive system. Yummy!



Elsewhere in the exhibition you had to face pregnancy, tears, screams, sickness and breathless kisses. Among all this display of shock and awe, there was one work i found particularly painful to watch: Hannah Wilke's Intra Venus, a series of photographs that chronicle the effects of chemotherapy therapy on her body. She died of cancer in 1993.



"Carnal artist" Orlan couldn't be absent from the panorama. Although i've never managed to watch any of her video from the intro till the end she's probably one of the artists i admire most. In her video Operation Reussie (Successful Operation, 1994) she undergoes surgeries as a sign of protest of cosmetic surgery itself and the diktat of beauty. The performance was broadcast live and Orlan,

dressed as if she were going to a party, stayed awake to explain her project and answer questions from the public. In this work, Orlan questions the status of the body in our society and for future generations via genetic manipulations. She sees the body as a site of public debate that poses critical questions for our time.



Two other works that are definitely worth a mention are Alfredo Jaar's poster filled up with the word "Rwanda" and a mesmerizing video Patriot Act (Xanadu: A Place Where Dreams Come True) by Robert Boyd, a collage of archive video showing iconic leaders since World War II. Parades, victory celebrations, adoring crowds rapidly give way to images of war and massacres leading to the video's cataclysmic end. *Ultimately, Patriot Act is about the men who lead*

and the people who adore them without question, without fail, time and again through out the course of history...

A third post about the exhibition is in the pipeline. It will focus on the "sex" rooms, I'm still wondering how much i liked the exhibition. Fellow visitors certainly didn't seem to have a merry time, their faces looked extremely tense and i never caught any smile. There's one thing i know though: none of the works on show was as disturbing as going back from the gallery, opening my laptop and reading how many people had downloaded the video of Saddam being hanged. Now that's something i'll never be able to watch.

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Full review: <http://we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2007/01/theres-vomit-fo.php>