



All that remains: Panya Clark Espinal's *Vagabond Vitrine*

By some strange serendipity, the installation of Panya Clark Espinal's *Vagabond Vitrine* has coincided with a rare period of upheaval in Toronto. The G20 Summit, which has brought together the world's political leaders under the city's roof this year, wraps up on the same day as this exhibition's opening. So, while Clark Espinal pieces together her installation on College Street's busy sidewalk, thousands of security personnel prepare the streets for violent protests, leaving the public to renegotiate their place within what amounts to a temporary police state. Today is Friday, two days before the opening reception—the piece is still unfinished, airplanes carrying Presidents and Prime Ministers are touching down at Pearson—but given the themes of transition and uncertainty inherent in *Vagabond Vitrine*, I can think of no better climate for writing about the piece.

This is not the Toronto that we know and recognize, this is something new, and our levels of relative comfort take a dip as we anticipate the unknown. It didn't help that the earth literally shook at our feet on Wednesday when the city felt its first earthquake, however minor in this region, in more than a decade. Both events serve as reminders that the stability of our corner of the world is a fortunate, but not certain, state of existence. Anything could shift at any moment. This week provides a small taste of what other cities experience daily.

Thus far, I've only seen *Vagabond Vitrine* in the process of becoming: sections of an oak and glass vitrine (rescued from the old Koffler Gallery prior to its demolition to make way for the new Koffler Centre of the Arts), a cardboard scale model, loose piles of birch branches and faux green leaves, and two cowbirds with a small nest carefully packed inside a box. What one might construe as a privileged view of a work-in-progress is nothing of the sort—Clark Espinal has worked on the street all week, in full public view, as *Vagabond Vitrine* comes together. Men (because, as the artist tells me, it has invariably been males) tend to stare, curious and confused, at the vitrine lying partway outside the store window, and comment, "I don't think it's going to fit." Here, the border between the public and the art will never entrench itself as Clark Espinal's structure spills out onto the sidewalk, shifting and interrupting the residents' familiar streetscape.

For the hottest month of the summer, this sculpture will reside on College Street, partially nestled into its new environs, half-exposed and half-protected by a store window, its multiple panes of glass and wood by turn revealing and obscuring their contents. As with any public art accessible 24/7, *Vagabond Vitrine* is at the mercy of graffiti artists and looting bar-hoppers (and, this week at least, violent protestors). But, save for the possibility of complete destruction, Clark Espinal takes the risk in stride, not only accepting the possibility that damage may come its way, but even welcoming a roosting pigeon or graffiti tag, as her sculpture integrates this new, if temporary, urban habitat. The vitrine's contents—nature mural, branches, birds and nest—suggest a collision between the natural and urban world, or more specifically, a collision between the museum and the street. Even situated within this eclectic corner of the city (this particular city block houses everything from a tattoo parlour to a Lutheran church) the pseudo-natural-history-museum display is out of place, as though a strange time warp has opened up. Then again, museum displays *are* time warps, distilled tableaux of imagined environments, slivers of utopian natural wonder.

Displays of this sort tend to showcase rare and elaborate species, so the presence of common cowbirds might seem an odd choice. But just as the vitrine has shimmied its way into another display window, cowbirds have the unusual habit of laying their eggs in the nests of other bird species. Nomadic by nature, they are vagabonds in their own right, with a rearing technique achieved through adaptation to aid their survival. *Vagabond Vitrine* freezes the moment after the cowbirds have struck again, laying one of their eggs in the nest of another. In the urban world, such adaptive trickery is an essential component of nature's survival. These themes of survival and invasion hold a peculiar resonance at this moment, when what might otherwise be a peaceful summer in the city is fraught with turbulence.

What remains at the end of this strange week? When the piece opens on Sunday, it will coincide with the end of the Summit, and likely the end of Toronto's temporary drama. *Vagabond Vitrine* is one remainder, clutching to the side of a storefront window, and right now it's difficult not to associate the fractured, inside/outside, push and pull of its structure with the week's unorthodox events. Will those who stumble across this curious sculpture over the coming month be reminded of the day the earth rumbled and they weren't sure if it was an earthquake

or a military helicopter? And afterwards, when *Vagabond Vitrine* dislodges, will it search for a new home? Given the uncertainty of the current moment, that seems like a long ways away.

It's the day after the opening, a quiet Monday morning, and from a perch across the street I watch people passing *Vagabond Vitrine*. Many pause at the presence of a small nest tucked into the sculpture's outer corner, but the vitrine is surprisingly innocuous, already at home in the mashup of storefronts. For those who pause longer and peer through the fractured panes of glass, the sculpture's other contents are soon revealed. In the aftermath of the protests that took over the streets just a few blocks away—leaving windows shattered and police cars burning—*Vagabond Vitrine* seems a little like something abandoned in the midst of the chaos, despite the fact that this neighbourhood seems relatively untouched. Something is clearly disjointed, but for the moment, anything out of the ordinary is still standard fare.

Shannon Anderson

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Panya Clark Espinal was awarded the Governor General's Medal upon graduating from the Ontario College of Art in 1988. Her practice as a multi-media installation artist has scrutinized and engaged the mechanisms that drive the making of meaning in our culture. She has shown across Canada and in several international cities including Tokyo and London. Key solo exhibitions include Oakville Galleries (2001); the Canadian Embassy, Tokyo (1999); the National Gallery of Canada (1995); Art Gallery of Ontario (1994); and the Southern Alberta Art Gallery (1994). More recently Clark Espinal co-led a collaborative project for the Harbourfront Centre entitled *The Terrarium Project*. In addition, she has completed a number of public art commissions including Toronto's Bayview Subway Station and is currently working on projects for the City of Mississauga, the Toronto Transit Commission and North Toronto Collegiate Institute. Clark Espinal is represented by Christopher Cutts Gallery in Toronto.

Shannon Anderson is an independent writer, curator and freelance editor based in Oakville, Ontario. Her writing has appeared in publications produced by the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, Oakville Galleries, Musee d'art de Joliette, the Thames Art Gallery, YYZ Artists' Outlet, and various art magazines, including *Azure*, *Art Papers*, and *Canadian Art*.

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Image credits

Panya Clark Espinal, *Vagabond Vitrine* (installation details), 2010, mixed media, variable dimensions.

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