

WHERE THE ART IS

There's a new constellation of Canadian stars.
By BETTY ANN JORDAN

Popularized by blockbuster shows, artist- and gallery-sponsored websites and YouTube videos, artists such as Damien Hirst, Banksy and Canada's own Ed Burtynsky are becoming household names. Art and artists are now well within reach of even the mildly curious, and contemporary art has never been more accessible. But who are the leaders of this movement? Among the scores of outstanding visual artists illuminating the Canadian art scene, nine stand out. Active and engaging individuals, with the winning blend of productivity and ambition, these players also epitomize key trends, from conceptualism to performance. And in the months ahead, audiences will have ample chances to see their artworks up close and personal in Canadian galleries and on the international art circuit.



KELLY MARK

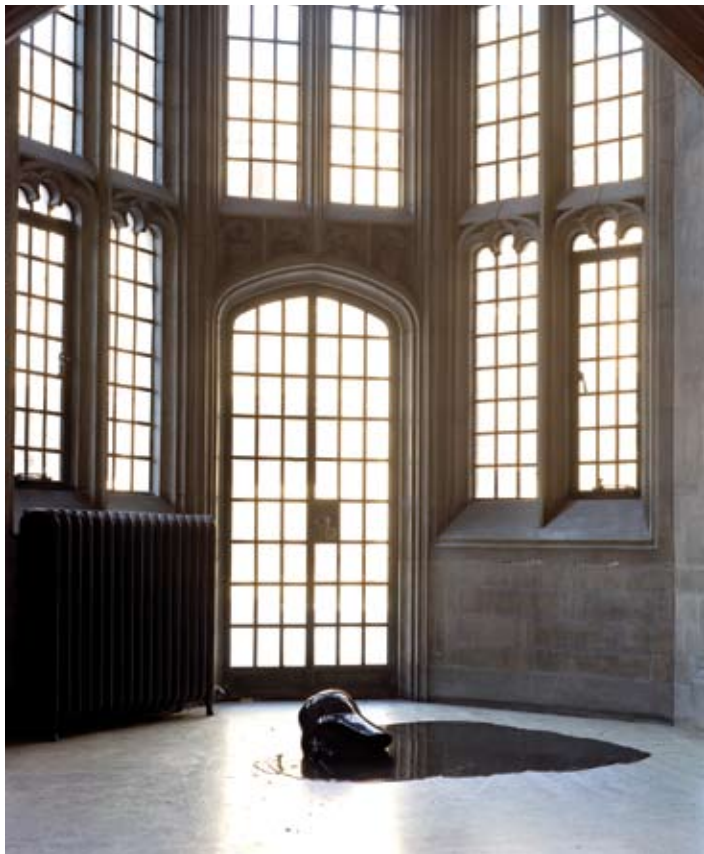
Toronto artist Kelly Mark's work—which has included illuminating the interior of a house with the eerie glow of 40 colour tvs, all set to the same channel—is always an inspired rethink of everyday occurrences. When pressed, she concedes that she is a “neo-conceptualist with a sense of humour,” which is like saying Woody Allen is a filmmaker with a few intellectual tics. On her application for a Berlin artist residency, she explained: “I respond to things.” She shows widely abroad (this year alone—Belgium, Miami, Madrid, Riverside in California and Dundee, Scotland), and notes everyday epiphanies in the flux of those repetitive acts that keep the world moving. She has turned the banal acts of punching a time clock or channel surfing between horror movies into high art. Especially cathartic was her *Horridor* (2008), a video mash-up of hundreds of screams lifted from movies; projected on large screens, the yowls blasted thrill-seekers at Toronto's Scotiabank Nuit Blanche all-night art event in 2008, speeding their passage through a specially constructed corridor at Union Station. Another Mark masterpiece (also transmuted into wall texts, T-shirts and shopping bags), *I Really Should*, is a one-hour-long audio work available on CD, in which the artist intones a nattering litany of unrealized good intentions: “I really should pay them back. I really should put something on that before it gets infected....” Time—how to spend it, make it count—is usually at the heart of Mark's works, while her process-based pieces are created according to a self-appointed set of rules (“I will draw until I use up the entire pencil”). *Stupid Heaven*, a solo survey show of Mark's works in all media, continues a major tour in 2010 to Canadian museums, and she recently wrapped group shows at LOLA (London Ontario Live Arts), Miami's Bass Museum and the California Museum of Photography, Riverside, California. »



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *GLOW HOUSE #4*, 2009; FRAMES FROM *HORRIDOR*, 2008; *NOTHING IS SO IMPORTANT THAT IT NEEDS TO BE MADE IN SIX FOOT NEON*, 2009



PHOTOGRAPHY: *GLOW HOUSE #4* BY GERMAINE KOE; *NOTHING IS SO IMPORTANT THAT IT NEEDS TO BE MADE IN SIX FOOT NEON* BY TONI HAPRENSCHIED; DIAZ CONTEMPORARY



FROM TOP: *GOODNIGHT DARTHY*, 2006, AND *PROMENER SON CHIEN (TO WALK THE DOG)*, 2005, BOTH BY BGL; *I PROMISE IT WILL ALWAYS BE THIS WAY*, 2008, BY JON SASAKI



BGL and JON SASAKI

In an off-kilter challenge to reality TV, both plugged-in Quebec City artist collective BGL and Toronto video and performance artist Jon Sasaki produce a mixed bag of sculptural installation, performance art and video, with themselves as the feckless protagonists in their own tragi-comic productions.

It's late September, 48 hours before the opening of *Postérité* (Posterity), a major exhibition by BGL members Jasmin Bilodeau, Sébastien Giguère and Nicolas Laverdière at Montreal's Parisian Laundry gallery (up until November 21). The three stooges of the Canadian art scene (my description, not theirs) have been camped at the gallery for over a week, building an in-situ "ornamental" evergreen-tree factory and a flea market to vend curious props and objects. Clever and iconoclastic, they make crazy-as-a-fox installations of found, altered and appealing invented objects that are now filtering into the art marketplace. Their work, while wildly varied, is generally concerned with the environment and geo-politics.

Digitally altered photo-documentation of these installations has hitherto been the primary (collectible) part of their enterprise. But now up for grabs are major works such as *Born Again*, a white resin sculpture of Darth Vader melting like the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, created for the 2007 Montreal Biennale, and *Last Smoke Show*, a fallen, smashed motorcycle flocked with black velvet. Self-parodying and priced to sell is a silly but utterly endearing *Postérité* print of the trio on their backs, legs aloft, balancing random objects (an axe, a link of sausages) on their bare feet, deft as trained seals. Using a visual strategy that has worked for Absolut campaigns, the kicker is that these absurd objects are casting shadows of the initials "B," "G" and "L" across the craters of the full moon, high above. When quizzed about the future, Bilodeau predicts a chromatic sea change: "We're tired of working in black and white. The world needs more colours."

A similar impulse to quixotic effort permeates Toronto artist Jon Sasaki's pained but funny performances. Deadpan metaphors for the process of art-making—or living, if you'd rather—his short performances-for-video, films, objects, installations and interventions take the viewer nowhere fast. His numerous short videos include *Ladder Climb*, which documents his futile efforts to climb an unsupported ladder. But Sasaki's future may well lie in directing public spectacles, such as his runaway hit at the 2008 Scotiabank Nuit Blanche in Toronto. In Lamport Stadium, he induced a dozen artists to don animal mascot costumes and cheer on spectators. As exhaustion threatened to overcome the mascots, the crowd unexpectedly turned the tables, cheering on the "animals" in a surprisingly moving exercise in mutual support. The artist's newest video projection, *Crossroads*, is a departure in that it is 51 minutes long and more anxiety-inducing than droll. Shot in Clarksdale, Mississippi, it takes place at the four corners where bluesman Robert Johnson purportedly sold his soul to the devil. Sasaki describes the gambit: "A crossroads is the place to make choices and follow through but instead my camera—and, by association, the viewer—wanders aimlessly through the intersection without making any choices as to direction." This January, *Crossroads* will be screened as part of Sasaki's solo exhibit at Toronto's Doris McCarthy Gallery, and other new works appear at Jessica Bradley Art + Projects. »



TERENCE KOH

A goth-punk Asian art star with Canadian roots and a fondness for ritual, Terence Koh understands the power of yin-yang dualities. Prominent on the international circuit, from the 2009 Venice Biennale to the Whitney Museum of American Art, his work is predominantly in black or white. Born in Beijing, Koh came to Canada as a preteen, and attended Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver prior to decamping for New York. The 29-year-old's notoriety has been cemented by his performances, for which he encrusts his face and body with white makeup and surrounds himself with props that double as collectible artworks. In his 2008 solo performance entitled *Captain Buddha*, he poured white paint over a sculptural cast of himself as Buddha in lotus position. In Paris this November, at Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Koh created a dramatic installation that incorporated two piano sculptures, an upside-down tree and many kilos of white powder. Closer to home, at the Brooklyn Museum, as part of Performa's visual performance art biennial on November 7, our expat art star morphed into a rockstar, melding vocals, rock and synthesized music in a multimedia extravaganza. On view until November 29 at Espace de Création Contemporaine in Charleroi, France, is a classic work from 2004 entitled *These Decades That We Never Sleep, Black Drums*. A jet-black drum set disgorges entrail-like ropes "from a ship found after midnight." The ensemble is described as being ceremonially encased in paint, wax, plaster, vegetable matter, crushed insect parts, the artist's blood and semen. U.K. art enthusiast Charles Saatchi has collected Koh's work for years, and Saatchi's eponymous gallery in London will mount a solo exhibition of Koh's sculptures in 2010. »



TOP LEFT AND RIGHT: ADANSONIAS, 2009. ABOVE: CAPTAIN BUDDHA, 2008. BELOW LEFT: THESE DECADES THAT WE NEVER SLEEP, BLACK LIGHT, 2004. BELOW RIGHT: THE CAMEL WAS GOD, THE CAMEL WAS SHOT, 2007





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GARBAGE HILL, 2009; THE PAINTING SIDE SHOW, 2009; BROKEN WALL, 2008



MÉLANIE ROCAN

Toronto dealer Paul Petro’s decision to give 29-year-old Winnipeg painter Mélanie Rocan four shows in as many years has been vindicated—the shows have consistently sold out. A two-time semifinalist for the RBC Canadian Painting Competition, Rocan is also one of the youngest artists tapped by art-world honchos for inclusion in the prestigious Magenta Foundation’s 2009 *Carte Blanche Vol. 2: Painting* book, which showcases today’s most exciting Canadian painters. She has described her imagery as conveying a “distressed beauty.” Rocan grew up in small-town Manitoba, in La Broquerie, and recalls that there wasn’t much to do, so country fairs were a highlight. The carnivals in her paintings represent youthful innocence, but the more ominous abandoned fairs point to the darker aspects of life. Concerned about environmental devolution, she depicts women surrounded by or garbed in debris. Rocan’s engaging paintings can be seen in a group exhibition running until December 24 at the Galerie Simon Blais in Montreal. In January 2010, she will mount a solo commercial show at the Lower East Side Gallery in Vancouver. Watch for her newest images of women linked together, collectively shouldering the burden of change. “Everybody struggles, everyone has a weight to carry,” says Rocan, “but these women are working together.” »



SHARY BOYLE

A visionary with a supercharged imagination, Shary Boyle's art is a heady blend of fantastical eroticism and cultural lore. Celebrated for her unconventional ceramics, this shape-shifting original moves effortlessly between porcelain works and painting, drawing and performance. "Beyond personal demons or fairy tales, my work is grounded in reality, politics and my belief that visual language holds most important meaning," she says. Invoking "alternative realms or realities," *The Clearances* is a paper cut-out wall-sized frieze that superimposes the colonizers and the colonized, Inuit, First Nations and missionary priests, Elizabethan explorers and Nazi soldiers, extinct animals, peoples, myths and religions. Her art embraces themes such as the loss of magic, family tensions, the male-female dynamic and the environment. Twice-nominated for Canada's Sobeys Art Award, a \$50,000 visual-arts prize, Boyle has also been invited to many art residencies. She recently participated in Baie-Saint-Paul's International Symposium of Contemporary Art, and exhibited at the Fumetto Festival in Lucerne, Switzerland. Independent curator Nic Brown explains: "Because she genuinely embraces their traditions, Shary is looked up to and welcomed by other artists in the craft community and in indie drawing and performing-arts circles, as well as in the contemporary art world." Keen on honing her technical skills, Boyle seeks out skilled artisans for guidance—for example, Toronto plaster-casting wizard Jean-François Furieri, known for his plaster Stations of the Cross, has taught her how to make life-sized plaster figures. Boyle's collaborative approach to art also goes well with projection and live music—the artist has joined Feist, Peaches, Christine Fellows, Swedish musician Jens Lekman and many others on stage doing live overhead drawings. Regarding artists as essential envisioners, Boyle says, "The seeds for a better future are contained in imagination." A collection of her ceramic sculptures and drawings, curiously titled *Le sort probable de l'homme qui avale le fantôme* ("The likely fate of the man who swallowed the ghost"), are part of the Pompidou Centre's Nouveau Festival in Paris until December 12. »



ABOVE: *SILK-WORM, (FOR AY)* 2007, FROM HIGHLAND SERIES. LEFT: *LIVE OLD*, 2009; *HAUNT*, 2005; *LA BÊTE*, 2006. BELOW: *VIRUS (WHITE WEDDING)*, 2009, SHOWN WITH AND WITHOUT PROJECTION



PHOTOGRAPHY: SILKWORM (FOR AY) AND LIVE OLD COURTESY OF JESSICA BRADLEY ART + PROJECTS; HAUNT AND LA BÊTE BY RAFAEL GOLDOCHAN



ABOVE: *TRACING NIGHT*, 2004. BELOW: *NIGHT GATHERING*, 2005

ED PIEN

Toronto artist Ed Pien, who was born in Taipei, Taiwan, and moved to Canada at 11, incorporates Chinese paper-cuts, sailors' nets and ancient ceremonial mazes into his work. His material of choice is strong, translucent, flexible gampi or rice paper. Paper art has long been relegated to craft exhibitions, but it is cutting-edge these days, elevated by artists such as Pien and Kara Walker. Pien recalls: "I remember asking myself—as much as I'd like to work with paper—how do I keep myself from functioning only in the realm of craft?" But those concerns have been banished. Pien constructs very large sculptural environments using paper richly embellished with drawings, or cut-out in elaborate, filigree-like patterns, animated with video and photographic elements. His sensuous imagery underscores the resilience and regenerative power of living creatures and plants. A recent recurring motif in his paper-cut wall works is the tree of life, its sinuous branches colonized by people and animals. A number of his paper-cuts, along with large-scale drawings and videos, can be seen in *Haven*, an early mid-career survey exhibition organized by Quebec's Musée d'art de Joliette, which is touring the U.K. and will reach China and Canada in 2010. From February 4, visitors to the Vancouver Winter Olympics will be able to amble through *Tracing Night*, Pien's undulating nocturnal-blue ceremonial corridors rigged with video projections and sound. His busy fall culminates with *Slash: Paper Under the Knife*, a seminal show of more than 50 international artists who work with paper, at New York's Museum of Arts + Design until April. □

