

Downtown, an uptown gallery finds a home



A still from John Sasaki's work, *After A Mural I Painted in Grade 4*, part of the inaugural exhibition of the Koffler Gallery.

The Koffler Gallery is front and centre at Artscape Youngspace

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VISUAL ART CRITIC

Mona Filip steps between ladders and strings cable strewn across the hardwood floor.

Four more days — enough, she's sure, if only just. "We'll be ready," says Filip, the curator of the Koffler Gallery, and lets go a laugh. "We hope."

It's the Friday before the Tuesday opening of Koffler's brand new home at Artscape Youngspace, and it's not the only one. Everything that was old here, in the long-abandoned Shaw Street School, a brick Victorian hulk of a building on Shaw St. just north of Queen St. W., is new again.

In 2010, Artscape, the not-for-profit property developer, acquired the building from the Toronto District School Board, which had mothballed it in its long list of surplus properties (it closed in 2000, victim to a Harris-era government mandate to shutter schools below a specific students-to-square-foot minimum).

Ever since, Artscape has been engaged in the long, slow process of remaking an outdated, abandoned school into a state-of-the-art cultural hub. Koffler is one of the anchor tenants on the main floor.

On the third you'll find the offices of the Luminato festival. In between are a host of community arts organizations, dance companies and individual artists' studios — from the looks of the bustle here, all moving in at once.

KOFFLER continued on E2

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Exhibit reminiscent of grade-school days

KOFFLER from E1

You can forgive them for chomping at the bit: the building was initially scheduled to be ready last year.

Still, it's a fair guess that none were so eager as Koffler. Ensnared for years in the hinterlands of the city's cultural scene in the Jewish Community Centre at Bathurst north of Sheppard, the gallery's provocative exhibitions could fall too far off the radar to gain notice.

Here, dead-centre in the most visible cultural district in the city, Koffler starts with a clean slate. The new gallery is the school's old library, and Filip took the idea to heart. "There are so many layers — the building, the neighbourhood," she says. "I wanted to zero in and talk about this first."

The show's title, *We're in the Library*, is straightforward enough, but echoes that grade-school note-passing or youthful shouts down echoing hallways.

Inside, Filip's show runs the same gamut, from the exuberant to the hushed.

For the latter, take Barbara Astman's quietly imposing, flat-out gorgeous piece *The Fossil Book*.

Taking up an entire wall, Astman, who usually works in photography, has carefully dismembered a biology text. She bought it while a university student, because it reminded her of one from her grade-school days.

Astman enlarged images from the book, then printed them in an array of colours on the old pages, simultaneously remaking its purpose while re-rendering her own memories through grown-up eyes. Which, when you think of it, is a nice parallel to the old bones made new of the Shaw School in which Astman, and Koffler, now find themselves (Astman's in the show, but she's also in the building; she bought one of the studios here).

Sarah Angelucci follows a parallel line with her thoughtful, elegiac work *The Readers*. Cast in plaster and set into the wall are the spines of a small selection of childhood classics: *Charlotte's Web*, *James and the Giant Peach*, among others.

Across the room, on an antique library cart are headphones, where



Barbara Astman's *The Fossil Book* will be featured as part of the inaugural exhibition at The Koffler Gallery's new home at Artscape Youngspace.

passages of each book can be heard, read by a cast of young readers.

Woven together, they create a strange air of innocence and longing; as you look through Angelucci's exquisitely-made books, each to house a single antique tintype portrait of a schoolchild, and a sense of distance and loss grows more powerful. Take in that tintypes, a cheap and easy

type of 19th century photograph, eventually fade to black, and the overarching message, of how precious moments slip away from us even in memory, comes home to roost.

Reanimating an old space inevitably means engaging with the past, and in the some-things-never-change department, we have Jon Sa-

saki's engaging exercise-in-futility *After A Mural I Painted in Grade 4*. Looking to recast the ubiquitous images of multi-culti grade school unity he grew up with in a real-world form, Sasaki gathered a group of kids to make a video of hand-holding harmony.

The inevitable happens: Set up in their ring of equanimity, kids get

bored, fidget, drop hands, yank, pull and run amok. It's a glorious devolution, from prescriptive structure to pure joy, and its deliberate futility is what satisfies: Rules are important, especially when you break them.

The Koffler Gallery's *We're in the Library*, at 180 Shaw St. in the Artscape Youngspace building, opens Nov. 19 and continues to Jan. 19, 2014.