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BY: Portia Priegert

Toronto-based artist Barbara Astman explores the commodification of iconic revolutionary Che Guevara in a new exhibition in one of Canada's most politically conservative cities. At the Kelowna Art Gallery, Astman creates a faux gift shop stocked with key chains, coffee mugs and other souvenirs featuring an image of Che, the enduring poster-boy of the radically chic. However, nothing is actually for sale. Nor are the black-and-white images emblazoned on Astman's tourist paraphernalia copies of the famous Korda portrait of the charismatic counterculture hero in a beret. Instead, they show Astman dancing to Latin music while wearing a white Che T-shirt.

"I was thinking about consumer desire, and how I don't allow you to fulfill that in this installation," says Astman, who has drawn attention for her photo-based media explorations since the 1970s. "There is an evident frustration that happens. Is this a critique on commodification of the art world? Not really. It's more a riff on it. I am a working artist who exists in the commercial gallery world, and I am somewhat dependant upon earning a living through my art, so I am a part of the whole commodification discourse."

For Astman, a longtime instructor at the Ontario College of Art and Design, the work represents a return to her own body as a subject for her art. Her interest in Che grew from spending time in Cuba, where his image is everywhere, from billboards to hotel lobbies. "I was interested in how Che had been turned into a popular commodity for the tourist market," she says. "I began a small Che

souvenir collection on subsequent trips there. Che as a revolutionary iconic image is very curious when turned into a placemat.”

Liz Wylie, curator of the Kelowna Art Gallery, notes the objects have no price tags, and any value is socially conferred. “As art objects, these items take their meaning and value from their context: they have been arranged for display in an art gallery and are therefore precious originals,” she says. “But these items are actually mass-produced by souvenir makers, and have very little intrinsic value in and of themselves.”

Wylie, who curated Astman’s 1995 mid-career retrospective for the Art Gallery of Hamilton, likens the effect of having simulacra stand in for souvenirs to Alice’s experience of passing through the looking glass. “We are in a place where nothing has a straight reading, nor can be counted on to actually be what it seems to present itself as.”

The sub-title of the exhibition, *Enter Through the Gift Shop*, plays with the title of the 2010 movie, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, an art world mockumentary by the British graffiti artist known as Banksy. Astman, who has been working on her installation for years, says her working title always included the term ‘gift shop.’ But after seeing Banksy’s film, she thought it would be fun to play with his title. “By using the term ‘enter,’ it puts the consumerism front and centre,” she says. “No matter who uses the term ‘gift shop’ now with their work, there will always be comparisons to Banksy. So why not be bold about it?”

Astman, who was born in Rochester, New York, has exhibited her work at leading galleries, notably the National Gallery of Canada, and has produced numerous public commissions, including one for the Canadian Embassy in Berlin. Her explorations include photography, new media, sculpture and light projections and she is known for staged and sequential work that considers issues of identity and history, as well as gender perspectives and systems of representation.