

By Murray Whyte

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“Freedom of Assembly” at Oakville Galleries: Review

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When the [Oakville Galleries](#) decided to name their summer exhibition “Freedom of Assembly,” I don’t think they meant it literally. More likely it was a cheeky little pun, given the show’s clustering of contemporary collage techniques, cut, pasted, reconstituted and reconfigured, both physically and virtually, in every imaginable way.

But with 18 artists represented over the galleries’ two spaces (on the lake and downtown) that literal sense does creep in. Take it from me, 18 is a lot, and I’ll insert the caveat right up front: There’s no possible way I’ll get to all of them — in this space at least. But you can, and you should. Far from feeling stretched thin, “Freedom of Assembly’s” everyone-in-the-pool roster feels vital, fresh, and casually inclusive, opening a broad umbrella under which a whole range of contemporary practice comfortably fits.

This is really only appropriate, I guess, given the necessarily loose description the medium of collage demands. With its beginnings in the Victorian era as the idle pastime of ladies of leisure, collage was dismissed as trifling decorative nonsense. Be that as it may, the sudden proliferation of the practice was also the signal of a world on the cusp of sudden, seismic change: Reasonably quick, relatively cheap albumen photo-printing had recently replaced the clunky glass-plate photography of daguerreotypes, making pictures for the first time plentiful, non-precious, reproducible and disposable; snips, cuts, scribbles and other such previously-unimaginable savagery became the norm.

If that sounds a little like the world we live in today — fast, cheap, and out of control — then you’re on to something. Contemporary collage, as respectable art and as an expression of modernity’s imposition of a disposable, mass-produced cut-and-paste world, is rooted in the early-20th century practice of the Surrealists, who contributed words to amalgamations, as well as images. Think of Rimbaud’s practice of the “exquisite cadaver,” which knit together random phrases from the Surrealist cohort to form bodies of what they called “automatic writing,” the likes of which was meant to channel a primal unconscious that cut through the modern, incomprehensible swirl. Romantic though the notion might have been, the technique stuck. When Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, among others, employed it in their early expressions of Cubism in the years leading up to the 1920s, sticking oilcloth and newsprint to their canvases, collage became an inarguable part of the modern art canon. Picasso firmed up that status not long after, famously crafting any number of his fractured guitars from so much agglomerated rubbish. Robert Rauschenberg’s emergence in the 50s, with his gritty assemblages of cast-off junk and mass-produced images ushered collage into a thoroughly contemporary era, and for good.

And so here we are. “Freedom of Assembly” is stuffed full with good work, bordering on great. Echoes of the medium’s inherent critique of the disposability of a mass-produced world are inevitable: Georgia Dickie’s three pieces of precariously-balanced industrial

salvage speaks plainly of a fragile ecosystem of objects, where utility defines how long they avoid the landfill, or scrap heap. Roy Arden's beguiling, shuddering mobile of salvaged trash — a bent bicycle wheel, tangles of wire, rusted cans, a filthy glove — has an almost mystical quality creating a quiet, sad reverence for the accumulated cast-offs of a consumption-mad world.

Geoffrey Farmer's homely works, which stand sentinel-like at the entrance of each of the galleries' spaces, are a direct link to the form's Surrealist past: A derby hat perched on a stick rooted in concrete is fitted with a poem: "I am by nature one and also many, dividing the single me into many, and even opposing them as great and small, light and dark, and in ten thousand other ways."

Farmer's poetic impulse aptly captures the medium's essential core: Collage is nothing if not the practice of transforming the insignificant into the ineffable. Jason de Haan's monumental *New Jerusalem* diptych shreds the covers of thousands of pulp science fiction paperbacks, and re-orders them as the all-consuming cloud that shrouded the earth in the biblical apocalypse portrayed in the Book of Revelations. Barbara Astman clipped pictures from a year's worth of newspapers, day-by-day, and pasted them into notebooks to form a deeply personal journal of a mediated life, filtered through the news. Jacob Whibley's intricate works on paper cobble and weave fragments of his voluminous — and messy, I imagine — rare paper collection, laying bare a compulsion to create order from an accreting mound of chaos. Jennifer Murphy's *Pink Moon*, a curling assemblage of images of birds, butterflies, flowers and cats, all clipped from nature journals and sewn together with fine thread, transform the instructive workaday into an elemental swirl of predator and prey, life and death.

"Freedom of Assembly" places a necessary emphasis on the medium's root in the handmade, but provides some essential updating as well. In the show's downtown location, large, precise grids of small works by Balint Zsako, Marcel Dzama, Paul Butler, Alison Yip and Elizabeth Zvonar hang salon-style in a nod, perhaps, to its origins as a polite Victorian diversion.

Nearby, though, sits the gutsy mash-up sculpture of Valerie Blass, and the dizzying *Orbits* of Kristan Horton. Horton, who won the Grange Prize for Photography on 2010, is among the most innovative artists I've seen, bashing together various technologies to produce works that are entirely unique. Putting him in the context of collage isn't something I'd considered, but it's spot-on: Making the *Orbits*, Horton circled piles of junk accumulating on the floor of his studio, taking pictures with his digital camera from different perspectives. In Photoshop, he layered the images one on top of the other, creating the impossible: The same thing seen from multiple different points of view, all at the same time.

It's a nice bookend, to a practice that served as a canary in a coalmine to a rapidly-modernizing world. But really, it's less endpoint than "to be continued." In a piecemeal culture teeming with constantly-proliferating throwaway junk, real and virtual, we'll always need someone to pick up the pieces.

"Freedom of Assembly" continues at Oakville Galleries, 120 Navy Street and 1306 Lakeshore Road East, Oakville, to Sept. 2. www.oakvillegalleries.com