

# Get your Free Sample

## 14 Canadian contemporary artists exhibit at MSVU

By SEAN FLINN

Giveaways, swag, additional/special value offers, kitsch, trinkets, tokens, tchotchkes (or is that chotchkes?), free gift offers, free samples: so many names for one of the cluttering results of consumerism.

Go to a conference, you get a T-shirt or ball cap. Sign up for a service, you receive a keychain or cap. Buy a product in one quantity and you find it has another item, or even more of the same, attached to it — a bonus offer!

It's endless. And, yet, inspiring at the same time.

The current exhibition at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, called Free Sample, brings together the work of 14 contemporary Canadian artists, most of them at the early stages of their careers, in such a way that the idea of the free sample is seized from consumerist clutches.

Don't worry: these are not ranting, polemical works, bashing you over the head with anti-this, anti-that messaging. These artists are nuanced and thoughtful people reflecting, conversing with you, on how objects and ideas of various meanings and values — secular and sacred, functional, symbolic, decorative and informational — get processed, used up, by a fast-moving society.

And that includes art of all kinds, says MSVU Art Gallery director Ingrid Jenkner, who invited guest curator and NSCAD University graduate Kelly Mark to put together Free Sample.

Mark had kept Jenkner apprised of the new, challenging

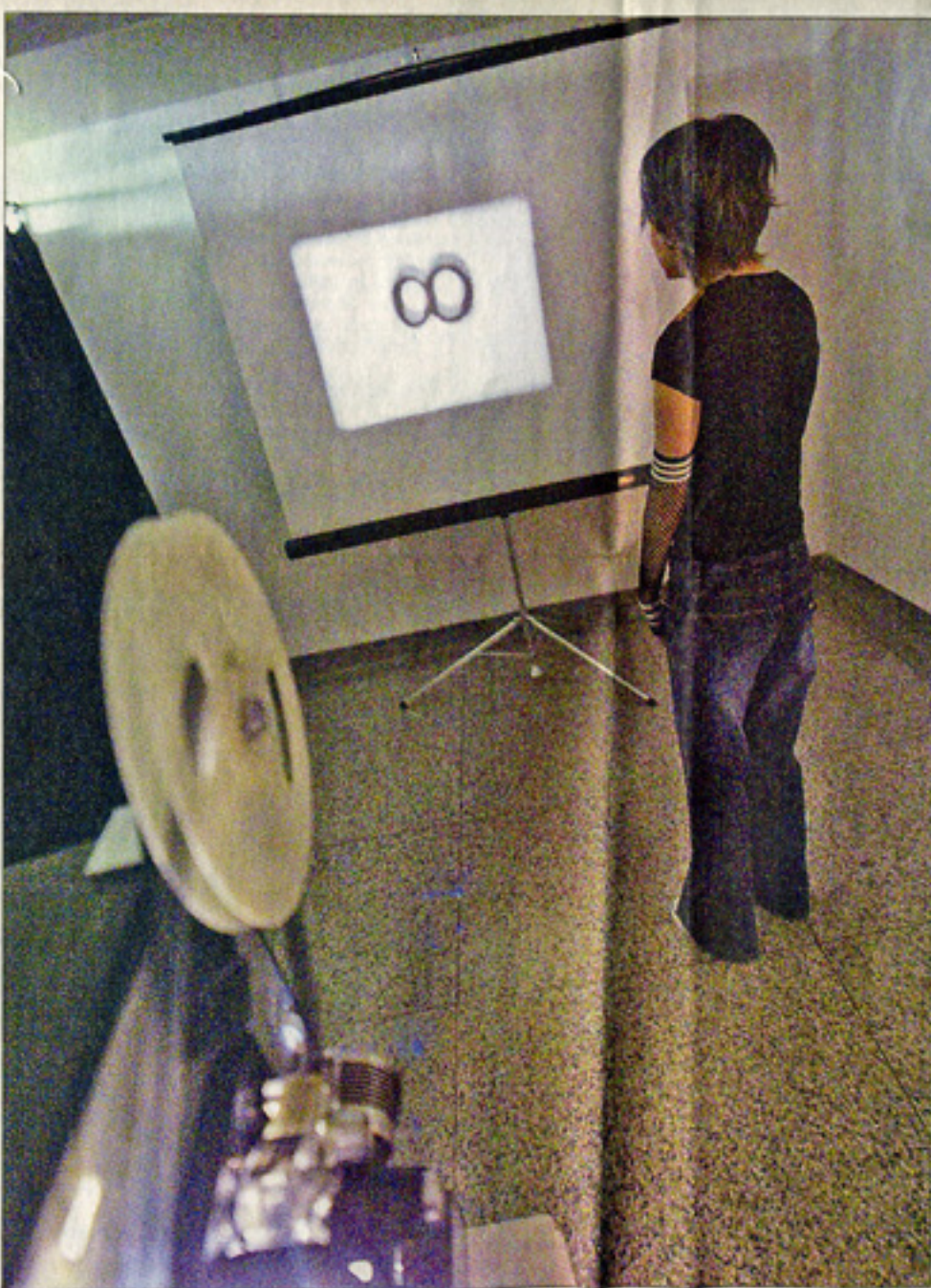
consumer culture to make statements about the experience of living in it.

Take Kristan Horton's series of digital print diptychs called Dr. Strangelove/Dr. Strangelove 2004.

According to the exhibition catalogue, the artist has watched the touchstone political satire starring Peter Sellers and George C. Scott more than 700 times, a staggering repetition and, arguably, an obsession.

But it's an obsession repeated many times over by cinephiles. (How many times did you, depending on your age, hear friends say they saw Star Wars?)

Horton's devotion to the film allows him to isolate and print single frames of the movie. All of them shown here are unnerving, dark moments in the film's plot about nuclear arms proliferation and possible annihilation.



Mount Saint Vincent University's Art Gallery is showing an installation called Free Sample. The show features works by 14 contemporary artists including this looped projection of the number 8 by Dave Dymant and Roula Partheniou of Toronto. Free Sample runs till April 24.

(SCOTT DUNLOP)

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For viewers familiar with the movie, and even those who remember news images of the nuclear arms race of the '80s, you feel the tension and the fear at the heart of the picture is defused, at least just for a moment. Maybe, you think, there's hope after all for humanity to untangle itself from the quagmire of war and destruction.

What else was the nuclear arms race from the '60s through the late '80s (with disturbing echoes today, thanks to talk of missile defence and claims of

rogue-state threats) but an exercise in the concept of infinity, stockpiling the weapons to reach the heavens and beyond?

And that idea of infinity sprouted by Horton's work sends you back up the stairs of the gallery, pausing first at Toronto-based Anitra Hamilton's eggshell-encrusted and antiquated bombs, to a projection room containing the excellent work by two other Toronto artists, Roula Partheniou and Dave Dymant.

The work, Super Infinity 2002, invites you behind a heavy black fabric curtain to watch a one-minute loop of Super 8 film displaying the number eight over and over, in various thicknesses, sizes and fonts taken from Letraset.

"Using Super 8 film to create Super Infinity and looping it endlessly seemed like a concise marriage between material and form," Partheniou explains from Toronto. "The word 'super' is transformative, but is so

ubiquitous that we have forgotten what it really means. We were aware of various associations — the countdown before a film, the Moebius strip, a fragile infinity."

Adds Dymant: "At the time I was reading biographies of the number zero and researching the concepts of nothing and infinity. The sideways 8 as infinity symbol first appeared a few hundred years ago and has been used ever since."

There are endless possibilities to experiencing Dymant and Partheniou's Super Infinity 2002. The projected images give a sense of movement, like eyes from the great beyond staring at you, stepping closer and back. There's the nicks and blemishes on the film strip that add further depth to the frames, much like, Dymant points out, Norman McLaren and others have done at the NFB.

And there's the iconic and historic look and sound of the Super 8 whirring and clicking away.

"The sound is absolutely key for me," Dymant enthuses. "Not only because I think of feedback loops in terms of music, but because I'm interested in the inherent qualities of appliances like record players and television sets."

For Partheniou, her appreciation for the object (the Super 8 projector) behind the processing of images on film came after the idea. "For me, it started out strictly conceptual, so the other associations — nostalgia, antiquated technologies — came alive after it had been installed."

This is the beauty and thrill of the Free Sample work: the connections you can make on your own. Walk back downstairs from Super Infinity 2002 and consider New York-based Micah Lexier's Two Ways to Make 2 (2000): how do you "make" your two, pen in hand?

In these highly structured marks of making numbers? Everyone's two will be different.

to fashion his two's makes you think of signage, ads, buying and consuming. How many poses and gazes are there in the simple act of a woman getting ready each day? Montrealer Addad Hannah's Stills sample just a few possibilities.

Go ahead and fill your mental basket with this work freely sampled from our culture. The quantities of associations and the quality of the work overall last until April 24.

In a co-presentation with Paradise Cinema Society, the gallery will screen Dr. Strangelove on Thursday at 7 p.m. There's a door prize for a DVD set of the film. There will be a reception on Sunday, from 3 to 5 p.m. A bus leaves NSCAD University at 2:30, returning downtown at 5 p.m. One of Free Sample's artists and NSCAD faculty member Jan Peacock will speak. Refreshments will be served.

Sean Flinn is a freelance writer living in Halifax.