

Chroma Lives channels a 1980s Toronto art-world happening

A new project tucked into a Yorkville condo show suite resurrects a forgotten moment in the city's hodgepodge art history.



Erin Alexa Freedman, left, and Lili Huston-Herterich at the ChromaLives exhibition in a Yorkville condo show room. The pair look to resurrect a long-lost moment in Toronto's art history. (NICK KOZAK / FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts

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"Reside in a Modern Day Masterpiece" reads the boldface font pinned near the ceiling of the show suite at 21 Avenue Rd. and, perhaps a little oddly, it's the only thing here to be taken at face value.

On the good graces of the developer Camrost Felcorp, Erin Alexa Freedman and Lili Huston-Herterich have set up shop here, past the tile samples and backsplash options, though their wares aren't of the buyable kind.

"We said 'Leave it,'" laughs Huston-Herterich, savouring the unintended irony. The phrase looms above *Chroma Lives*, the full-blooded séance masquerading, at least in part, as an art exhibition for the month of June, and the array of things here are as far from off-the-rack luxury as you'll find.

Chock full of objects by local artists and craftspeople both — the line is blurred, and intentionally so — *Chroma Lives* looks to find points of communion in the here and now, but also the long-ago then. A small set of textile works here by the late Tim Jocelyn opens the door and beyond it lies a history as enthralling as it is forgotten.

Chroma Lives is a reprise — small scale — of *Chromaliving*, an enormous, grassroots Toronto art-world happening that took up more than 10,000 square feet of retail space in the Colonnade on Bloor St. W. To call it significant is to sell it short: organized by Jocelyn, who died a few years later due to AIDS, and his partner Andy Fabo, *Chromaliving* was a cheeky send-up of a decor show that gathered up more than 150 artists and makers of all kinds.

It was inclusive, grassroots, engaging and widely seen, with school groups trucking through on a regular basis. It landed in the newspapers here

and in ArtForum, the definitive art magazine of the day, in New York. It helped make careers, like those of painter Joanne Tod and sculptor Evan Penny, who are among the best known artists the city has produced. It engaged the high — General Idea, international superstars and masters of subversive self-reflection, contributed a Venetian blind dress — and the low (fashion, furniture, woodwork) with no hierarchy or second-guessing.

In short, it was a do-it-yourself hodgepodge cultural landmark built, of all things, on the recession (the Colonnade space was available due to the bankruptcy of Harridge's department store) and the vibrant eclecticism of a Toronto art scene that has typically been seen as its weak point.

"Whether or not (*Chromaliving* is) liked," wrote Christopher Hume in the Star in 1983, "it serves the purpose of giving the Toronto community a sense of itself and what it's up to. And because art isn't produced in a vacuum, that's terribly important."

And what happens when something important takes place in the art world here? "What we found were that the histories were quite faint," says Freedman. "There are a couple of low-res images on the Concordia (University) database; that's how we discovered it. But that's it. It was such a watershed for so many people and yet there's so little to show for it."

The official keeper of Toronto's unofficial histories has been Philip Monk, the long-time director of the Art Gallery of York University, and it's a lonely pursuit. So it's fitting, perhaps, that his latest book, *Is Toronto Burning? Is Toronto Burning?*, about the rough-and-tumble Toronto art scene in the late '70s, launches downtown next week while *Chromalives* tells tales of past Toronto lives of its own all month.

Which brings us to the here and now. Freedman and Huston-Herterich intend *Chroma Lives* less as homage than as a bootstraps effort to resurrect and enshrine a major moment in the history of a city famous for forgetting. *Chroma Lives* is the outward expression of an archival project — sponsored by a Netherlands-based, socially minded art organization — meant to gather up a forgotten history and keep it safe for generations to come.

For Fabo, it's a welcome correction, decades later. "When the Queen Street shows from the 80s were enumerated some years later, *Chromaliving* was often left out," he says. "What I really like about this project is that it introduces a kind of continuity, I hope, between generations that's always kind of missing here."

Official accounts, left to the city's museums and artist-run centres, do yeoman's work in recording what passes within their own walls, but what about those that don't fit?

Fabo's ChromaZone, a painters' collective happily putting oil to canvas to the disdain of the ruling conceptual aesthetic, was one of those. With Jocelyn, whose fabric and textile work wilfully embraced art, craft, fashion and everything else, the pair imagined *Chromaliving* as an everyone-in-the-pool event where those boundaries could fall, at least for a while.

The early '80s were just that moment. Fitfully conservative museums such as the Art Gallery of Ontario relied on travelling blockbusters, while artist-run centres such as Mercer Union and YYY retrenched in heady conceptual practice, leaving little room for playful materialism and, God forbid, colour.

Chromaliving provided one of the few points of communion, an upbeat all-for-one affair that reserved judgment in favour of self-declaration. Whoever you were and whatever you did, what mattered was that you were here. In a city that has always looked everywhere else to find itself, that might have been the most radical declaration of all — a fact it doesn't hurt to remind, even now.

"Being in this space, with these artists is a chance for me to expose a history to my contemporaries, and they're contributing to it, whether they know it or not," Huston-Herterich says. "It helps make Toronto feel less like a brand new, crane and condo city. Sharing it with my community feels right somehow."

Chroma Lives continues at 21 Avenue Rd. to June 30, with public talks and events every Friday. See <http://www.chromalives.ca/chromalives.ca> for more information.