



VISITOR ACCOUNT

*Chroma Lives, Camrost Felcorp Yorkville
Plaza Sales Centre, Toronto,
1-30 June 2016*

From Showroom to High-Rise

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“*Chroma Lives* is a performative exploration of Toronto’s 1983 exhibition *Chromaliving: New Designs for Living*”¹. *Chroma Lives* is not a re-enactment of the original exhibition.

Chroma Lives is hosted or “remobilized” in a staged workplace in the sales centre of the new Yorkville Plaza, just around the corner from the Colonnade in which *Chromaliving* was mounted (or flaunted). *Chromaliving* was held in an abandoned and suddenly available large space in a retail complex. There were one hundred and fifty participating artists, although co-curators Tim Jocelyn and Andy Fabo had originally intended closer to twenty in a much smaller space.² *Chroma Lives* is mounted in a sales centre for some (or more) brand new shiny condos. There are eighteen artists who are not at all cramped into the office-sized sales centre. Both exhibitions theatricalize domestic space. Decorative impulses usurp objects that are supposed to be functional, and fashion gains the upper hand in a not quite seamless collaboration with the fine arts.

It is important to note that the Chromazone collective were all easel painters and that *Chromaliving* was in many ways an anomaly for the group, although the group’s paintings tended to be much more social in subject matter than the parallel works by modernist painters and sculptors exhibiting concurrently in Toronto and the international art world. *Chromaliving* was all about artists of many stripes engaging design and furniture and home living. There were both functional and dysfunctional objects in the show. There were chairs not intended for seating, and so forth. *Chromaliving* became this large space, requiring at least one visit to absorb once visitors decided to engage with the space and its contents. The conveniently deserted retail space became social; the artists would usually be on the premises and people would meet and look at works together as they do in museums but perhaps not as formally. *Chromaliving* was performative and not static.

Chroma Lives is mounted in a showroom close to the size of the original Chromazone gallery, which was in the living room of painter/collective-member Oliver Girling's apartment. There are chairs that are very comfortable to relax in, and there are tables on which one is discouraged from parking food or beverages. The two curators, Erin Alexa Freedman and Lili Huston-Herterich, are omnipresent, holding court and relating to the visitors. In the exhibition showroom, Tim Jocelyn's screens from his *Ooga Booga Suite* are centre stage and a variety of utensils, paintings, and furnishings occupy the small space. It is not at all cluttered—most of the art objects are small and some are even borderline visible. The exhibition is not unlike a set for a stage play—a performance has taken place and props are left for the players to possibly return to or else they are evidence of a performance that has passed. Visitors can see mostly small objects that blur differences between the decorative and everyday. My favourite art object in *Chroma Lives* is Roula Partheniou's *Cigarette With Ashtray*, which is exactly that (albeit not a real cigarette). In the *Chromaliving* space, the environment was social so smoking was very much part of the mix. Now of course smoking is highly regulated and I no longer smoke. Still, I fought a desire to light the damn thing.

Chromaliving was mounted in fall of 1983, in the midst of the roaring eighties characterized by hysterical art markets and the reigns of Thatcher and Reagan. Brian Mulroney was waiting in the wings for the opportunity of becoming the Canadian go-between. AIDS was already a subject of critical concern in the gay communities but not yet as far as the mainstream entertainment and cultural sectors of Toronto were concerned. The early eighties was a period of painterly resurgence, one in which photo-conceptualism began receding, video artists were encouraged to switch to film or make music videos, and performance artists were expected to grow up and do theatre. Yet *Chromaliving* both celebrated and parodied the markets of its day.

Chroma Lives is mounted in an age in which what else could possibly be built upon available urban (and suburban) property than more condos. The recent exhibition is low-key—it is not flamboyant like the original. Is it critical of habitual high-rises; is it an oasis of artistic ingenuity in a neighbourhood that was once the centre for Toronto's commercial galleries.³ These questions are not easily answerable.

Chroma Lives is not nostalgic, although it easily induces nostalgia among those old enough to have experienced not only *Chromaliving* but also remember so many artists and players whose lives were cut short by AIDS as well as by cancers or other illnesses. *Chroma Lives* participants such as Oliver Husain and Jeremy Laing, whose practices combining fine and textual or fabric arts recall Tim Jocelyn's, had never previously heard of Jocelyn or *Chromaliving*. But *Chroma Lives* is not a re-enactment, although at one point it was intended to be such a thing. *Chroma Lives* is an echo of echoes. It plays differently to many people who have heard of the source exhibition with its reputation for daring excess, to many people who were there in 1983 but whose memories vary sharply, and to many different people with differing expectations for an exhibition which announces itself as a performative exploration of an "original".

The two curators of *Chroma Lives* have done much more with their project than mount an exhibition referring to or referencing the *Chromaliving* source exhibition. They have also instituted an archive in reference to both the "original" and the "remake." Freedman and Huston-Herterich interviewed many artists who contributed to the enactment of *Chromaliving*; so here is a space encouraging different recollections and possibly conflicting

memories. In Toronto, there has recently been much interest among younger artists and curators about formative exhibitions and collectives from the nineteen seventies and eighties, exhibitions presented before the curiously resourceful younger artists and curators were even born. This is creative and constructive; important works are thus remembered and entered into replay.

Andrew James Paterson is a Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist working with video, film, performance, painting, music, critical and fictional writing. He is currently the coordinator for *the8fest* small-gauge film festival in Toronto. His videos have shown locally, nationally and internationally for three and a half decades. Much of his art in various media references tensions between bodies and technologies; as well as anarchic impulses played against formalist tendencies. Between 1977 and 1982, he was the prime vocalist and writer for the Toronto post-punk band *The Government*. He is currently in development with an artist book project *Collection/Correction*, to be published by Kunstverein Toronto in fall of 2016.

¹ Press statement for *Chroma Lives* by curators Erin Alexa Freedman and Lili Huston-Herterich.

² *Chromaliving* was very much an extension of Fabo and Jocelyn's relationship. Fabo, a member of the Chromazone collective, was/is a painter while Jocelyn (1952–1986) was a fabric and textile artist working in both the art scene and the fashion industry.

³ The Yorkville district had previously been the centre for the hippie counterculture of the late nineteen-sixties. Art and artists as agents of gentrification are hardly a recent development.