

MagMag

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Chroma Lives

by Adam Lauder



Connor Crawford: Untitled Background 8 (Cracked Wall), (2016). Courtesy Erin Freedman & Lili Huston-Heterich.

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Toronto

June 1 - June 30, 2016

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The refreshing cognitive dissonance of *Chroma Lives* is due in no small part to its setting inside one of Toronto's ubiquitous model condos on tony Avenue Road. Inspired by the inclusive ethos of the chronically unsung 1983 art-and-design happening *Chromaliving: New Designs for Living* – which turned Yorkville's vacant Harridge's department store into a tongue-in-cheek homage to the utopian spectacles of an earlier era of cultural and consumer confidence – *Chroma Lives* succeeded in proposing a compelling alternative to recent contemporary and historical surveys of Toronto art.

Co-curators Erin Freedman and Lili Huston-Herterich, with funding from the itinerant Dutch group If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part of Your Revolution, presented neither a random cross-section of emerging talent, nor the representatives of a past or present "trend." Instead, the inter-generational exhibition and durational performance unfolded an archival logic un beholden to the protocols of the so-called archival turn. A long list of emerging Toronto artists working at the threshold of art and craft were placed in productive dialogue with the legacy of *Chromaliving's* co-organizer and self-styled "fabric artist" Tim Jocelyn, who passed away in 1986 following a battle with AIDS. A riotous textile collage by Jocelyn and a focused sampling of his deceptively casual fashions served to anchor works by younger artists that resonated with their nondenominational flare without offering a studied reply to the fraught histories which they embody. The co-curators also played host to participant interviews and special events, documenting invaluable testimony in the process.

Chromaliving derived the greater part of its explosive charge from a calculated disregard for Toronto's de facto partition into a retrograde uptown market and an energetic but dogmatic downtown scene. This illicit promiscuity embraced muscular (but disarmingly mundane) Neo-expressionist paintings by the likes of Jocelyn's co-organizer and partner, Andy Fabo, as well as theory-savvy works channeling the cool Neo-conceptualism of their Pictures Generation counterparts working south of the border. This stylistic patchwork defined a queer space, welcoming gay and lesbian artists largely unrepresented by the aforementioned scenes. The canny location of *Chromaliving* – on the unfashionable corporate fringe of uptown Yorkville, far removed from the hub of downtown activity on Queen Street West – literalized the decentering ambitions of its organizers. Above all, it was the show's brazenly sincere fusion of art and craft that – in the spirit of Modernist precedents like the Bauhaus – succeeded in levelling the hierarchies of Toronto's prevailing image economy, if only for the brief interval of its carnivalesque happening.

Taking *Chromaliving's* flat ontology as its point of departure, *Chroma Lives* invited a mix of emerging artists and designers – and those working at the generative fringe of art and craft – to animate a corporate container space donated by developer Camrost Felcorp. The resulting bazaar-like environment disrupted the established sightlines of the white cube through the subtle appropriation (and at times surreal reimagining) of commercial display strategies – picture artist-run retrospective meets vintage thrift shop. *Chroma Lives's* studied indifference to the default reverence and nostalgia of historically-motivated curatorial projects sets it apart from recent Toronto-themed retrospectives that have studiously avoided any taint of commerce or disorderly craft, to the detriment of inclusivity and relevance alike. Instead of viewing the condo as a threatening symbol of gentrification or amnesiac globalization, the boutique ambiance of *Chroma Lives* seized upon the very deceptions sustained by this generic figure as a metaphor for the queer potentiality of contemporary experience. Its theatre of mundane duplicities invited visitors to scrutinize everyday illusions as catalysts for resistant ways of being and seeing. In suggesting the cartoony mise-en-scène of Disney impossibly come to life, works by Connor Crawford and Roula Partheniou, in particular, drew attention to the tenuous stability of the commonplace. In a similar spirit, Oliver Husain's textiles transformed the stuff of fashion into a counter-screen for personal fictions.

Ultimately, the syncretic energy unleashed by *Chromaliving* is less a blueprint for future exhibitions than a timely provocation.

Adam Lauder recently completed all of the requirements of a Ph.D. in the Graduate Department of Art at the University of Toronto. He has contributed features and shorter texts to magazines including *Art Handler*, *Border Crossings*, *C*, *Canadian Art*, *e-flux*, *Flash Art*, *Hunter and Cook*, *Magenta* and *Millions*. He is the editor of *H&IT ON* (YYZ, 2012).

