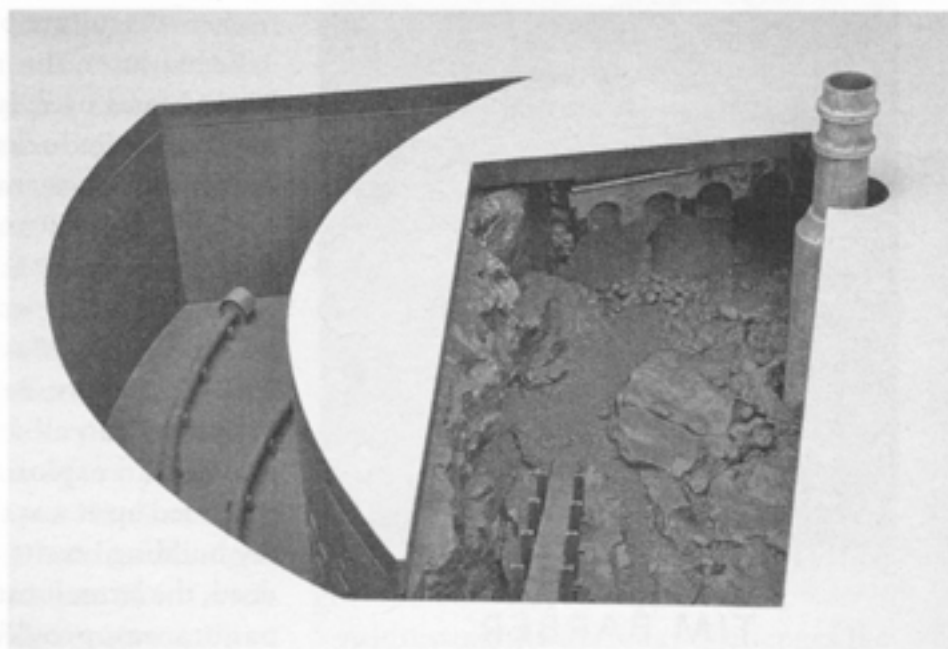


STEVE HIGGINS: ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, AND SARA GRAHAM: DEPARTMENT OF SYSTEMS OVERSIGHT

Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Halifax

by SARA HARTLAND-ROWE

Sara Graham, *Replica
of Decoy Stairway/
Stairway 'Supersystem,'*
2009
PHOTO: STEVE FARMER



Steve Higgins, detail
from *Urban #3*, 2007
PHOTO: STEVE FARMER

The Dalhousie University Art Gallery is reached by going down a flight of stairs to a basement. While often irrelevant to the work that is shown in this space, in the case of Steve Higgins's and Sara Graham's concurrent solo exhibitions there was a fitting congruence between the subterranean gallery and the work they presented. Higgins' and Graham's works both recall the archive—that safe house for documents describing the shape of a civilization—and the cement-walled basement gallery certainly suggests the bunker-nature of artifact hoarding.

Higgins' and Graham's works, although independently curated, (Higgins' was a travelling show curated by Ihor Holubitzky for the Confederation Art Centre, and Graham's was organized by Peter Dykhuis for Dalhousie), present complementary facets from the archive of dystopia. Steve Higgins' show, *All things considered*, consists of three separate bodies of work, two sets of prints, a group of sculptures and a large wall-drawing. Both the prints and the drawing address architectural form, with images of building foundations and the structure of the written page in the former, and a rendered description of struts, supports, towers and stairways in the latter. There is a romantic quality to the larger prints and to the wall-drawing that is a function of the trace of the artist's hand: blotches and streaks of ink in the prints,

light but sooty fingerprints in the wall-drawing. The spectre of the drawer gives a sense of human presence, flesh and blood, that is utterly erased from the sculptural work. In fact, the strongest aspect of the sculptures is the evaporation of animate life.

The sculptural works consist of five tables that are reminiscent of the Formica-topped desks found in high schools, libraries and archives. However, cut into the top of each "desk" is a trapezoidal opening, through which one has an aerial view of a model replicating a bleak urban terrain: tiny bungalows stud what looks like a strip-mined landscape, and industrial buildings and raised highways are carved and bisected with pipes and scaffolding. The landscapes are meticulous and precise, but the pleasure of looming over the miniature is mitigated by unease; they are unpeopled. Moreover, they are monochrome, painted with a matte, light-leaching black.

A young artist in Halifax recently described to me the city of Sudbury's attempts to conceal the scars of decades of mining by covering a massive slagheap with a thin layer of bright green grass. Higgins' black paint is a reversal of this cosmetic touch-up. The result is that, while these are familiar urban places—recognizable from any highway in a North American city—there is nothing homey here. Instead, there is a sense of bleakness and dismay. They look like Canada—Sudbury, Sydney, Hamilton—and the world of convenience we have created around ourselves, a slower, more deliberate kind of disaster.

Graham's work also speaks to misplaced intentions. Her *Department of Systems Oversight* project describes a Kafka-esque world of governmental double-speak and paranoia. The DSO is Graham's persuasive invention, an inter-governmental body intended to oversee organizing systems (traffic, information, monetary exchange) in the modern city. Its directives and outcomes are presented via pages and pages of typescript text set out on scarred folding tables. The reader is quickly bogged down in a wearying morass of instructions about clearing desks, filing reports and clarifying verbiage.

In contrast to the blotchy, mimeographed pages—true relics of the typewriter era—the exhibition includes a sleek, red-painted spiral staircase that leads from the gallery to a door set high into the atrium wall. This is a decoy door, as prescribed by the DSO, to keep the true location of the

busy-body organization safe. According to Graham's parodist imitation of official jargon, it's part of "creat[ing] decoy offices... to [either] justify funding by providing false offices, [avoid being] a target of corporate and political espionage, or—more outlandish, but perhaps more accurate—[to act as] portals to a 'super-system.'" (*Department of Systems Oversight, 1968–1973*, Sara Graham.)

Graham's strength in this exhibition lies in her ability to parody without lampooning. The reams of paper, dense with jargon, are plausible artifacts—earnestly laid out in such a way that eager readers can immerse themselves in the drab world of the DSO. (There is, though, something slightly artificial about the set-up: surely, these decommissioned documents should be collected in manila folders rather than laid out like gems on a table?) The staircase is an act of perfect ventriloquism. It rises up, fire-engine red, thin and elegant to meet an institutional metal door. A discreet sign reading "Official Personnel Only" hangs on a chain across the bottom of the stairs. It feels no more out of place here than the Dalhousie Gallery's seemingly arbitrarily placed concrete column, which blocks one wall, or the atrium windows that peer down on the gallery. Graham's use of seductive, almost frivolous, gloss-red paint is the only oddball note, but one that makes one's sense of exclusion from the inner sanctum of officialdom even more complete.

That said, the cumulative effect of both exhibitions doesn't speak well of our ability to create a just and beautiful society. Higgins' multiple desks suggest study and deliberation over the hacking-up of the landscape for human consumption, while Graham's DSO is marked by internecine wastefulness and chaos. One suspects that in other underground bunkers, equally cock-eyed plans and specifications are underway, shaping the "good life" of the 21st century. ►