

VISUAL ARTS ■ REVIEW

Much more than bear minimum



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DEAN DREVER AT MKG127

\$7,400-\$14,500. Until Aug. 30.
127 Ossington Ave.; 647-435-7682

Dean Drever's carved bears – now at Toronto's MKG127 – are massive enough to press you to the gallery walls. These are prodigious bears, as huge as real bears – which is to say about four metres in length and one-and-a-half metres high (the exhibition is waggishly titled *Bear Minimum*). One of Drever's two bears is complete and freestanding, and the other is represented just by a head and, below it, a single massive paw, both affixed like trophies to the wall so that the great bear appears to be entering the gallery in sections, re-materializing itself as it comes.

What keeps these giant bears from looking fearsome is the fact that each of them is coated in a blazing, eye-searing, flocked yellow finish. Which lends them a charming sense of décor, as opposed to danger.

The show, like much of Drever's past work, is essentially about power and violence, but is clearly tempered, in this case, by irony and a studied disingenuousness. "I've always been interested in oppositions," Drever says as we walk through his exhibition, giving the bears a wide berth. "and so I didn't want to make the animals wild and aggressive. I decided to take the big-bad-bear idea and soften it. And I thought the yellow finish would be kind of calming. I wanted to make them nice, because that would make it nice for me. And besides, I think it says in the *I Ching* that yellow is the colour of measure and mean."

Drever is a member of the Haida nation, and the bear is an animal of his clan, the Raven. "As a Haida, a number of animals, like the bear," he says, "are simply a part of our collective stories."

There are even Haida-proscribed ways to formally represent the animals – certain cuts in carving and a narrow choice of colours in painting (red, white and black), though



Dean Drever's *Bear Minimum* features one whole bear, and one in parts.

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Artist Dean Drever

Drever says he has not adhered strictly to the carving conventions and, he adds puckishly, "there is nothing in Haida culture that prohibits my giving the bears a yellow finish."

The bears at MKG127 are carved from Styrofoam. Originally, they were supposed to be carved from red cedar, and indeed Drever has seven or eight huge red cedar bears in

his studio now, each about 80-per-cent complete. The trouble is, he explains, each one weighs in at about 3,500 pounds – enough to collapse the gallery floor. So Styrofoam was the answer – albeit a troublesome one.

The free-standing bear, Drever tells me, is carved from that form of Styrofoam known as Expanded Polystyrene, which, he notes ruefully, "is unforgiving a medium as water-colour." Apparently when you carve it, it comes off in chunks, which makes it difficult to control.

The two-piece bear (the one emerging from the wall) is carved from Precision Board (Urethane Foam) which, when you file it, "comes off like sand" and is thus much easier to work. The carving of both bears is masterful, however, a deft and pleasing combination of biological accuracy ("I tried to stay away from the Disney effect") and stylization (a Winnie-the-Pooh as big as a Hummer).

Drever insists that his Styrofoam days are over. "It's an intensely messy procedure," he says, and besides, he wants to get back to "real" carving – the cedar bears are waiting. "I have thousands of dollars worth of foam tools I'd be happy to get rid of," he says, flashing that infectious grin.