

GALLERIES

Instant Coffee awakens with hot colour

Collective pays homage to iconic Watts Towers in Los Angeles

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

There's instant coffee and there's Instant Coffee.

The first is the original kind, the stuff you drink. The second is the newer but way more original kind, the kind that makes you think.

"As a product and service, Instant Coffee is an effective substitute," says the so-named Toronto-Vancouver collective on its website. "It mimics the real thing without the pretense of being better."

Proof of Instant Coffee's claim is its show, "There is No Romance in Taking a Risk," at the MKG127 gallery. The arrestingly vibrant sculptural installation suggests a devastating implosion of a vintage Hollywood movie set that splattered retina-challenging Technicolor everywhere, starting with a daiquiri-dipped lemon-lime north wall. Almost everything else seems coated in deep pink more often found on blushing flamingos. Odd markings on posters hint at a sci-fi epic never finished, an idea reinforced by skeletal models of spacey-looking towers.

Actually, the Instant Coffee towers — made of wooden parts or of metal — refer to the vintage Los Angeles landmark Watts Towers. This integrated arrangement of 17 two- or three-storey structures was started in 1921 by Simon (actually Sabato) Rodia, a reclusive Italian-born construction worker living in the Watts area of L.A.

For 33 years Rodia used scraps of piping, metal and bedsprings to make his folk-gothic towers — two of them some 30 metres high — decorated with just about anything that came to hand, from shards of 7-Up bottle glass to seashells.

Over time, Rodia became pals with a few local kids who didn't think he was nuts, although he never really felt welcome in this hard-scrabble area.

(Rumours during World War II had it that the towers beamed signals to Japanese subs lurking just off the Pacific coast.) Tired of all the scavenging on the site, Rodia gave his beloved tower site away in 1954. He died in 1965, in a grumpy, self-imposed exile far from the tower site.

In 1990, the area was designated as

one of the United States' National Historic Landmarks.

Films often reference the Watts Tower. One of them — *Colors*, directed by Dennis Hopper in 1988, starring Sean Penn — is shown in a video loop in one gallery corner. For Instant Coffee though, the aesthetically hot combo of the rejected artist idea, the importance of social sculpture and the use of found material proved to be perfect for the collective's "detritus and flash aesthetic." Rodia's story suggests that even the Hollywood dream can end up in the trash.

"We want to play with the social nature of (Rodia's) work, his involvement with his community and the political nature of south central Los Angeles at the time," says Jinhuan Ko, one of four Instant Coffee-

ites I found setting up the installation at the gallery a few days ago.

"He was loved — people in the area talked about it being 'our tower,' as if it was 'our community centre' — and he was misunderstood at the same time.

"We're also drawn to the (Watts Tower) aesthetic, the aesthetic of a material process and product which resonates with us. Our question is: How can a collective that practises a kind of social sculpture make use of that story?"

Smartly, Instant Coffee's practice combines social awareness — it regularly emails to a huge contact list of people news about show openings or available studio space — with exhibitionist panache.

Its "Disco Fallout Shelter," installed in the Toronto Sculpture

Garden two years ago, rendered the fear-activating hole in the ground more as some sort of haven for GTA hobbits, with its welcoming, gaily painted door found at the end of a yellow brick road.

Other Instant Coffee Watts Towers, closer in scale to the originals, are in the works, says Jenifer Papararo, "if we find the right place to build them, although we'll never build it to the original specifications."

JUST THE FACTS

WHAT: "There is No Romance in Taking a Risk," by Instant Coffee.

WHERE: MKG127,

127 Ossington Ave.

WHEN: Until Feb. 5.



Instant Coffee splashes vibrant colours at MKG127 gallery.