

# Art road show aims to 'slow down' commuters

Villa, a touring exhibition, hits Union Station on Thursday for a week-long stay

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VISUAL ARTS CRITIC

Stu Monck looks skyward, toward the barrel-vaulted ceilings of Union Station's grand old Great Hall, and lets loose an audible sigh.

"That's my big challenge," he says, eyeing a row of windows three storeys above.

One of them, at least. Between now and next Friday, Monck — hopefully — will have figured out how to string a diaphanous bolt of white fabric way up there, part of an artwork by Swiss artist Reto Pulfer. Pulfer is part of Villa Toronto, the first local instalment of an infrequent international art road show that touches down at Union Station for just a week, starting Jan. 15. It will feature a couple of dozen artworks — some monumental, some not.

Monck, from Toronto, comes to this via far points, namely Warsaw, where the Raster Gallery hatched the first Villa event back in 2006. Since then, they've staged events in Tokyo and Reykjavik, making Toronto only its fourth stop.

Describing what, exactly, Villa is, is its own challenge: A crossbreeding of artists from here and far, there's a temptation to brand it another of the fast-proliferating art fair species — brief, international commercial extravaganzas that have multiplied like lemmings in recent years and infested cities, major and minor, all over the world.

But Villa, Monck says, is different. "The commercial aspect is not the intention — not at all," says Monck in his deliberate, understated drawl. "It's really the opportunity to do something that's not commercial. We have this opportunity to encounter the public, to confront the public, to create a little bit of debate. And that's really at the heart of it all — creating this dialogue about art in the public sphere, and hoping that carries through."

All of this makes the location, amid the opulent decay of Union Station's Great Hall, all the more loaded. Behind schedule and over-budget, the great Union Station makeover — by all accounts and best guesses, it should have been done by now — seems to be leaving the Great Hall to almost last.

Osmington Inc., which is responsible for the new retail concourse and programming at the station, has



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Stu Monck, curator of Villa Toronto, hopes that the art road show will give the delayed redevelopment of Union Station a needed infusion of positivity.

been waiting as long as the rest of us for the city-led reconstruction of the station to round the corner to completion. It's dabbled amid the ruins — a week-long installation for *Nuit Blanche*, a holiday market — but Villa represents its first stab at sustained programming on a large scale.

"It's a good taste of what we're hoping to do in the future," says Osmington's Brad Keast. "We want Union to be a place that people don't just pass through, but becomes a destination itself."

Once it's done, it will include significant cultural programming, not the least of which is a permanent home for a satellite of the venerable artist-run centre Art Metropole. Thanks to Villa, Art Metropole gets a crack at a dry run.

All week, Art Metropole will host a loungey reading room in the Great Hall, a prototype for its eventual, permanent home, AM Station. Hoping to be installed in the station in time for its 40th anniversary in November, Villa offers not that perma-

nent space, but a toe in the water of bigger, broader public engagement.

Art Metropole, which was founded by the members of the Toronto-based art collective General Idea in 1974, has always been content on the fringes, but arriving at Union is a deliberate attempt to push onto unfamiliar ground.

"It's a terrain for Art Met that's maybe a bit new," says Corinn Gerber, Art Metropole's director. "But these things require new models. You can't insist things stay the way they are, because they won't."

Art Metropole isn't just another name on the Villa roster. With its credibility and clout both here and internationally, it was able to partner with Raster to secure local public funding to help make Villa happen. Mention the term art fair, and Gerber politely demurs.

"There's too much care about the social dimension here," she says. "Transactions will happen, sure, but it's also an attempt to challenge those conditions."

What else is Villa? Have a look at the program. At the western end, Ontario-based Dean Drever's towering, cartoonish totem pole fashioned from a stack of paper will loom over crowds of commuters, five metres high. At the opposite end, next to the Art Metropole lounge, is Toronto artist Derek Sullivan's *Endless Kiosk*, equally towering and totemic, and festooned with posters. Flanking the entrance to the Via Rail platforms, a gold-hued dumpster and a chrome porta-pottie — a little nod to the station's constant state of unfinishedness — courtesy of Zekes Moore of St. John's.

Those works represent a smattering of the fare to be seen from Toronto galleries at Villa — Drever is with MKG127, Sullivan with Jessica Bradley, Moore with Diaz Contemporary — but more important is with whom they'll rub shoulders. Since its first inception in Warsaw in 2006, where a local collector handed over the keys to his underused villa to the Raster folks and they packed it with art,

Villa has had a way of snowballing.

In Toronto, previous iterations are represented by Icelandic superstar Ragnar Kjartansson (he'll have a video projection in the Great Hall), Yuki Okumura from Tokyo, and Michal Budny and Aneta Grzeszykowska from Villa's Warsaw home base. In the mix are galleries from London, Paris, Milan and Berlin.

"There's an exchange happening here," says Michael Klein, whose MKG127 gallery is loaning Drever's work for Villa. "It's helping to put us on the international map. Toronto doesn't really get its due, and with this, it kind of does."

First, though, the logistics. "To picture this place filled with art, filled with hundreds of people..." Monck says, a little worried.

"It'll be fine," he shrugs.

"Everything will have to coexist. What I'm hoping for, more than anything, is to slow people down a little — to have them say, 'I'll take the next train. Let's see what this is about.' That's the goal."