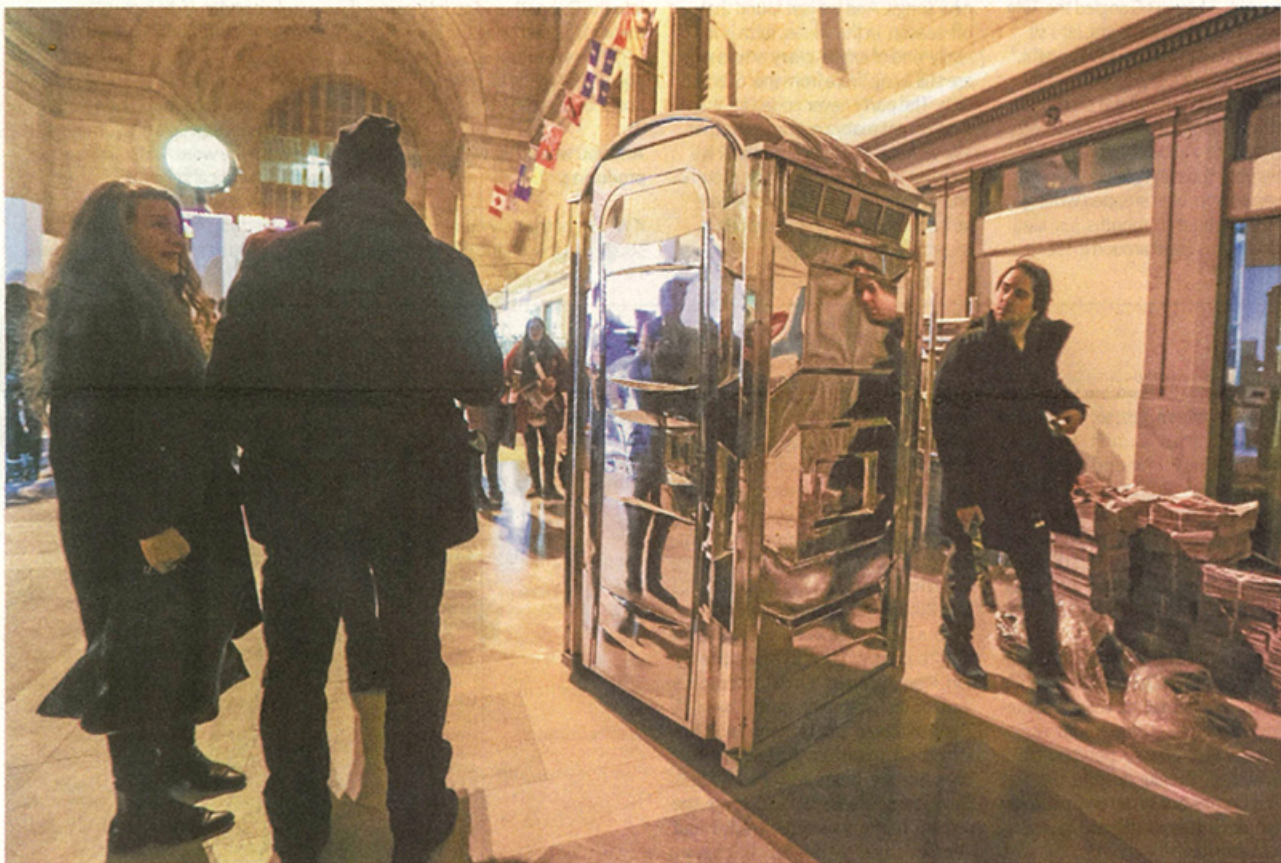


Villa Toronto art exhibit underwhelms



DAVID COOPER PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

Zeke Moores' chromium porta-potty is a cheeky jab at the endless construction work at Union Station where the Villa Toronto art exhibit is being held.

Union Station Great Hall project inspires on paper, but is awkward in reality

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Like everyone else, it seems, I really, really want to love the Villa Toronto project. On paper, it's absolutely inspired: Taking the truly spectacular but criminally underused Great Hall at Union Station and making it into a temporary visual arts playground that cross-fertilizes artists and galleries from here and afar is exactly the kind of thing the long-languishing Union redo desperately needs, to say nothing of the city at large.

So it's with no pleasure that I have to say, on my inaugural visit to the show on its opening night Friday, that I was underwhelmed. Villa soars in moments, where it takes the context and scale of the Great Hall and embraces it, but it has a way of confining and segmenting what should be an invitingly strange and seamless flow.

Here's what works: A pair of works are the event's two towers, positioned at opposite ends of hall and embrace the building's soaring, barrel-vaulted height; Dean Drever's towering 17-foot tall, wryly goofy totem pole, fashioned from thousands of sheets of stacked paper, stands at the western end; and Derek Sullivan's Endless Kiosk, a nod to the high-modern purity of Constantin Brancusi, stretches to similar heights to the east.

Both embrace the building's proportions — as much as they can, at least. In Sullivan's case, it also goes a



Dean Drever with the Pass the Hat installation, a 17-foot totem pole, built with sheets of stacked paper.

little deeper, as he festoons his version of Brancusi's primal Endless Column with the impermanence of tattered public notices — apropos and then some for a very public site where rushed walk-bys and ephemerality are the day-to-day.

Sullivan's work towers over the nearby reading room, set up by the venerable Toronto artist-run centre Art Metropole, which specializes in book works and artist multiples, and where a series of readings will take place throughout Villa's run. It's also

something of a dry run for AM, which has been promised a permanent space in the station whenever the drawn-out renovation hits completion — in everybody's nervous best guess, by the time the Pan Am Games roll into town this summer.

This too, promises to work nicely, introducing a waiting room of a very different kind to the station's daily ebb and flow.

Here's what doesn't: Walking into Union, the first thing that grabs you isn't Drever's totem pole or Sullivan's Kiosk, but rather the ungainly cubicles of white-painted plywood that cleave the Great Hall more or less in half.

This is the product of a practical dilemma — where to hang artworks when there are no walls? — and Villa solved it in the most straightforward manner: By building some walls of their own.

Inside, there are some lovely things. The poetic slowness of Icelandic superstar Ragnar Kjartansson's video "Drunken Voyage," shot at the Venice Biennale in 2013 as he sailed a crew of recruits through the canals on a miniature Viking ship, or the beguilingly minimal, materially-sensitive canvas pieces by Barcelona-based Patricia Dauder.

But the structure that contains them is a hard lesson of what happens when you work against a building and not with it. The incongruity is hard to reconcile; Villa Toronto is meant to embrace the grand old structure, but instead seems at war with it. It self-declares as non-commercial and anti-art fair but with its bright white booths, it comes off looking more than a little fair-y.

Villa will be infiltrating various art spaces all over the city with an array of events, lectures and readings all week, and that gives it depth and separates it from the fair circuit with sensitivity and aplomb. But how its troubled heart in Union Station might have been soothed is a good guess. Given the restrictions of working within a historic structure part-way through a near-billion dollar makeover, maybe it couldn't have been.

A little clarity, maybe, comes in a pair of sculptures by Zeke Moores, a gilded dumpster and a chromium porta-potty.

The cheekily obvious jab at the endless construction here aside, they work: Large sculptures set adrift on the limestone floors of the grand old room, not imposing on it so much as adding to it. Why put art in boxes for an event that, in its ideal conception of self, is doing all it can to live outside of such things?

Applied to one eerily gorgeous installation by Tony Romano, a broken tree branch cast in aluminum coupled with a small film, you can see the damage done: Where it should have been lying vulnerable and exposed, it is unceremoniously fenced in.

It put me in the mind of a very different kind of show, one of installation and sculpture thoughtfully scattered throughout the space, with not a wall in sight. Union cries out for such a thing and who knows? Maybe that's next. Villa, from its home in Warsaw, is the pioneer here and all credit to them for that. They've opened the gate and showed us what could be. Now it's up to us to walk the path.