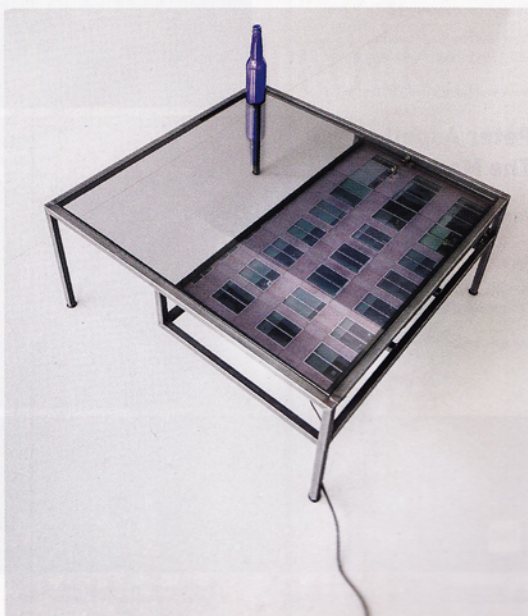
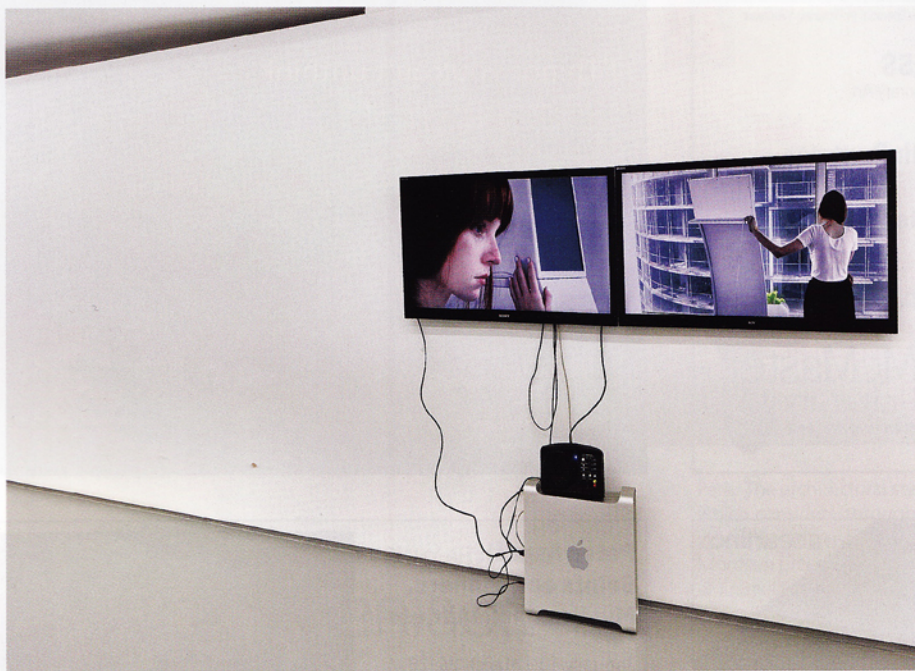


TORONTO
MKG127

GEOFFREY PUGEN

by Sam Cotter



Geoffrey Pugen's exhibition "White Condo" combined film, photography and sculpture to examine manifestations of urban alienation and surveillance in relation to self-presentation and lifestyle marketing. The exhibition's primary component and titular work, *White Condo* (2015), a 17-minute, two-channel film, follows protagonist Jan as he attempts to integrate into the expectations and lifestyle image prescribed by the omniscient computer overlord-cum-building manager of his new condo unit.

Within the film, brooding, hermetic Jan is in a probationary period, where he is being evaluated by building management to ensure his personality and aesthetic sensibilities are compatible with the condo's branding. The criteria for evaluation centres on his use of decor for self-expression, and he is assigned a psychiatrist turned lifestyle caseworker to help him succeed. Together they work through a carefully curated catalogue of housewares and, though he selects approved items, his combinations of them prove cold and baffling; he seemingly uses the objects in a purely aesthetic way, communicating neither personality nor purpose.

These sculptural assemblages, which also appear as photographs in the gallery, call on the slick aesthetic of catalogue and stock photography. Though these kinds of images are often brought into an art context by the generation of photographers to which Pugen belongs, within the logic of Pugen's film they signal Jan's maladjustment and lack of feelings, emotions and humanness. This inability to coherently express himself perplexes his caseworker and ultimately leads to the revocation of his unit in the building.

White Condo shows us a not so distant present. Pugen well understands the longstanding use of the science fiction genre as a means to

illustrate contemporary concerns. The exhibition creates claustrophobia through numerous representations of the condo-rich Toronto skyline, focusing on the sea of cranes and glass that signal seemingly endless new development. Despite the density, there is an equally strong feeling of isolation and, though Jan is constantly being watched, a lack of human connection. Under these pressures, the work takes the desire-oriented logic of lifestyle advertising—as represented by the catalogue and the condo itself—to an almost inverse extreme, in which Jan must alter himself to fit the images these commodities project.

Jan's self-transformation goes awry, under the film's omnipresent surveillance, sparseness and isolation in the characterless space of the condo. Though the city is recognizable, the condo itself is an anyspace, which through transference exchanges places with the uniform white cube of the gallery it is displayed in. Jan—and by proximity the viewer—begins to lose context and individuality, paralleling the hollow structure of the condo, becoming expressionless and sub-human. Jan's condo is a crucible for the alienation created by the mediation and compromises we accept for our pursuits of desire, public image and safety. ■

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Geoffrey Pugen *Looking Down, Looking Out* 2015 Steel, glass, salt, LED monitor and HD video 36.8 x 86.3 x 78.7 cm; 7 min
PHOTOS TONI HARKENSCHIED

ABOVE: Installation view of **Geoffrey Pugen's** "White Condo" 2015