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**GODFREY DEAN ART GALLERY
YORKTON
JULY 5 –
AUGUST 28, 2021**

Modern buildings are hardly functional without a power box. Although they are unremarkably hidden in plain sight, these simple boxes, boards of intricate wires and connectors carry currents that power every light, kettle, air conditioner and computer in a building. This tremendous contribution to the daily operation of our modern cities often goes unnoticed. However, this was the subject of Saskatoon-based artist David Stonhouse's solo exhibition *POWERBOXES*, on view in summer 2021 at the Godfrey Dean Art Gallery in Yorkton, Saskatchewan. Composed of an immersive gallery installation, murals, wall sculptures and paintings, as well as public interventions, the exhibition recognized and celebrated the ubiquity of utility panels. The artist also posed an interesting question "are they artistic?"



In trying to answer his conceptual question, Stonhouse took over the gallery with three large pink, yellow and blue murals. The artist populated each section with paintings of surrealist architectural features. For example, in the pink mural—inspired by the living room wall in the hit series *The Simpsons*—the subtle composition of three shades of colour creates an optical illusion that seemingly lifts the wainscoting away from the wall. Meanwhile in the wall's upper section, a grid of thickly fluorescent serpentine lines divides the surface into buzzing electrified squares of pastel pink. Or in the yellow and blue murals, the concept of electricity running up and down the wall is visualized with arrangements of strong organic circle patterns, or squiggly worm-like lines, swimming up from the floor. The yellow colour was selected as a personal preference, and for its healing potential in colour therapy. Whereas the sea-foam green wainscoting panel on the blue wall comes from the artist's observation of the same colour markings on power boxes around his city of Saskatoon. Standing in the middle of the gallery's open floor plan, the visual electricity—generated from the optical dynamics of Stonhouse's striking formal elements—engulfs the perception of visitors pulling them into a truly immersive experience.

The playfulness of Stonhouse's murals extended to the elements that he used to fashion the walls. Instead of concealing the gallery's existing infrastructure such as doors, exit signs, power outlets and cord covers, Stonhouse painted over or around the features, making them part of the environment he was constructing. Occasionally, he enhanced the



elements, painting trompe-l'œil cord covers or electrical outlets. The additions further emphasized their integral roles in the architectural composition not only of the murals, but by extension of the very building that the gallery is in.

Stonhouse also decorated his murals with a collection of wall sculptures that drew inspiration from utility boxes, vent hoods, radiators and other elements typically found outside a building. Contrary to their common

monotonous appearances, Stonhouse's sculptural renditions radiate bright colours. The functional elements are now geometrical shapes organized within a defined picture frame. The formal arrangement recalls the modernist tradition similar to works of Canadian sculptors like Eli Bornstein and Elizabeth Willmott who are known for their structural approach to abstract reliefs and sculptures.

Another artist reference that comes to mind when viewing Stonhouse's sculptures is Quebecois artist Serge Tousignant whose 2012 print series *Totem bleu*, *Totem jaune* and *Totem vert* also demands consideration of colour, sculpture, and space. This reference to the senior artist was substantiated in Stonhouse's series of small sculptural photographs. Occupying the only non-mural wall in the gallery, the artist installed a row of small-format square photographs of utility exteriors of buildings. The collection is a result of Stonhouse's bike rides around industrial areas, looking for views that would remind him of paintings. He places the photographs inside custom-made frames, which share elements with the environment depicted in the images. These can be viewed as extensions of the environment from the original site. In this manner, Stonhouse shares Tousignant's interdisciplinary curiosity about how sculpture and photographs can work together to influence a viewer's perception of space.

By layering the exhibition with a diverse range of techniques, formal and conceptual references, Stonhouse effectively turned the room inside out. He brought the outside into the previously pristine interior of the gallery. Stonhouse also brought art to the outdoors. During the run of the exhibition, the artist installed sculptures and photo panels on buildings and businesses across downtown Yorkton. Visitors could find his works adorning the exterior of a popular ice-cream shop, the

brick wall outside the gallery and a window hoarding in the alley of a music store. In a similar approach to the one used inside the gallery, Stonhouse responded formally to the environment, taking visual cues from the texture and colours of the site to which it was attached. Just like the inside of the gallery, the aesthetic additions not only drew attention to themselves but also encouraged reflection about the actual utility of infrastructure hidden in plain sight.

POWERBOXES was a daringly fun exhibition. Stonhouse's bold colours and rich textures created a formal and conceptual experience that was different from typical immersive exhibitions, which often focus solely on transporting audiences to another place or reality. By creating an environment and an experience that was simultaneously inside and outdoors, Stonhouse brought attention to simple, ordinary power boxes to highlight their significance and contribution to supporting our daily infrastructures.

Tak Pham is a Vietnamese art curator and critic. He is a graduate of Carleton University and OCAD University. His critical writings and reviews have appeared in *ESPACE art actuel*, *esse arts + opinions*, *Canadian Art*, and *Hyperallergic* among others. Pham currently works as Associate Curator at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan, Treaty 4 territory, the original lands of the Cree, Ojibwe, Saulteaux, Dakota, Nakota, Lakota, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation.

TYRANNY

Ray Cronin

**ART GALLERY OF NOVA SCOTIA
HALIFAX
JULY 21 –
ONGOING**

Tyranny's antithesis is often thought to be freedom, but in a new exhibition at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia a different solution to the problem of authoritarianism is proposed: sympathy. It's a timely discussion. Too often, "freedom" is the cloak would-be autocrats hide behind, and the rallying cry of oppression. Our neighbours to the south provide many examples, but in case we get too smug, current events in this country provide numerous ones as well. The ongoing debate about Covid-19 vaccination mandates is just the most egregious. Sympathy, the ability to project oneself into another's situation and feel accordingly, is a richer and more subversive antidote to tyranny, because, unlike our Western idea of freedom, it is outward facing. Sympathy murmurs "you," while too often freedom shouts "I."

There are sixteen artists in *TYRANNY*, all Canadian, all represented by works drawn from the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The exhibition, curated by David Diviney, starts with two powerful and unsettling works by Brian Jungen and Jane Ash Poiras. Jungen's *Beer Cooler* (2002)—a commercial plastic cooler incised with images based on homemade tattoos—evokes traditional Northwest Coast bentwood boxes that, elaborately painted and carved, were given away and even destroyed in potlatch ceremonies—a traditional Indigenous gift-giving ceremony banned in Canada from 1885 until 1961. *Beer Cooler* is filled with cans of Budweiser beers, their red, black and white colour scheme echoing the palette of much Northwest Coast visual art. Jungen is inverting the generosity of the potlatch here, offering alcohol to settlers, returning the poison pill that colonization inflicted on First Nations. Jungen stipulates that viewers of European descent are invited to help themselves to the beer; the exhibiting gallery is responsible for keeping the cooler stocked. Jane Ash Poiras's *Pink Shamans* (1996) combines collage, drawing, painting and text into a dense meditation on aspects of the colonizers' attempts to suppress First Nations culture. Such attempts, of course, have been all too successful, yet she still sounds a note of optimism, writing in the work, "the balance of nature tips but doesn't crumble. With determination harmony will prevail on Mother Earth."