The Utter Fascination of Watching Paint Dry

VINCE CHERNIAK

WATCHING THE installation videos that form part of Canadian artist Dave Kemp’s The Things You Know But Cannot Explain exhibition might leave you speechless. They’re about as interesting as watching paint dry, water boil, or grass grow. And while we’ve all seen a few shows over the years that may have prompted that response, I have Kemp to thank that I can actually finally say that in print.

Except —if you haven’t guessed already — this is exactly what Kemp is up to in his provocative and engaging Series of Boring Videos. The surprising revelation in this show also warrants a spoiler alert: trust me, that’s about all the info you need to know. Stop reading now, and get to McIntosh Gallery before July 19 and take in one of the more fascinating and thought-provoking exhibits you’ll see this year. Then come back, and read on.

That warning is justified here, because I wish I knew just a little less about what I was walking into at the gallery ahead of time. We’ve likely all had a film review reveal just a tad too much information that can influence our direct response to the film proper, and it would seem that is part of Kemp’s intent, by limiting textual descriptions, in the layout of this show. The three videos, Watch, Watched, and Watching that comprise the Series of Boring Videos all play with seemingly mundane scenarios to which we might bring preconceived judgments, and Kemp is interested in that disconnect between what we think we know and the perceptions or information of what’s hidden in the banal.

“I am interested in different kinds of knowledge and how they form our perception and understanding of the world,” says Kemp. “It is easy to quickly label something based on one’s pool of knowledge and then simply walk away. With these works, the nature of their presentation encourages the viewer to really experience what is happening with these everyday occurrences.”

Thus for Watched, the first video in the series, Kemp has the viewer start the video of (spoiler alert!) water boiling, rather than have it play on a loop, as half the fun is the unfolding of the process. The hard to identify black shimmering surface in short order reverses, so you see the dried state “returning” to wet. At some point through the video, both sides merge as a uniform image when the paint is at the same stage of drying. It’s a clever way of enhancing and informing just what

EXPERIENCE WHAT IS HAPPENING WITH THESE EVERYDAY OCCURRENCES.

Dave Kemp: Video still from Watched, part of Series of Boring Videos, 2014

Photo courtesy: Dave Kemp

Dave Kemp: Video still from Watched, part of Series of Boring Videos, 2014
have to hang in the darkened gallery for the length of the exhibit to see what other wonders you’re missing.

Kemp’s visual magic doesn’t end here. A mechanical engineer before focusing on art, he puts his tech skills to use in an intriguing conceptual piece, the One Pixel Camera. With a paradoxical high-quality Zeiss lens, Kemp fabricated an instrument that records the extreme limit of useful information on the low end of the extreme, one pixel of data, so that resulting images are a mere averaging of colour in the field of view, and thus present one colour tone — reducing “photography to its bare essence” he says. Kemp purposefully shot cliché scenes here, a sunset at Grand Bend, Niagara Falls, a kid’s birthday party, and a selfie. The images running down one wall of the gallery appear like the best paint chip display you’ve ever seen.

ON THE OPPOSING wall, a complementary series of detailed photos of arbitrary or ambiguous objects, Locations, sets up a contrasting dialogue with the low-info one-pixel series. While the only useful information in the one-pixel series comes from the titles, the Locations pics are full of image info, but no title or contextual background. “In neither way do you have a whole picture,” notes Kemp.

Oscar Wilde once said of Wagner’s music that “it’s better than it sounds”, and though it’s a seemingly backhanded compliment, it speaks to something ineffable in the work that can’t be reduced to words or descriptors of its reception, or reasons why a work is memorable and provokes further thought. Something like that is afoot here in Kemp’s work: watching paint dry, or one-pixel images, truly are better than they look. And further, great art often has humble origins and subjects; all in all, The Things You Know But Cannot Explain is a reminder of how powerful an exploration of the everyday, eloquently conceived and delivered, can be. So thank you Mr. Kemp, for boring us to tears — they’re tears of joy and wonder.

DAVE KEMP: The Things You Know But Cannot Explain at the McIntosh Gallery until July 19
www.mcintoshgallery.ca
exhibitions/current.html
www.davekemp.ca