

ENTERTAINMENT

VISUAL ARTS

A hilarious and perplexing show

'YYZ Mall,' a downtown installation piece, champions the small in a chain-store world

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At "YYZ Mall," which celebrates its grand opening this Friday, a particular kind of logic rules, maybe best exemplified by the money exchange run by Ken Ogawa at his specialized boutique, 156 Ehohe.

Besides running a single-hole mini-golf course and selling perfume — a bargain at \$5 a vial, if you're fond of smelling like a cinnamon bun — Ogawa runs a money exchange. You can buy 4.7 Ehohe dollars, which he makes himself, for the rounder figure of \$5 (Canadian). You can then use his dollars to shop the mall and, on your way out, return Ehohe dollars for your own profit and his loss.

It may seem a curious way to run a business, but in the context of art, where self-diminishing economics are more often the rule than the exception, the Ehohe exchange starts to bend to a sadly familiar logic.

So the cat's out of the bag: "The YYZ Mall," with its four stores, 430 square feet and very, very particular retail, is in fact an art installation, engineered by Daniel Borins and Jennifer Marman — or, for the purposes of the mall, MARMCO, quite possibly the smallest-scale developer in the history of the industry.

This also plays into the familiar limitations of the art world, particularly those of the artist-run centre, of which "YYZ" is one; founded some 40 years ago as an alternative to public institutions like the National Gallery or AGO, where the priority was seen as selling tickets to see multi-million-dollar works by dead artists, artist-run centres were open invitations to see the work of real, live people with exactly no profit motive whatsoever.

Which, of course, in a culture of capitalism, inevitably leads to crisis, and most artist-run centres have faced either an economic or identity crisis since their inception. Taken at face value, Borins and Marman make a clear, but largely insider-y, faux-commercial gesture in a space where such things are anathema; but at the same time, they engage a parallel crisis in the world Out There that makes the entire enterprise much more intriguing.



The stores at the "mall" include Ulysses Castellanos' shop, where he paints your portrait as a clown.



Daniel Borins and Jennifer Marman are the engineers behind "YYZ Mall."

The site of the mall is no accident: just a block off the outdoor shopping around Queen St. W. and Spadina Ave., Borins and Marman don't just make a sardonic lament for the artist's lot in a commercial world, but for grassroots enterprise, artistic or commercial alike.

At once perplexing and hilarious, the "shops" at "YYZ Mall" have maddeningly little to sell; as well as Ogawa, Aleks Ognjanovich offers a café-cum-fashion boutique called War and Leisure, which features his wear-once leisure wear for warfare fans; Ulysses Castellanos paints your portrait as a clown; and vex-

ingly, Nick Shinn represents his family's legitimate graphic design business, Shinindustry.

But they do serve a higher — even artist-run centre-worthy — purpose: MARMCO's mom and pop shops hyperbolize the disturbing speed at which small proprietors and family-run storefronts are becoming irrelevant in our real-estate-swallowing chain world.

Before you enter the mall, a photo grid of small storefronts (real ones: Jacob's Hardware, JM Meat Market) greet you. It doesn't prepare you for, say, Castellanos' disturbing renderings of you-as-clown; but it

does help make clear the perspective: that a creeping sameness, both in an art market gone crazy and a retail monoculture that transforms urban textures into outdoor malls, each with an H+M and an Urban Outfitters, is very much at hand.

So, how to view next weekend's full-on marketing blitz for the mall, in which the shopkeepers will do their best to lure shoppers inside? Call it a test: of the public at large's ability, or lack thereof, to resist the terms "massive" and "sale," when applied together to virtually anything; and of a small group of artists' ability to, in fact, deal with said bargain-hunting public accustomed to the clearance rack at Joe Fresh — and not finding it.

But most of all, I suspect from the point of view of Borins and Marman, it's less a test of either party than it is a larger system, both of expectations and what we take for granted. The mall closes for good on Oct. 17, whether business is brisk or not. Like so many other shops within a few blocks that have closed after years, or decades, the end result, both for art and commerce, is the same: small, personal and unique are vanishing luxuries in this world of ours, often without a mark. Do we miss them when they're gone? Not if there's a bargain to replace them. And there's nothing funny about that at all.