

Last month, on a sun-drenched Saturday afternoon, a friend and I drove to Hamilton to see “Centrifugal,” an exhibition of art in parking lots organized by curator Eileen Sommerman for the Art Gallery of Hamilton. Since centrifugal denotes a moving away from the centre (the part of the city where both gallery and parking lots were located), I couldn’t help but find the show’s title bewildering. (Art that’ll drive you right out of town? – not an auspicious beginning for someone who has just arrived.) But this was the curator who last year had given us “In Lieu,” art in public washrooms, so I suspected some titular mischief was involved.

As it turned out, the title refers to the fact that the parking lots are largely used by commuters who head for the burbs as soon as the work day is over, leaving the downtown core empty. Sommerman asked artists Kim Adams, Adrian Blackwell, Alan Flint, Gwen MacGregor, machyderm (Dermot Wilson and Christopher McNamara) and Kelly Mark to respond to the site. Adams and Blackwell have experienced making public works, but for many of the artists it was a departure. When curators ask artists to respond to an unusual context, there are real risks involved; understandably then, shows like this are almost always uneven. Alan Flint’s billboard *Power (the family as a cultural corporation)*, depicting his family home with the word “Power” looming above, left me baffled.

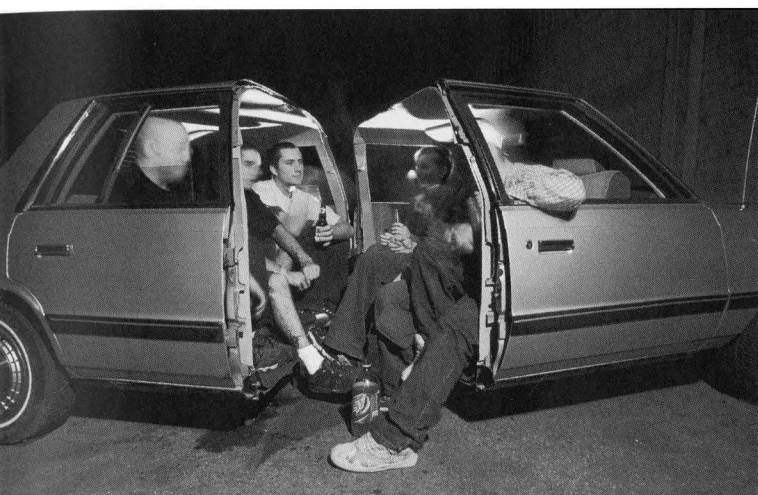
Why mount this here? Why not in a residential neighbourhood? Despite his enthusiasm for Sommerman’s proposal, Flint’s sensibility just didn’t translate.

Others fared better. Gwen MacGregor made full use of the poetic possibilities of a “found” site. In her piece *Up*, she simply drew attention to a gorgeous old smokestack leaning at the far end of a parking lot by having a musician sit on an elevated platform at its base and play the hurdy-gurdy. And Adrian Blackwell’s piece, *How to open a car like a book*, featuring a bisected Plymouth Reliant (sawed in half between the front and back seats), was a wreckless thrill to behold.

Sommerman’s successes are memorable precisely because of the exigencies built into her curatorial premises; but a few days later, back in Toronto, an artist was describing the pressures of making work on demand: So many curators want to show new work, what are we to do with the work we’ve already made?

Certainly curators programming for parking lots and washrooms won’t always find existing work that suits their purposes, but curators for galleries might still find relevance in exhibiting work that has been gathering dust in the studio. Those who consistently overlook existing work in favour of the new make suppliers out of artists and leave viewers little opportunity to see the work that artists feel compelled to make, independent of curators’ demands. Given our capacity for cultural amnesia and our unhealthy infatuation with newness, it couldn’t hurt to re-open a few dusty crates.

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Top right: Alan Flint, *Power (the family as a cultural corporation)* 1999, illuminated sign board / Above left: Adrian Blackwell, *How to open a car like a book* (1999), Plymouth Reliant / Photos by Michael Awad