

The Piazza Room

Updates Mon/Wed/Fri to keep you informed about your country.

Gallery Profile: Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery

Posted on [July 20, 2010](#) by [A.Y. Daring](#)

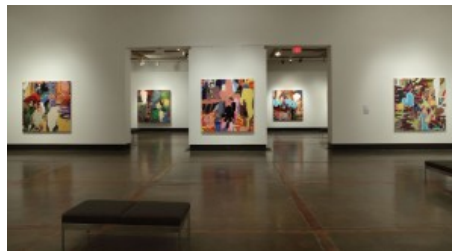
click the pics for a large view

Walking into the [Kitchener-Waterloo Art Galley](#) (or KW|AG as they're also known) I can certainly understand why some people would feel intimidated and small in a room full of contemporary art. The expansive grey walls are broken up only by the sound of children's laughter, bright yellow walls, and large LCD tv behind a grouping of plush couches. It'd be easy to ignore all that and focus only on preconceived notions, if you really wanted to.



The Hub research lounge. Photo: Robert McNair

Past The Hub, that entrance way with the couches and the yellow and the children's day camp in the room on the left, is a large room with several dozen paintings that look like a Kindergarden class exploded onto them. Over, and over, and over again. It's the [John Kissick exhibit](#), entitled "A Nervous Decade," on display from June 16-Septemebr 5.



Installation view of John Kissick's A Nervous Decade.
Photo: Photo: Robert McNair

He's an abstract artist, and A Nervous Decade is a collection of work throughout his career, showing both the differences and the similarities between who he was then, and who he is now. At first, I stand in front of them, one by one, utterly confused. Apparently, this particular artist is inspired by what the curator calls a "circuitous process of quotation and the institutionalization of artistic gestures". Now, I am an educated woman. I actually understand the importance of one person recycling, and BBC is on my lists of websites that I check every morning. But even I can't quite grasp what a "circuitous process of quotation" is, and for a long

time, I can't connect with the art work in front of me. I keep thinking, "I don't get it. I'm not smart enough to get it. What does this mean? Who is this man and why is he so circuitous with his institutionalization?" On my third walk through the Kissick exhibit of abstract art, something catches my eye that makes me stop trying to translate hyper-syllable poofy words and start appreciating what I'm seeing.

Directly to the right of the entrance way into A Nervous Decade is a painting called "I Feel Better (Than James Brown)". I smiled when I saw the title and immediately started humming the classic '60s song, when suddenly, like sugar and spice, I get it. All the blues and greens and pinks and splashes of red in what was once an abstract painting now meant something. The point isn't to be able to contextualize it and be able to describe it. The point is to just feel it. When you think back to the lyrics and the music of the James Brown classic, the John Kissick painting is actually entirely relatable. He's painted what it's like to listen to I Feel Good! Here I was, thinking that there was some big picture idea that needed to be articulated, when really, what the artist was trying to express was the pure, unadulterated joy that comes from turning up the volume really loudly when a song you love comes on the radio. And then you stop being inhibited, and you start dancing with your friends, and every one just feels really, really good. Some art is meant to inform and call you to action. Other art is just meant to be an expression of what the artist is feeling. And then they release that to the world because, I don't know, maybe they're exhibitionists and want everyone to know how they feel. Or maybe it's because they just want to connect with others who are feeling what they're feeling and can share in their joy. They want to smile and they'll show their teeth because it just plain feels good.

There's more to the KW|AG than just John Kissick. There's also a painting in their permanent collection that looks like someone froze a tornado, then exploded a rainbow inside the middle of it. The stillness of an object in motion so well captured. It's the first painting on your left when walking down the main corridor. It's also my favourite painting in the gallery. If you have the time, and I suggest that you make an afternoon out of visiting the KW|AG, you should stand in front of it and turn yourself sideways, and then as upside-down as you can manage. Looking at the tornado swirl becomes different things when you move yourself in front of an inanimate object.

There's an art installation in the first room on the right of the corridor that looks like a bunch of garbage left by the kinds of people that Al Gore hates. It's called "[Research, Flow Charts and Data Banks](#)," on display from June 17- September 5.



Installation view of Gwen MacGregor's Research, Flow Charts and Data Banks. Photo: Robert McNair

When you walk over to the other side of the room, things suddenly change, and what you're really seeing is a meticulously documented graph of where various wildflower species grow along the Grand River. I want to describe to you the awe I was in as I stood and stared at the floor, marvelling at this particular piece of installation art. Gwen McGregor, the genius behind that particular work, used GIS to create the art. GIS stands for Geographic Information Systems. It is a combination of hardware, software, data and people that combined, create a system for creating, managing and manipulating geodata. I once took a 12 week course in GIS. (And attended only four of the classes. But see, I did learn *something!*) Had I know that with the right frame of mind, GIS can be used to produce fine art, I would have taken the course more seriously. Each glass bottle, each yogurt tub, each cardboard box was meticulously placed in order to be an accurate representation of what's happening in our physical environment. There is toxic garbage mixed in with wildlife, and unless you're careful to look at it from all sides, you could quite easily walk right past something truly beautiful.

Don't forget to venture downstairs. There's some sculpture work by the staircase that you should be sure to see. But it's the drawings and the paintings that should really draw you in. I stood for a solid 20 minutes in front of a drawing of a bird. Or at least, I thought it was a drawing of just a bird. Until I notice the man within it's wing. I think that's a pretty obvious metaphor for a particular relationship between humans and nature, don't you? Yet it's drawn with nothing but clean, bold lines and the liberal use of white-space. So while the (apparent) metaphor is (apparently) obvious, the message is presented in the most refreshing of ways.

Before you walk into the gallery though, make sure you stop and look for the baby-shaped squash. No, really. Look:



Installation view of Mary Catherine Newcomb's Product of Eden 2010.
Photo: Kirstie Patterson, KW|AG.

Every single morning, Mary Catherine Newcomb comes to the KW|AG at 6am and carefully tends to her squash garden. It's an art installation titled "[Product of Eden](#)" and you can catch it until October 22nd. (And read her blog about it [here](#).) Inside the two large, rectangular planters in front of the gallery, she is tending to a very special species of squash. It's a special species of squash partly because she developed the particular strain of the vegetable you'll see. It's also special partly because each vegetable growing gets carefully and tenderly placed inside a baby-shaped mold. And as the squash plants grow, they've taken on the shapes of little (rather

life-like!) baby creatures. There's something intensely visceral about looking at a 2.5 pound marrow plant, taking on the shape of one of humanity's most delicate forms. It's difficult to decide if this is a political statement about what humans are doing to the environment, or if this is simply a piece of organic fine art. Is Newcomb trying to tell us something about our behaviour, or is she just having fun, experimenting about what happens when you put soft squash plants into tight molds and let them grow, creating very beautiful, innocent shapes? Are we supposed to be challenged, or calmed by her work? That's entirely up to use to decide.

There are currently 4 exhibitions that you can go see, as well as a large permanent collection that you can keep going back to, again and again. Allow yourself to fall in love with the pieces. They're family friendly too, with a revolving schedule of children's programming and family events. So take your kids. (As if you're not already making sure they understand the importance of art! Still, it's important that children learn to play in art environments though, and learn to connect with the cultural movements of their times, even if they think they're just making pretty pictures. Let's indoctrinate them early, people!) What I've described is but a small snapshot of what they have to offer. You can describe art to people, and help them see past the fog of intellectualizing everything and having to understand it. But I can't live the KW|AG experience for you. I can just give you a snapshot of all the kind of experience you might encounter. I promise you, it'll be a good one. (And admission is free!)

For more on the KW|AG and their list of programming and events, visit them at www.kwag.ca

Like it? Subscribe and share it!



About A.Y. Daring

A.Y. Daring once beat Chuck Norris in a staring contest. Twitter is her drug of choice ([@aydaring](https://twitter.com/aydaring)) and she lives on a diet of caffeine and megalomania. All of this is a true story.

[View all posts by A.Y. Daring →](#)

This entry was posted in [Community](#), [Contemporary Art](#), [Events](#), [Gallery Review](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

Like

[Login](#)

Add New Comment



Sort by popular now

Showing 0 comments

[✉ Subscribe by email](#) [RSS](#)

Trackbacks