

Smoking City (detail) 2004–06
Cardboard, wood, fog machine
Dimensions variable

JOHN DICKSON'S art puts
metaphysics into motion

BY R. M. VAUGHAN

Beautiful Disasters

The boat is in the process of sinking. And those mini-cities? They're on fire

Last summer, on a warm, clear day, a breezy afternoon appropriately close to the magical, dreamy stroke of *Midsummer's Eve*, a deceptively simple work of art induced in me a feeling I'd thought my art-weary eyes (soul?—I wish) had lost long ago—wonder.

Don't get me wrong, I still crave an emotional response to and from art, and contemporary art fills me with all sorts of emotions. The problem is, few of them are profound. Bemusement, check. Knowing and nodding agreement, check. Appreciation, check. Resignation, double check. Boredom, a pointy mountain range worth of checks.

But on that sun-dappled afternoon, on a day as ordinary in all other respects as a tablecloth, as a sunflower, an installation by the Toronto-based artist John Dickson, a work fabricated from the plainest materials, reminded me why I think and write about art in the first place—because every once in a (too long, lately) while, art can inspire awe. I don't care if that sounds unfashionably transcendent. I've seen enough fashion to choke Anna Wintour.

Let me set the scene.

I had met John Dickson once or twice before, exclusively in his capacity as a participant in *Persona Volare*, a smart, underappreciated Toronto-based art collective that happens to house some good friends of mine. But John and I had never had a proper conversation, and he is, if not shy, not the most socially aggressive person on the planet. I remembered him as the quiet one in the collective (every collective needs a quiet guy, and the PV gang are a particularly, um, chatty bunch).

So when he picked me up in his car to take me to the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, a so-called "regional" (i.e., more than half an hour from downtown Toronto) public art gallery located in the town of Bowmanville, I was more than a bit anxious. What if he clammed up in the car? What if the quiet guy spent the ride playing with the radio or, worse yet, drove in sombre silence? I'm Atlantic Canadian, we don't understand silence.

Instead, within moments of hitting the highway, we were talking about genital surgery and sleep disorders (none of your business), child-rearing (he is a proud parent), migration (he is British-Canadian), writing (that would be me), prostate cancer (don't ask) and my recent, raunchy misadventures in Chicago (really, don't ask). The man is a fountain of happy chatter. And we hadn't even looked at his art yet.

Once we got to his exhibition, a survey of work from the 1990s and the current decade entitled "Two Cities," the talk truly began to flow. It was almost as if no one had ever asked John about his work before, so happy was he to follow me around the gallery and explain, in great detail, exactly how every marvellous, meticulously crafted sculpture had been created; what gizmos and gyros were needed to make them spin, or puff, or rotate; and what he was obsessing about at the time the works were made. Then we went upstairs, to the gallery's high-ceilinged, airy loft space, and both of us were struck dumb.

Perched way, way up on a plateau wedged between the rough rafters, key-lit by indirect sunshine, sunshine that changed in intensity and shape every time the wind nudged a tree branch or a cloud, Dickson's *Smoking City*, an enchanted miniature paper metropolis, hovered above our heads, floating in a cloud of dust-sparkled fake fog. It was like seeing Oz's Emerald City for the first time, from the end of the yellow brick road, minus the lurid greens, minus the gold (Dickson prefers common cardboard to precious metals). Or like coming upon a perfectly preserved mid-century diorama in an overlooked museum. Or like opening a box you thought was empty and finding, instead, that this is where your parents put all the models you built when you were nine years old.

There's a lot going on in John Dickson's art, much to consider and parse and intellectually position (and I will try), but, for that moment of pure breathless joy, that perfect moment of revelation and exhilaration, I will pause, say thanks and hold the quiet thrill close. Sometimes the best response you can have to a work of art is to shut up.

It's tempting, as are all reductive strategies, to describe Dickson's works as "toy art"—art that is both about and employs miniatures, models, ships in bottles, dollhouse-like structures and train-set landscapes. And these elements are certainly at play, and Dickson does love his gadgets.

"I don't care about the 'toy artist' label," Dickson bluntly states, "because I'm not really working with toys proper. Some of my works look like they could be toys, but that's not a big concern. But in terms of the same sort of attention that a well-made toy requires, yes, I share that. I'm pretty fussy. I have a certain idea of how I want things to look in my head, but I don't want them to look too good, too 'skilled' or too finished, because then the work starts to look like craft, and then the crafting kind of overtakes the meaning.

"Sometimes," he continues, "all people will pay attention to is how well something is put together, but I want them to think about how beautiful the thing I'm recreating is. But I'm not worried about being read as a craftsman or a gadget guy, because there's other stuff going on in the work that is just as important. I do hear all the time: 'Wow, that's a lot of work!' But there are lots of pieces I've made where the gadgetry and the work is all kind of hidden, and the meaning too."

Indeed. Once one looks deeper into the work, past the first gleeful thrill of seeing so many, well, cute (I have no problem with that word—cute is much harder to pull off than it looks) contraptions, the adorable little boats, planes and buildings, one sees, very quickly, that Dickson is up to much, much more than creating charming amusements. Every little whirligig and trinket is embedded, indeed seething, with tension, even menace. Not to overstate Dickson's intentions, as I imagine them, but even if Dickson has placed a sweet little wooden boat, in the most darling way imaginable, inside a fat and jolly wine bottle, remember that the wee boat is in the process of sinking! And those mini-cities? They're on fire.

Walking through Dickson's survey show at the Clarington, my first reaction was that kids would love this art. Love it, and not truly get it. They would want to caress the palm-sized sculptures, or shake the bottles holding the ships and watch the miniature vessels bob up and down. But the calamities the sculptures describe, the ruin and death prompted by horrible collisions of nature and human ambition, would elude a child, and more than a few adults. To wit, Dickson's 1996–97 series *Ten Small Nautical Disasters*, two elements of which—*Oil Spill* and *Sinking Ship*—were on display at the Clarington, is a prime example of Dickson's deft mixing of the charming and the charnel house.

In *Oil Spill*, Dickson inserts a miniature oil tanker into a long, horizontally laid wine bottle. Simple enough. Except, on closer inspection, we see that the tanker is half-submerged in a line of thick, black oil, oil that hovers over the remaining water like a filthy, opaque shroud. In *Sinking Ship*, another vessel, looking like a luxury ocean liner from the last century, is surrounded by wax icebergs. And we all know where that narrative is going.

The most active of the boat-model works, although one not officially part of the *Ten Small Nautical Disasters* series, is *Cyclone*—a work that plunks an imperilled, wee model ship into a huge and heavy water-filled demijohn (one of those homey, oversized fermenting bottles one sees used as decoration in Italian restaurants). The ship drags a miniature (and mag-



Black & White 2008 Burnt wood, mirror, compressed air, ground garlic skin 96 x 76 x 85 cm

netized) anchor, and when Dickson throws a switch on the cabinet that supports the sculpture (and hides all the mechanical gizmos Dickson so loves to concoct), the water begins to swirl faster and faster, creating a whirlpool that perpetually threatens to suck the ship under—and, by extension, all the terrified little people one imagines clinging to life jackets for their dear little lives. Down, down they will go, into the heartless brine.

Cute and cruel are often interrelated—just look at the Internet-based lolcats phenomenon, wherein images of pet cats in distress are decorated with funny/sick text that anthropomorphizes the cats as subliterate humans—but Dickson takes the conflation to another level. His works are so lovingly constructed, made with so much evident joy and painstaking planning, that the fact that the works are ultimately depicting wrenching disasters makes the viewer invest in the works on two ostensibly conflicting levels: enjoyment of the craftsmanship, which is thrillingly accomplished; and a kind of creeping horror, which is amplified by the realization that one is gazing with admiration at recreations of catastrophes.

Dickson, however, questions my perhaps overly dark readings of his work. As he explains, "There was a blog entry when I showed the *Smoking City* piece at the Toronto International Art Fair in 2008 that said, 'I've had enough of this 9/11 shit!'—and, you know, there's references to 9/11 in the work, but I didn't want it to be just about 9/11. I mean, I guess there are darker readings, but I wanted it to be more ambiguous, and I purposely didn't put in the World Trade Center towers.

"Ha! I make positive pieces too! At the Tree Museum, I made a giant beaver lodge. It's very organic, but kind of like a Romanesque church. In the summer it fills with frogs and snakes, and big fat *Alice in Wonderland* caterpillars. And chipmunks."

Dickson's latest works, a series of model cities in states of distress (*Smoking City*, the mesmerizing work described in this essay's opening, is a magic urban landscape covered in mysterious white mist—fog, smoke, poison gas?), decidedly up his inviting/disturbing dynamic to full throttle. Making obvious references to contemporary and historical conflicts (with its many miniatures of famous buildings, especially buildings from New York City,

John Dickson at Katharine Mulherin Contemporary Art Projects in Toronto, September 2008



Cyclone 1997 Cabinet, motor, water, sand, cork, copper, magnet, electronic timer 1.3 m x 50 cm x 50 cm PHOTO JEAN-MICHEL KOMARNICKI



Smoking City is, whatever Dickson says, a definite nod to September 11—but, to be fair, one not slathered in jingoistic morbidity), Dickson imparts to devastation a weird, and weirdly alluring, calm.

What we are watching, in both *Smoking City* and the equally gorgeous *Black & White*, a doll city in a mirrored box that looks like Dresden after the Allied bombing, are before-and-after shots of urban disasters—the city as a target and the city as a target successfully struck.

Black & White is particularly unnerving because the tops of all its match-box-sized buildings have been meticulously burnt off by Dickson. Meanwhile, the charred and blackened rooftops are slowly being covered in white powder that puffs up from the base of the sculpture, like little explosions going off. Yet in true Dickson style, this grim diorama was created from the humblest ingredients—the little torched houses are made of thin bits of simple craft wood, and the snow/bomb dust/nuclear fallout is made of garlic skin that Dickson shredded with a coffee grinder. Tabletop and terror, a classic Dickson strategy.

“My early work came out of just exploring materials,” Dickson tells me. “And then I kind of started pushing that, and as my work progressed, I sometimes used process just to have an initial starting idea. I think I’m trying to confront the chaos that I think about all the time, that keeps me up at night, by trying to compress it to a manageable scale, so that you and

I can deal with it. What I hope people get out of my work is that the work reveals itself the more time you spend with it. The longer you spend with it, the farther it takes you. The good thing about being a visual artist, though, is that, apart from at exhibition openings, you don’t really see how people look at, or dismiss, your work! Ha!”

In a catalogue published in 1996 to celebrate Dickson’s touring exhibition “Rise and Fall,” a joint show with the Montreal artist Laurie Walker, Wayne Baerwaldt, then director of Plug In ICA, described Dickson’s work, and Dickson himself, as “reluctant to apply any sense of the word spectacle... Dickson insists that the common definition of spectacle as blockbuster public event is inadequate and misleading as it obscures the more important issues and subtle strategies behind his ‘minor spectacles.’” A decade-plus later, I found this to still be true.

Dickson’s quietest works, his recent wood-and-cardboard sculptures augmented with puffy clumps of upholstery stuffing, play, with razor-sharp precision, on this oxymoronic “minor spectacle” dichotomy.

Made from pale and unvarnished wood and/or Dickson’s signature dull cardboard, the works’ various subjects (a whale, a downward-racing plane, the CN Tower, the Golden Gate Bridge, another tanker) look innocuous enough, even a bit whimsical, but are nevertheless laced with melancholy. Whales are an endangered species. Is the burst of clotted upholstery stuffing pluming up from the whale’s back a spout of water, or a last gasp? The descending plane’s trail of white batting could be an exhaust trail, the remnants of a pierced cloud or the first signs of an engine about to burst into flames. The Golden Gate Bridge is a landmark famous for its fog-shrouded majesty, and high suicide count.

I’m not suggesting that John Dickson is a sad sack, because he is decidedly not one in person, nor that his work is overly concerned with death, mortality or calamity. But his choices as an artist, namely his habit of combining visuals that simultaneously register as both charming (in the full sense of the word: designed to charm) and distressing, as both playful and portentous, as fun and fun’s true opposite, awe-inspiring, make him something of an enigma. Is he really that split in his world view?

Chatting with John, I notice a pattern developing: he loves to talk about how his works are made, all the inventive strategies he employs to make the snow fly, the smoke waft and the waters funnel—but he rarely talks about why he makes what he makes.

In fact, when asked, he tends to deflect the question with more tech talk. In his quiet studio, a cross between a scrapyards office and a mad scientist’s lair, I confront him with his reluctance to talk about the non-material aspects of his work.

“Yeah...,” Dickson considers, “I may be more comfortable talking about how I make things, but I like to talk about the why too. The how is kind of limiting. But I find that most people don’t really ask you ‘what does it mean?’ questions, or maybe they might ask you why you made something, but that’s usually someone who is totally outside the art world, who doesn’t really understand why people make art.

“In some ways, the mechanics and the semiotics are intertwined. Each piece is very different from every other, but the themes that run underneath connect them, so when I get an idea, I kind of choose materials and processes that go with that idea. In that way, meaning comes out of how they are being made and what the materials are, as well as the imagery.”

Like the well-oiled motors John Dickson pulls apart and rejigs for his own devices, his practice is perfectly in sync with his own internal gears. ■

See more of John Dickson’s work at canadianart.ca/dickson