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## In the Studio: Andrea Kastner

By Melissa Bennett

Andrea Kastner has lived in six cities across Canada in her thirty-odd years, and lucky for me, Hamilton has been her home for the past two. Before she and her family move on to their next abode in Iowa this summer, I finally visited her studio in a proper way.



We met about a year and a half ago, and she currently lives about fifty paces away from my house. Trouble is, we've got kids who like to play together, and the conversation tends to turn towards the quality of the maple syrup as we scarf down pancakes at my place, in snippets of conversation in between the children's chatter. When I saw her this morning at the bus stop with kids in tow, and chatted with her three-year old, Jonah about the awe-inspiring details of the number four bus, I started to miss her already.

Our visit took place a few weeks ago, just as her studio was bursting with paintings stacked two or even eight deep against the walls. It was the night before the works were sent to Montreal for an exhibition, and the smell of paint was still there, some of the canvases still wet. Considering the small size of her home studio, the works contain a lot of deep spatial considerations. For the past ten years, Andrea has been looking at urban landscapes, focusing on the buildings and infrastructure, and in these recent works, highlighting the rapid changes happening around her in downtown Hamilton. As residents of the north end, we've both witnessed the building of the new GO station, and the creep of gentrification. Dumpsters sit in front of at least one house on every block, followed by endless construction crews. The real estate market has caught up to us here and change is palpable. I have loved the neighbourhood so far for its realness and its grit, its good mix of artists and working class folks and culturally diverse families, the quiet, and the close proximity to the harbour. It reminds me so much of the time I lived in and loved the north end of Halifax.



Andrea's work, whether made while she lived in Montreal, Sackville, Edmonton, Toronto or Kamloops, has always looked at the overlooked spots in a city, placing value on back alleys and especially the garbage in them. But she's not just another artist looking at garbage - she has worked with refuse as a material from many different angles, and the works tend to imbue found materials with character and poetry. Her Hamilton paintings show construction debris, trucks, train tracks and buildings in limbo. She incorporates collage too, adding a nice nod to the visual perception of these spaces, once or twice removed through photography and reproduction. I think I could go on about Marshall McLuhan's theories of mediation, or theories about photographic and print reproduction in terms of realism and fantasy, but our conversation didn't lead us there.

I was first enthralled by the beauty in the painterly quality of her canvases: her deft touch that treats the tiniest of spaces and the largest swaths of colour with equal weight, the negative spaces that sit perfectly next to areas that have been highly worked. We talked about the familiarity of the sites she's painting, but there were other familiar elements too - a

painting of a side of a house that I know, though cropped in view to show only its upper story from the side, bears a trace of its neighbouring building from another era. It can't seem to shake the shadow of the roof line of the past adjoining structure, after it was evidently torn down and rebuilt as a shorter house. But Andrea's take on this particular site is not so photographic or collage-based; this one has dark painted angular shadows, and ambiguous areas that are filled with an otherworldly blue. One blue section is the sky; the other takes up the space of the second story window of the house, but given the time of day she's depicting, it's an impossible blue.



Andrea Kastner. Dreamers, 2016 oil on canvas, 20" x 26"

The longer I look at it, the more I wonder about the fantastical sources that those blues must have — and then we get to talking about aliens and lights and outer space. I hadn't thought "science fiction!" when I first encountered her work, but now that I think further about it, I love that she is playing with her own bizarre narratives, though they need not ever be told to

the viewer. The black angular shadows on the lower right of the painting seem at first to describe an eavestrough, but as we talk further, we decide

that they really look more like this character we can't quite recall, but both remember from watching TV as kids in the early 1980s. Further research on my part reveals that I'm thinking of a classic silhouetted burglar figure (a dominating fear of my youth) crossed with "Teeny Little Super Guy" from Sesame Street. Remember him? No? "You can't tell a hero by his size, he's just a little teeny super guy." Wikipedia tells me that those stop-motion animated shorts featured him always in his residence, a live-action, regular-sized kitchen. This doesn't immediately illuminate Andrea's practice, though I could likely whip up a quasi-convincing piece about the ever-evolving pedestrian world she depicts in contrast to the controlled domestic surroundings of "Super Guy," but I shall refrain.



Andrea Kastner. Rupture, 2016. Oil on canvas, 60" x 72"

Andrea's focus will surely evolve with what I imagine will be very different views in Iowa City, where the family is moving because her husband, Colin Lyons, landed a year-long artist and teaching position in the town where American Gothic was born. After that it's off to Binghamton, New York, where Colin has accepted a permanent teaching gig. With luck, we in Hamilton have earned a place in their hearts, and they'll return.

Melissa Bennett is a curator and writer, and currently holds the position of Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

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