

## Douglas Coupland, Canada's most patriotic cynic



### Iconic artist goes small (gallery show) and big (downtown park) in T.O.

Douglas Coupland is probably this country's best-known cultural multi-tasker: novelist, playwright, actor, TV producer, screenwriter, furniture designer, coiner of zeitgeist-defining terms ("McJob" was his, drawn from his equally lexiconic first novel, *Generation X*) and – oh, right – artist.

Not that his art career is an afterthought. It is art that brings Coupland to Toronto today for the twofold purpose of opening a show of his work at Clark & Faria (formerly the Monte Clark Gallery), and surveying the colossal installation of public art he's spent the last few years working on amid the Concord Cityplace condo development.

The former is smallish, the latter huge – at eight acres, by some accounts, the largest privately funded public art commission in the country, ever.

Let's start with the small. At Clark & Faria, Coupland's main preoccupation is parsing his relationship with an artist who would appear to be his direct forebear, Andy Warhol. This comes through in ways that are direct – silk-screened copies of Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe, besieged by food labels or skateboard stickers or, in one case, an array of tiny cartoon flowers – and much more subtle and eerie.

The Marilyn series is called "Matricide;" in an equally dark parental reference, a series of gilt-framed wigs – one layer dark, the other Warhol-esque peroxide blond – is called

"Patricide." Whether Coupland is defacing or eviscerating Warhol's project in an attempt to break free, or indulging in homage, is for you to decide.

"Warhol is obviously a huge figure in the art world," he wrote via email, "obviously, so much so, that artists often choose not to go near issues like repetition and mass culture ... it's almost a form of self-censorship. I just thought I'd bring it all out into the open with the wigs and Marylins and Bills."

There's more here, too, all of it glitteringly seductive and candy-colourful – a series of "Talking Sticks," assembled of children's word blocks, spell things like "Quit Your Job," "Define Normal" and "Hot Shit" – but not without a touch of melancholy.

Coupland's dabbling in mass-produced sameness can't help but elicit lament. Coupland calls it a manifestation of "the kind of depressing legislated creativity that arises from big-box craft stores ... how to do something anarchical with flower stickers? That's a real challenge."

Meanwhile, out there, a different, less depressing vision is taking place. In his *Souvenir of Canada* books, seemingly cynical Coupland surprised many with his achingly earnest assemblage of consumer-culture Canada. From Canada Goose lawn sculptures to stubby beer bottles, the sense was a man who has taken even our most clichéd throwaways to heart.

So what to expect at the massive Concord Cityplace Park? It's mostly speculation at this point, but if you drive along the Gardiner Expressway, you'll get a taste: Way up high, a huge red canoe, beefed up, cartoon-style, made stubby and wide; and over a machine-contoured hillock, a stand of colourfully striped, man-sized spools that Coupland said were fishing bobbers. The park is due to open in September. Encircling it will be a walking path named for another icon of Canadiana and Coupland hero: the Terry Fox Miracle Mile.

At 3 1/2 years from start to finish, it was surely a challenge to the fast-moving Coupland. "I've never done anything with such a long timeline," he wrote. "I also had to learn about things like what sort of lawnmowers Metro parks people use and the thousands of minor issues involved with urban situations. Lighting. Dogs. Noise. Light. It was a learning curve."

Cynically inclined critic of mass-produced culture, or shamelessly earnest nation-booster – can the real Doug Coupland ever please stand up? The thing is, he may well be already – performing the previously-thought-impossible task of standing in two places at once.