

THE GLOBE & MAIL, by Sarah Milroy
September 6, 2005, pgs. R1-R2

Globe Review

THE GLOBE AND MAIL ■ CANADA'S NATION

THE NEXT GREAT PRIME MINISTER
BILLIONAIRE FRANK STRONACH'S
REALITY-TV IDEA, R4

BLACKBIRD THEATRE
ALL CLASSICS, ALL THE TIME
IN VANCOUVER, R3

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2005

The Vancouver author and artist has chewed up his books, a Bible and U.S. dollar bills to produce this summer's sleeper hit on the visual-art scene, **SARAH MILROY** writes

Coupland's literary lunch

For writers, chewing on the past is an occupational hazard, fated, as they are, to ruminate on the cud of lived experience and past creative output in an unrelenting, self-defining discipline. It was just such a process that gave rise to the work that was, for me, this summer's sleeper hit: a suite of sculptures by Vancouver artist and novelist Doug Coupland.

The author of such epoch-defining novels as *Generation X*, *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Eleanor Rigby*, Coupland has, since the early nineties, also produced work as a visual

artist, showing with the Monte Clark Gallery in Vancouver and in Toronto, where his most recent works are currently on view. The show includes works that play on futurist themes (including a comely pink-and-white spacesuit for interplanetary escapades, fitted out with ornamental orchids).

Others probe the world of books and language — such as a suite of brightly coloured panel works that present fragments of language run through the digital translation programs from English outward and back again to home base, the missing bytes and blips registered in

blanks of coloured paper.

The pick of the litter, though, is the group of faux hornet's nests fashioned by the artist from the pulped remains of books — the artist's own, as well as a Gideon Bible — plus one made from a wad of masticated U.S. \$1 bills. (This last work is titled *Royalties*.)

Each nest is poised on a branch and sheltered in a wooden vitrine, preserved like a natural-history display. Here, though, the natural process under scrutiny is that of human creativity.

These works are very intimate and visceral, reflecting the author's

own passionate, even compulsive attachment to the print medium. He has read many of the books in his home library repeatedly. Ask for the A-list, as I did over the phone earlier this week, and the titles jump off the tongue. "*The Andy Warhol Diaries* may be the No. 1 pick," he says, after a brief pause for consideration. "I've read that about 10 times. There's *Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio*; *Play It as It Lays* by Joan Didion; *Fight Club* [by Chuck Palahniuk]. . . ."

"There's a point when you have read a book enough times that reading becomes like listening to

music. I was driving in my car yesterday and listening to [David Bowie's] *Aladdin Sane*. When you listen to a song enough times, it's no longer a song. You become it. That's what happens with books."

Like most writers, he has a very particular relationship to books as physical objects, having become, over the years, a connoisseur of paper stocks and binding techniques. He makes it his practice to ravish them to his own satisfaction. "I write in them. I rip pages out so I can keep things I like," he says.

See COUPLAND on page R2

Above,
Doug
Coupland's
Hornet's Nest
No. 01
(*Generation X*):
food for
thought.



'You chew the pages one at a time'

COUPLAND from page R1

"What am I supposed to do, sell them on eBay? They're my books — I'll do what I want."

In his most recent work, this principle is carried to extremes. The idea of making the nests came from contact with his cousin,

James, an entomologist in Ontario. "I was asking him about how wasps' nests are made, and how you could maybe trick them into making nests out of coloured paper," he recalls.

"Or how you could use different coloured papers and have them make tie-dye nests. I was wonder-

ing if that would be possible," he adds. He was fascinated, too, by the involuntary nature of the insects' industriousness, and their gripping biological compulsion to create. "The wasps, the hornets — they can't *not* make the nests, you know. They *have* to."

Quickly, he honed his procedure.

"You take the book, and you remove the pages and soak them in a Tupperware container and then you chew the pages one at a time. I always did it when I was watching TV."

Each nest took about a week of chewing. Some of the pages had to be chewed two or three times, de-

pending on the durability of the paper, the money even more. ("Those bills are really built to last.") And what about the impact on his health of all that ink, not to mention the printing chemicals and paper bleaches? "Well, you do stop salivating for a few days afterward," he admitted, reassuring me that he soaked the used \$1 bills in antiseptic before getting under way — just to be safe.

With the heavy noshing out of the way, Coupland then moves into construction mode, laying the flattened layers of paste out into "demi-lune shapes, overlapping them one on top of the other, as you can see," and leaving them to dry.

Most of the works in the Toronto show involved revisiting his own previous literary output: *Girlfriend in a Coma*, *Generation X*, *God Hates Japan*, *Life After God*. His Gideon Bible piece was the anomaly.

"I think it's there because of the fact that I spend so much time in hotel rooms thanks to books," he says, referring to his endless cycles of book tours, "and the Gideon's Bible is always there. For me, it's a metaphor for travel. And that one was easier, too," he adds, fondly. "The paper was thinner."

So far he has made six nests, but there may be more to come.

Currently, he is eyeing the manuscript of his forthcoming book *jPod* — a hearty 480 pages of 8½-by-11-inch bond. This, he says, will be the K2 of book chewing, a tour de force, so monumental it may give rise to a new form, perhaps harking back to the pulp bricks made by Vancouver sculptor Liz Magor in the 1970s. "It will involve, I think, some other product of regurgitation," Coupland muses. "I just don't know yet."

The project could also serve as a ritual farewell to the book itself, and the pleasures of its making. "When I spend time with young writers, they often talk about launch parties for their novels, and I always say: Save your money for the marketing budget; launch parties are a waste of time. What you need to do is have a 'book's over' party. You gather your friends together at your house and you have a good dinner and some good wine and then you burn a copy of the book. Otherwise, when is it over? With the publication of the paperback? The Norwegian paperback? Otherwise, it is just perpetually with you. You can never let it go."

Douglas Coupland continues at the Monte Clark Gallery in Toronto until Sept. 18 (416-703-1700).