

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

R.M. Vaughan: The Exhibitionist

Grauerholz photo show throws the book at fixed ideas

[R.M. VAUGHAN](#) | [Columnist profile](#) | [E-mail](#)

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Oct. 07, 2011 5:00PM EDT

Last updated Tuesday, Oct. 11, 2011 5:07PM EDT

Angela Grauerholz at the University of Toronto Art Centre*Until Nov. 26, 15 King's College Circle, University of Toronto; utac.utoronto.ca*

No matter what you conclude about the massive survey of 30-plus years of photo-based work by Angela Grauerholz, you have to admit they sure got the title right – The Inexhaustible Image is just that, and more, and more, and more. The show at the [University](#) of Toronto Art Centre, and its volumes of layered, meaning-generating content, just keeps on giving.

Comprised of several suites of photographs and two major sculpture-installation works, The Inexhaustible Image can be a bit intimidating at first. The volume of works is not really the issue here, it's a manageable pile, but rather the presentation's tone.

Grauerholz, a highly influential Montreal-based feminist conceptual artist, celebrates the scholarly impulse: the action of studying, via both her own deep, hypnotic photographic gaze, which is nothing if not studied, as well as her focus on spaces worthy of and/or where study takes place; and the very tools of study (books, but also reading chairs and tables, library cabinets and vitrines), presented as both fetishized (and thus suspect) objects and as detritus, as actual physical remains, of a life spent engaged in inquiry.

Her collection of photographs of burnt cultural theory books, books from her personal library that were salvaged after a house fire, perfectly sums up this conflicted relationship with texts, ideas, and objects that house ideas.

The books are practically useless, but remain coveted treasures, much like ideas or conceits treasured in the mind more out of sentiment than pragmatism. But, what powerful sentimentality! In Grauerholz's pristine, face front, studio-portrait [style](#) images, the burnt book becomes a kind of sacrifice, a horrible but necessary metaphor for letting go of no-longer-viable ideas. And in the world of cultural theory, ideas are chucked and reinvigorated, then tossed away again, faster than the pop, pop, pop of factory grown mushrooms.

Viewers can be forgiven, then, if at first The Inexhaustible Image appears to be out of the non-academic's reach. The furnishings alone – including a wooden photograph cabinet that resembles a mausoleum, and a functioning “artist’s reading room” (based on an actual room from the early Soviet era, designed in the Russian futurist style, a room I guarantee you few visitors will have the nerve to sit down in) – are enough to scare off anyone unused to the Vatican Archives treatment.

Then there are the photographs, which tend toward opacity, intentional blurriness, Eurocentric topics (so many misty cobblestone streets, too little time) and abundant, creamy and melodramatically gothic mystery.

But viewers ought to just relax. Grauerholz’s work ultimately seeks to discover why the human mind is driven to inquiry, knowledge acquisition (if not outright fact-hoarding), and skepticism (thus her questioning, just-out-of-focus photography style), while simultaneously being seduced by nostalgia, an emotion antithetical to inquiry (thus the old-Europe, cigarettes-and-dank-café’s imagery, beloved by liberal arts students the world over).

In other words, we love to learn, but we long for psychic rest.

This push-pull between restlessness and exhaustion will be understood by anyone living in contemporary society, in the anxiety-driven bi-polarity of a world filled to the brim with addictive information, but starved for the comforts of fixed ideas.

Annie Dunning at YYZ Artists’ Outlet

Until Dec. 10, Suite 140, 401 Richmond St. W., Toronto; yyzartistsoutlet.org

After all that heavy idea lifting, you’ll need a respite – and what better place to rest your weary head than Annie Dunning’s magical mushroom forest (no, not that kind of magical)?

Dunning’s installation at YYZ Artists’ Outlet, entitled Foolproof Four: Super Heroes of the Forest Floor, invites the viewer to examine, via gigantic ceramic replicas, the hardest working members of the woodland community – the mushrooms that feed off and transform decay.