

Angles and planes of the city

Regina Haggio

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Sleep in on Sunday morning? That's not for Aleda O'Connor and Barry Coombs. The two local artists went out early, camera in hand, in search of inspiration for their latest exhibition.

"Starting at first light, we roamed the downtown, east end and industrial neighbourhoods," Coombs tells me.

"We often wound up at Two Cougars and a Café on Burlington Street for breakfast and a chance to review our photos."

The photos led to sketches and the sketches to the paintings in #Hamilton 2Views, a striking exhibition at Earls Court Gallery.

"As we explored the city together, there was, and is, constant dialogue about colour and shapes," O'Connor says.

"Often, as we drive through the city on one errand or another, we notice and remark about some interesting combination of shapes, silhouette or colour. If it is possible to pull over, one of us takes a photo."

Urban views have been part of Coombs's repertoire for a while.

"The visual variety of urban environments has inspired me since I explored the old industrial neighbourhoods of Toronto as a young art student," he says.

O'Connor, however, had just recently made her mark with an exhibition of gorgeous landscape paintings complete with sheep. But she easily switched to urban themes.

"When I began to select images for this show, I was looking for buildings that combined strong silhouette and colour. But it is impossible to look at or paint these places without wondering about the people who live or work in them," she explains. "I am drawn to colour, shape and story."

O'Connor uses oil pastels and layers her colours to achieve her rich and vibrant palette. "Ray and Peter" focuses on houses with orange brick walls and blue roofs. A grey-roofed house with white walls rises in the distance.

Combined with the elevated point of view, different shades of blue and orange draw our attention to geometric shapes such as triangles, rectangles, parallelograms and other polygons.

In "Ice House," O'Connor invites us to contemplate the distinctively roofed old structure that once produced ice for Hamilton's iceboxes.

Coombs, like O'Connor, likes to emphasize a building's geometry. O'Connor's buildings look naturalistic and solid. Coombs, however, opts for a more simplified, animated style. He flattens, overlaps and tilts the architecture.

"The planes and angles of the city are a natural fit with my passion for Cubism and geometric abstraction," he says.

In "Elgin," straight lines, rectangles and triangles dominate the composition. Coombs paints the buildings in bright reds, greens and blues, the kind of colours that intensify one another.

A bold composition characterizes "One Way." A bending blue street occupies the left side, adorned only with five yellow lines and a jagged black shadow.

He gives us a bird's-eye view of the road, but we see the crazy cluster of



Barry Coombs, *Elgin*, acrylic on canvas.



Aleda O'Connor, *Ice House*, oil pastel on wood panel.



Barry Coombs, *One Way*, acrylic on canvas.



brightly hued houses at the top right from a different perspective.

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<http://www.thespec.com/whats-on/story/4942787/angles-and-pla...>

Coombs paints with acrylic on canvas, a new venture for this exhibition.

"I've exhibited mostly watercolours for several decades and my work in gouache and acrylic has almost always been on paper. I've often experimented with acrylic and oil on canvas in the studio but rarely exhibited them."

Regina Haggio, art historian, public speaker, curator and former professor at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, teaches at the Dundas Valley School of Art. dhaggio@thespec.com

Barry Coombs and Aleda O'Connor

What: #Hamilton2Views

Where: Earls Court Gallery, 215 Ottawa St. N.

When: Until Nov.15

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