

**Barbara Astman
Dancing with Che:
Enter through the Gift Shop**



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Kelowna Art Gallery, Kelowna, BC
Dancing with Che: Enter through the Gift Shop.
May 7 - July 31, 2011
Curator: Liz Wylie

McMaster Museum of Art
Dancing with Che: Enter through the Gift Shop.
McMaster University, Hamilton, ON
February 16 - May 5, 2012
Senior Curator: Ihor Holubizky

Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA)
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June 22 - August 11, 2013
Artistic Director & Curator: David Liss



Protect Me From What I Want

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.

– Karl Marx

Gallery visitors entering this installation by Toronto-based artist Barbara Astman will each have his or her own initial reaction to and “take” on the work. Some people will immediately recognize the face of the notorious South American revolutionary leader of the mid-twentieth century, Che Guevara. Others may have no idea who this man is. Most people will “get” that the installation is set up as a faux gift shop, with key-chains, T-shirts, tote-bags, and all the other usual, predictable paraphernalia. But why is each item emblazoned with a black-and-white image of a man’s face? And what no one could realize without being told is that the image itself is of Che’s face on a white T-shirt, which is being worn by the artist as she dances to Latin music. This act was performed before her own camera in 2003, after Astman returned from a visit to Cuba, where she had been struck by the proliferation of Che’s image. Known as “Che-chic,” the popularity of Che’s face on merchandise in some parts of the world is remarkable. Who knows how long this will last, however, as recently a colleague showed an Elvis Presley image as an example of kitsch to her art history class, and to her shock, most of the students did not know who he was.

Let’s look a little more closely at what is being presented – unpack it, as it were: we have a gift shop-like installation in which nothing is for sale. The objects have no price tags and their value is only socially conferred. As art objects, these items take their meaning and value from their context: they have been arranged for display in an art gallery and are therefore precious originals. But these items are actually mass-produced by souvenir makers, and have very little intrinsic value in and of themselves, the playing cards, small plates, pin-on buttons, etc. And are they, in fact, actually these objects at all, or are they simulacra, stand-ins for souvenirs, but not the real thing?

As was the case with Alice after she passed through the looking glass, we find that we are in a place where nothing has a straight reading, nor can be counted on to actually be what it seems to present itself as.

What of the installation’s sub-title: Enter through the Gift Shop? This is a take-off, first of all, on the title of the Bansky film of 2010, Exit through the Gift Shop. We are all too familiar with the signs and experience of exiting through the gift shop after visiting a blockbuster exhibition (Gems of Impressionism or such like) at a big art museum. These little retail spaces are now an

expected component of such a gallery-going experience, like dessert at the end of a fancy meal, a nice dollop of consumerism to round out our visit. But Astman's title wants us to enter though the gift shop. And so we do, only that is as far as we get. There is nothing on the other side except a fire exit from the gallery – this gift shop is the exhibition. So where are we? Viewers may ask themselves, feeling confused, perhaps a bit like David Byrne in the 1980s: this is not my beautiful house / this is not my beautiful wife! Or like Monty Python of even earlier: my brain hurts! And they may find themselves inexplicably filled with desire to own something from this display, frustrated in their desire to purchase one of the items.

What exactly is being spoofed here? It is a fancy web to untangle and figure out. After a bit we might worry that we as viewers are not actually complicit with the humour of the work, but in fact might be the butt of the joke! Well, visitors can always relax and watch Astman's video for a while, made up of stills of the artist dancing away in her Che T-shirt, now what was that about? Maybe something of a way to co-opt some of that macho Latismo power and make it her own? Anything is possible.

Eventually it is time to leave the art installation/gift shop, and take away with us only our memories. How aggravating, when we so desire a souvenir. After all, even certain tourist attractions are exciting to some visitors largely due to the themed gift shop merchandise they have to accompany them. Both Las Vegas and Niagara Falls come to mind as examples. There is something visually exciting and captivating about masses of a repeated identical motif. The image seems to underline to us our very experience of being where we are, and later whispers quietly: I was there.

Liz Wylie

Liz Wylie is Curator of the Kelowna Art Gallery.













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Photography by Barbara Astman and Kyle L. Poirier at Kelowna Art Gallery; Jennifer Sciarrino at McMaster Museum of Art, and Jennifer Sciarrino at Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA).

Design by Jennifer Sciarrino. Printed in Canada by Custom Colour Imaging & Publishing.

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ISBN # 978-0-9812445-1-8