

THE BEST FROM THE BRIGHTEST

Big Bang exhibits show off Ottawa's art stars



PETER SIMPSON
Big Beat

The exhibition Big Bang, at SAW Gallery, is a showcase of art being made in Ottawa, but another big bang is an unexpectedly thrilling part of the show.

The exhibition, curated by SAW director Jason St-Laurent, includes 14 of Ottawa's most compelling and highly regarded artists, including Donna Legault.

Legault's video installation, titled *Sonic Horizon*, is a darkened room in which a sonic wave appears as a white line crossing five curved video screens. I step into the room and quickly realize that the installation is reacting to the noise I make — the line wavering gently as my shoes scuff the floor, and jumping wildly as I clap my hands. I think about the noise we all routinely, and almost unconsciously, create, and how it alters our immediate environment.

A few minutes later, I notice an effect more subtle, and monumental. I hear a low-level "thump-thump-thump," and I see that the mystery noise has Legault's sonic wave in a steady state of mild agitation.

"What is that thump?" I ask St-Laurent.

It is, he says, construction on the new Arts Court development, under way on the other side of the property and moving toward SAW, which at some point will have to temporarily close and relocate.

Ah, I realize, so Legault's art is reacting to the force that will destroy, and then rebuild, the gallery — something inexorable this way comes. I don't know if Legault anticipated this effect or

if it's serendipitous, but either way it is an eloquently effective reminder that everything changes, and we must be aware and adapt. (Less airily, I thought of Jurassic Park, and a dinosaur's approach forewarned in ripples on a glass of water.)

The other video installation in Big Bang is also moving, though in a different, smaller way. Josée Dubeau's *Rythme d'amour* is a 90-second video of a spinning record, which releases soft tones when repeatedly and gently

An installation view of Big Bang at SAW Gallery, with Gavin Lynch's "Not yet titled" at left. *DAVID BARBOUR, COURTESY SAW GALLERY*

tapped by two tone arms set on either side of the turntable. The tone arms' robotic dance makes me think of love birds, bobbing their heads in a display of courtship. Sweet romance. Delightful. Then there's the raw sex.

The purpose of Big Bang, the exhibition notes say, is to hold up "Ottawa-Gatineau's impressively varied and diverse art scene as a model, and (invite) us to celebrate the recent successes of some of the region's brightest art stars." Some works are new, and some are earlier, emblematic pieces by veteran artists, including Annie Pootoogook, whose three prints from 2001-2003

AT A GLANCE

What: Big Bang, new works by Ottawa artists

When & where: To Oct. 10 at SAW Gallery, in Arts Court, 67 Nicholas St.

show an Inuit couple in positions that would melt a hole in the thickest ice. The prints are prime examples of why Pootoogook has an international reputation at the modern edge of Inuit print-making.

Each piece in the show is chosen to demonstrate the best of each artist, and, cumulatively, the strength of the capital's art scene. There's a typically masterful painting by Leslie Reid; Frank Shebageg's large mobile of miniatures of the de Havilland "Beaver" float plane, which has long been a lifeline for remote aboriginal communities; and more from Eric Walker, Leslie Hossack, Jennifer Lefort, Guillermo Trejo and Justin Wonnacott.

Amy Schissel's 2014 piece *Animate Grounds*, which debuted at Volta Basel in Switzerland, is so massive that SAW can accommodate only two-thirds of it or so. Even reduced, the piece is a galaxy of Schissel's imagination, a room-length representation of the digital universe made tangible, and comprehensible.

Two paintings especially stand out in Big Bang. Gavin Lynch's "not yet titled" canvas is spectacular, with the old forests of British Columbia gloriously recast in angular relief, like nature's cathedral. Lynch framed the large painting — approximately four-and-a-half by six feet — in many shards of wood that seem to project outward the sunlight that plunges through those soaring, ancient forests. If Lynch keeps this up, he may someday tower over the art world like the giant cedar and spruce trees he represents.

In stark contrast to Lynch's epic forest is Michael Harrington's *Basement King*, a five-by-seven-foot portrait of a man who is up to ... something. Harrington has cast the basement as dark and moody, the back wall cluttered with tawdry pin-ups. The "king" stands alone in his socks and flip flops, and an outrageous fur-trimmed, bright yellow and pimpin' coat. He, and his lights and camera, face the viewer, who is left to wonder what this pasty, subterranean regent is filming.

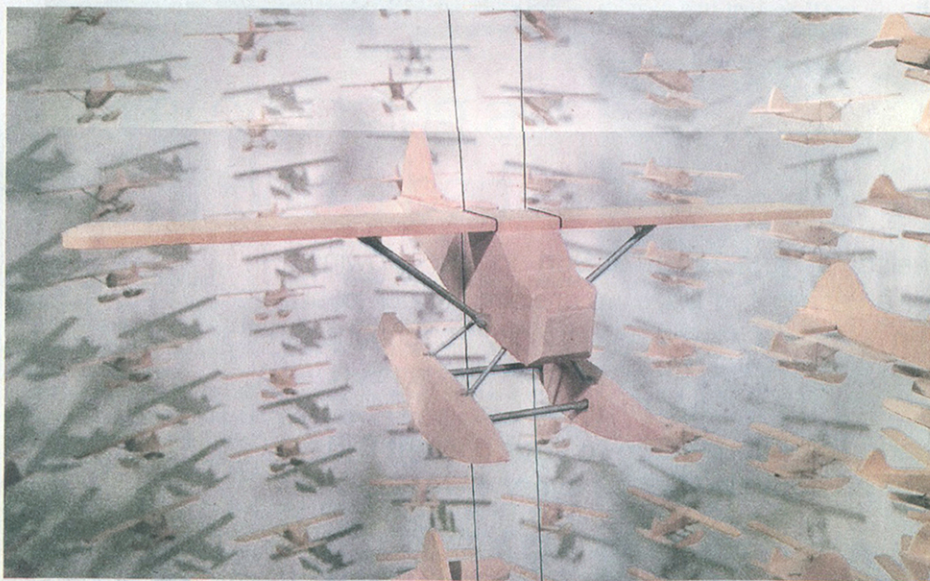
Basement King is everything that's great about Harrington's work — cinematic, enigmatic, and disquieting.

There's one more part of Big Bang that will only be seen on Sept. 10, when Dana Michel presents her dance performance *Yellow Towel*.

"With a blend of gravity and buffoonery, she digs into the stereotypes of black culture, turning them upside down to see what is revealed," says Michel's Facebook event page.

Admission to *Yellow Towel* is \$20. Admission to the Big Bang exhibition is free.

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Detail of Frank Shebageg's *Beavers*, in Big Bang at SAW Gallery in Ottawa. *PETER SIMPSON / OTTAWA CITIZEN*