



VISITOR ACCOUNT

Chroma Lives, Camrost Felcorp Yorkville
Plaza Sales Centre, Toronto,
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*Condo Living: An exhibition gets reprised after
30 years, revealing deep changes and some
continuities in Toronto's art scene*

ROSEMARY HEATHER

The second time I visited *Chroma Lives* I sat on furniture that was part of the exhibition, happy to have escaped the blazing hot sun of the Toronto summer outside. Presented in a condo showroom, the exhibition was pleasantly air conditioned and accompanied by a treacly jazz soundtrack. There was no cake, and there had been at the vernissage, but I could live with that.

Curators Erin Alexa Freedman and Lili Huston-Herterich had assembled works by local artists and designers in one room in the sales centre. Devised in reference to *Chromaliving*, an earlier exhibition held in the same upscale Toronto neighborhood some thirty odd years before, *Chroma Lives* repeated its predecessors' basic gesture of furnishing a retail space with artworks. The two shows however were on decidedly different scales: the former featuring 150 artists, and the latter just eighteen. This difference is one of a number of reasons *Chroma Lives* has a seemingly notational relationship to its past context. Another would be the more obvious explanation that, between now and then, historical circumstances have changed.

In the showroom, affixed in serif letters on the wall is the marketing slogan "Reside in a Modern Day Masterpiece." The curators wisely chose to leave this feature intact. By giving credence to the hoary idea that artworks connote elegance, *Chroma Lives* made evident the narrow space of maneuver it was operating within. An agitated light fixture hanging in the centre of the room, animated to jerk constantly while making a crackling electric sound (Connor Crawford's *Light from a dilapidated interrogation room*, 2016), was one of the few hints of disturbance amidst the otherwise placid facade of the show. Of course, closer inspec-

tion of the art on view revealed other signs of disruption, such as the wry humor of Oliver Hussein's phallic curtain tassels (*Can we talk about the elegance in the room*, 2016), for instance, or the subtle perversity of Laurie Kang's seventeen aluminum-cast peach pits scattered across a silicone mat on the floor (*Spit Pits*, 2016). Many of the other works in the show were elegant takes on household items. Made by young designers who had responded to an open call, the show's intermingling of art and design was for the general purpose of a *mise-en-scène*.

Throughout the exhibition, the curators used the showroom during off hours to conduct interviews with *Chromaliving* participants, from which they will produce a book and online archive about the project. This focus made *Chroma Lives* function like something of a portal into the past. A photo archive and catalogue provided documentation of the original exhibition. Presented in the vacated space of a bankrupt department store, *Chromaliving* was a maximalist endeavor. If that show's contemporary incarnation presents mostly as decor, the latter exhibition was staged to serve an entirely different purview. *Chromaliving* aggressively positioned art and artists as values in and of themselves. In the documentation, one sees aesthetic excess that, among other things, might have pointed to a lack of infrastructure for the Toronto art scene of its day. If this art rawness is little in evidence today, this is perhaps an insight *Chroma Lives* helps to illuminate.

Toronto critic and curator Philip Monk has done crucial work chronicling the history of contemporary art in the city. His recently published *Is Toronto Burning?* (2016) is the catalogue for an exhibition that looked at the years 1977–1979. Monk positions this three-year period as foundational to the city's current art scene. So called "artist-run" culture has always been strong in Canada, in part due to relatively lavish government largesse. The galleries Mercer Union, Gallery TPW, and Gallery 44, so central to Toronto's artist run culture today, were founded during that time, along with some of the city's most influential artistic tendencies. Monk has written:

"In the midst of the economic and social crises of the 1970s, Toronto was pretty vacant—but out of these conditions its artists crafted something unique, sometimes taking the fiction of a scene for the subject of their art."

If creating an art scene out of fiction sounds familiar that's because it was the *modus operandi* of General Idea, the artist group who are Toronto's most internationally celebrated art practitioners, along with Michael Snow. GI (as they are always referred to in Toronto) also participated in *Chromaliving*, arguably having been a progenitor of the DIY ethos that made the show possible. This legacy is still evident in certain threads of Toronto art practice—the queer, low-fi aesthetic of Peaches, Allyson Mitchell, FASTWÜRMS, or the late and dearly missed, Will Munro, for instance. The demand for such self-invention never goes away. In light of this, the *Chroma Lives* project has the feeling of an interlude: an occasion to contemplate past eras, and how Toronto as a location gets manifested in art today.

Rosemary Heather writes about art, the moving image, and digital culture for numerous publications, artist monographs, and related projects internationally. The former editor of *C Magazine*, Toronto (2003–2009), and Director of Publications and Communications for Fogo Island Arts (2012–2014), Rosemary Heather is editor-in-chief of the digital imprint Q&A—www.qqqandaaa.com.