



TORONTO

TERENCE DICK

JEN AITKEN AT ERIN STUMP PROJECTS | WIL MURRAY AT PIM GALLERY

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My entry point into art criticism was never a love of pictures so much as a fascination with ideas. I studied philosophy at university, not art history, and the moment I get most excited in a gallery doesn't happen with an exclusively visual question – something along the lines of "what does it look like?" – but an ontological one – such as "what is it?" – that addresses a basic inquiry into the nature of being. The initial visual impact of the work might grab or repel me, and the subsequent pigeonholing within the larger context of what came before eventually organizes my assessment, but both those responses are delightfully delayed when the only reaction is one of confusion. The longer it takes to place a work, to name it and frame it, the more power it has to intrigue me and invite the intense scrutiny and speculation that makes art worthwhile.



Jen Aitken

Plonked on the floor like discards from a construction site, **Jen Aitken's** sculptures (though that word feels too dainty, so perhaps we could call them "forms") at **Erin Stump Projects** are, on first glance, impassive. They are as inviting as the Brutalist architecture (a more appropriate name for an architectural school has never been coined) they resemble. In other words, they aren't talking. At least not in a "Hi, how are you? Let me tell you about myself." sort of way. If I wasn't one for the underdog, I'd be reviewing Hollywood blockbusters instead of art, so I find this reticence appealing, and, like all cool quiet types, these forms only reveal themselves slowly. The shapes and angles they describe resemble puzzle pieces, and the set number of modular variants alludes to a potential assemblage that resolves into a higher order (the point where Plato and the Transformers meet up). However, any notion of unity and perfection is left behind once the material nature of the work is discerned. Concrete is already a blend of aggregate and cement and thus impure, but Aitken mixes in polyurethane foam, canvas, and dyes to confuse any attempt at identification. It's not enough to look; you have to touch them in order to feel their density. You have to circle around and crouch down to view their undersides in order to get a sense of their volume. And you have to wonder at what stage does order become chaos in order to grasp their meaning.



Wil Murray

Up the street at **p|n Gallery**, **Wil Murray** plays a similar game of identity but with representation instead of reality. He's taken a collection of early 20th Century European landscape photography and used the images as a base for collages that are then reprinted, painted in the style that black and white photographs used to be coloured, and then remounted on the original pages of the portfolio from whence they came. They are unconvincing at first and, particularly, when seen individually, but when the full range of works is on display as it is on the gallery's west wall, then the constructive confusion asserts itself. The resulting dreamlike scenes combine bucolic greens with eruptions of paint smeared in amongst the trees to break up any spatial sense and remind the viewer how much of all we look at is an illusion. This deception is where art lies.

Erin Stump Projects: <http://erinstumpprojects.com/current-exhibitions>

Jen Aitken: Poda continues until June 14.

p|n Gallery: <http://pmgallery.ca/exhibitions>

Wil Murray: Die Welt in Farben continues until June 14.

Terence Dick is a freelance writer living in Toronto. His art criticism has appeared in Canadian Art, BorderCrossings, Prefix Photo, Camera Austria, Fuse, Mix, C Magazine, Azure, and The Globe and Mail. He is the editor of Akimblog. You can follow his quickie reviews and art news announcements on Twitter [@TerenceDick](https://twitter.com/TerenceDick).

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