

Small works and smaller ambitions

"Small Works: In Search of a Non-Toxic Art Practice" opened at the Eastern Edge Gallery on Saturday, December 10. The show runs to the end of the month.

It's an interesting show in two respects. The art in it is interesting and the ideas behind the show are interesting.

Should artists be making art which is environmentally conscious? Should they be making art which is small and purposefully non-extravagant? Posing this question is one of the main aims of this show.

Why is the art the size it is? Big art gets noticed. It consequently sells well and in the final analysis gets the lion's share of our aesthetic attention and excitement.

This is the same process which produced the gas-guzzling cars of the 50s. Ever-bigger cars were built in response, supposedly, to an ever-greater demand for bigger cars. Until a whole industry collapsed when people remembered cars were primarily about getting from A to B only secondarily about showing your neighbours how rich you were.

And artists are making giant art works because this type of work is attractive to institutions with big rooms. To say some art "needs" to be big begs the question. Surely the need to make small, more human-scaled

works is equally pressing. Why isn't it this need which is being filled?

In that art, like cars, is about going from A to B, from an idea to an object, it will be interesting to see if "big art" collapses the way the "gas guzzlers" did.

Three artists

The three artists in *Small Works* each take a quite different approach to "thinking small." All three approaches are worth entertaining.

Geoff Ash's approach is the most immediately attractive. He makes noticeably sub-sized paintings. Ambiguous, anxiety-charged domestic scenes are his preferred subject matter. There is nearly always a cowering male nude as part of the furniture, as well as a teapot and an opportunity wall-papered and tilted interior. A threateningly-dressed woman in insolent command of the situation is the clear villainess in the situation.

The story Ash is telling is a complex one. By keeping things small he keeps the take from settling down.

Ash's queazy colours, impermanent materials and strangely emphasized shadows serve the same purpose. The small scale of the paintings mean they weigh in as private communication rather than as a big, stagy, bragging public confession.

Ash's paintings are so interesting that I find it rather frustrating that they are small. This is a common problem with trying to keep important things small. God is as well served by a small as a large church but this has never stopped people from building cathedrals.

Important ideas are much-enhanced by million dollar productions. Promoting smallness, straightforwardness and simplicity is as radical a political agenda in the arts as it once was in religion. It runs against the human tendency to unnecessarily elaborate and over-determine an already good thing.

Geoff Ash was born at Come By Chance and received some of his art training in Stephenville. He presently lives in Ontario. Carol Taylor was born in Grand Falls but grew up in New Brunswick. Taylor's approach to smaller art harkens back to the days when societies were nomadic and objects were decorated as an expression of some innocent ritual purpose.

Her "ritual objects" are miniature prints of women "as seen by women." What does it "feel" like to be a woman and what does that "feeling" look like? This is the artistic question Taylor is asking.

The answer she comes up with is very close to the answer pre-historic artists came up with: an anonymous reproductive figure built up out of circles and oblong shapes.

The third artist in the show is Cliff Eyland from Halifax. Eyland paints thick, entertaining postcard-sized paintings and employs a wide variety of subjects and styles. Essentially Eyland is making fun of "big art" subjects by pointing out that a miniature version has certain advantages. One can ship an entire museum's worth of work in a suitcase, for example.

Eastern Edge editorialized by hanging only a few of Eyland's works. I think an entire wall of miniature paintings would have been more fun. And more ambiguous. A wall of miniature work is not necessarily less "toxic" than a single big work. However it does suggest a different type of practice and effort. To my mind that's where the main interest of this show lies.