

# ARTS

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## The Week In Wit: Don Quixote and a dehumidifier walk into a gallery ...



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Those puffs of vapour will eventually spell out the entire text of Miguel de Cervantes's magnum opus.

Mitchell F. Chan

The sign of a great work of art, the one telltale giveaway that proves technique, craft and genius, is the joke it tells.

That's according to one of the characters in *The Goldfinch*, the excellent Donna Tartt novel that just won the Pulitzer, and he's talking specifically about the Dutch painting that gives the book its title.

"It has a joke at its heart," says Horst. "And that's what all the very greatest masters do. Rembrandt. Velázquez. Late Titian. They make jokes. They amuse themselves. They build up the illusion, the trick — but, step closer? it falls apart into brushstrokes."

To extend this theory of art history as joke, the twentieth century began with shock comic Marcel Duchamp declaring a urinal to be art. And since then, the same gag has been repeated ad infinitum, the art world's version of the dad getting hit in the groin on *America's Funniest Home Videos*.

"Wit is something that artists got quite good at in the twentieth century, to the point of being insufferable," explains Mitchell F. Chan, a Toronto artist who is actually quite sufferable. "And we're stuck in this cycle where anything that makes a reference to something that's been done before gets passed off as wit, and it's really not funny to anyone who didn't waste four years of their life in an art history degree."

Chan sees two ways to break that cycle. First, to make art that unfolds over time, be it video, animation or something more dynamic. And second, use materials of everyday life, so the media are relevant to anyone who happens upon the piece in a way that

oil and canvas just aren't.

As an example, he cites *Permanent Vacation*, a piece by New York artist Cory Arcangel that consists of two Gmail accounts sending each other Out of Office auto-replies in an endless loop.

One of Chan's attempts to break the cycle is *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, a work now on display at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto.

He describes the piece as "the world's most useless book," and the viewer should figure that out like this:

"There are these clouds that are coming out into the air, and most people don't immediately see what they're doing. Once you figure out there are letters being formed in the air, you have that 'aha' moment, and you'll just stand there and read it, letter by letter."

THE INGENIOUS GENTLEMAN DON QUIXOTE OF LA MANCH...



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The letters, if you continuously stare at them for about three years, spell out the entire text of Don Quixote, and the installation coincides with a production of the epic Spanish novel being staged by the Canadian Opera Company. That's the first half of the piece; the second is a dehumidifier that collects the moisture and drips it onto the blank pages of a book, thus completing a totally futile translation.

Ideally, the artist explains, you get the joke in three steps:

"At the simplest level, you have this beautiful phenomenon of clouds being made. There's just something beautiful about watching fluid dynamics in motion. Then they realize there's a puzzle here, something being spelled. Then you process the meaning. The joke happens in the third layer, and then hopefully you're into a more conceptual sort of beauty."

To the extent that the joke has a butt, Chan is very clear that it is him. After all, he's the guy who devoted countless hours to making this thing.

"It takes a lot of confidence in yourself to see the humour in your work," he says. "Great, good job, you've done exactly what you set out to do, and you realize that this is completely ridiculous, right? And then you almost cry because it's so true. It's a stupid thing to do. You cry right before you laugh, and I think that's what makes it a sincere joke."

*The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* is on display at Toronto's Four Seasons Centre until May 24.

Topics: Arts, Canadian Opera Company, Don Quixote, Mitchell Chan, The Week In Wit, Visual Arts

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