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In Hamilton, the mundane becomes spectacular

R.M. Vaughan

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Diane Landry's work at the Art Gallery of Hamilton

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Diane Landry at the Art Gallery of Hamilton

Until May 22, 123 King St. W., Hamilton; www.artgalleryofhamilton.com

Two days before Valentine's Day, a day that always reminds me of the classic Snake Whacking Day from *The Simpsons*, except that the target is single people, I was looking at art in the wonderfully unromantic city of Hamilton and found a postcard designed by local artist/publisher Dave Kuruc.

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On the card, two 1950s-era lovers, a gal and a guy, stare into each other's eyes. The caption reads: "She

said: ‘Kiss me somewhere dirty.’ So we drove to Hamilton.”

Ah, Hamilton. How real you keep it.

The great thing about art viewing in Hamilton is the scene’s absolute lack of preciousness (as illustrated above). Gallerists are happy to see you, are smiling and chatty, and while art is respected and treasured, it’s not treated like some unfathomable discussion on the reality-altering possibilities of string theory.

Art is presented to the public, first and foremost, to bring the paying customers pleasure. To kiss them somewhere, so to speak. And kissed I was, more than a chubby baby at an Italian wedding.

The first stop, the always reliable Art Gallery of Hamilton, is the current home of The Defibrillators, Diane Landry’s spectacular collection of altered common domestic appliances and salvaged pop bottles. Yes, I know, “spectacular” is not a word one associates with salad spinners, umbrellas and plastic laundry hampers – but Landry rigs up these mundane objects into elaborate gizmos that spin, whir and, in combinations that resemble steam-punk Christmas trees or giant junk-yard kaleidoscopes, create twinkling halos of soft, pulsing light.

The centrepiece of Landry’s collection is a series of miniature Ferris wheels made from bicycle hoops ringed with upright water bottles and augmented with blue-white LED lights. Ranging in size from turkey platters to dining tables, the wheels blink on and off as they spin, causing the main gallery to fill with starry light and curving shadows. While the mechanics behind this installation are hardly simple (and Landry makes all the wiring and clockwork guts visible, as her work is not about mystery, but joyful inventiveness), the final effect is wonderfully so – a gentle carnival of pure, soothing visual stimulation, of filtered light, meditative motion and occasional waves of calming white noise.

Alongside this minicircus stand two optical delights made from plastic baskets tricked out with green and white bottles. Plunked on top of tall spikes, the baskets are geared to move close to and then far away from a single light at the end of a pole. As the basket glides closer to the light source, an intricate mandala, derived from the shadows caused by the basket’s webbing, is projected onto the adjacent wall, with the bottles forming glowing petals off the side of the circle of light. The effect is hypnotic, and hilarious. The mind marvels at Landry’s ingenuity, and the glee-inducing light show, and then remembers that Landry’s artist materials are about as unique (and precious) as lint. Talk about kitchen-sink drama.

Of course, Landry is playing with supposedly oppositional forces here – turning the banal into showy, and that game is more than entertaining enough. But if you spend a bit more time with her contraptions, you realize that there is another set of intentions at work, other semiotics. The machines (particularly a room filled with umbrellas that are opened and shut, lit and darkened, via wheezing concertinas) are performing very human functions – casual, perhaps even involuntary functions, granted, but still resonant.

The Ferris wheels turn and turn and turn, rest briefly, then start up again. The projected mandalas blossom ever so briefly, then shutter, cease to thrive. The umbrellas are breathing. In their very human display of cycles of activity and stagnation, Landry’s contraptions have as much to say about the human body in motion, and its movement through time, as any dance troupe.

Heaps and Hives at the Print Studio

Until Feb. 26, 173 James St. N., Hamilton; www.theprintstudio.ca