

Will Munro

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Uniting sexuality and the *gemütlich*, laughter and the sacred, Toronto artist Will Munro's exhibit *Inside the Solar Temple of the Cosmic Leather Daddy* transformed Paul Petro Contemporary Art's upper floor in a way that felt, appropriately enough, alchemical. A ludic deployment of iconography saw images such as the scarab and the pyramid meet long lengths of chain: moustached bikers and Muri caps also marked the installation, which brought together a number of wall-mounted panels incorporating mirrors, fabric and other materials, as well as a large sculptural piece. Even more impressively, while bringing together so many disparate images, materials and moods, the show managed to evoke art-making's most deeply-buried ancient drives and its most post-modern ironies simultaneously.

Will MUNRO, *Untitled*, 2010. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Paul Petro Contemporary Art.

Looming at the centre of the gallery space and crafted of black-painted wood, the most prominent element of the exhibition, *Spider Sex Sling* (2010), was a recognizable (and functional looking, at least) sling of the sort that normally occupies pride of place in sex clubs. Unlike those, however, Munro's *détourned* version was decorated with macramé plant hangers holding spider plants, and featured a colourful crochet blanket covering the leather back support. The opposition of such unlikely partners wittily defanged the sexualized, somewhat perverse, edge the item normally possesses. The knit plant hangers and coverlet also constituted a knowing nod back to the artist's earlier exploration of textile media, notably the men's underwear pieces that, in a related gesture, provided both new materials and forms for the briefs as well as a new context and frame of reference for viewing them; one that foregrounded its erotic ambiguity.



Will MUNRO, *Infinity*, 2010. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Paul Petro Contemporary Art.

However, his dense play with textiles was carried further in this show. Prominently, one of the wall panels, *Infinity* (2010) was a stitched fabric piece that, in a single creative move, managed to echo the gay pride rainbow flag, the cover art of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* and the use of the triangle as a symbol for elemental fire in a such esoteric traditions as the magic(k) of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Other textile works accompanied the central installation and were displayed in an adjoining room: the *Planetary Porn Portfolio* (2006-2009), silk-screened on bed sheets and suiting fabric, and a T-shirt edition entitled *Leather Pharaoh* (2009) that crowned a moustache-and-sunglass sporting leatherman with the iconic Egyptian nemyss headdress. The latter work, in particular, seems to call to mind—in its bright irony—Munro's involvement in queer/popular culture endeavours such as his near-legendary *Vazaleen* club nights.

The triangle glyph, so central to *Infinity* was picked up—and lent even more ambiguity—in a pink neon piece, whose camp simplicity played tensely against the symbol's history of use in Nazi-era concentration camps and its reclamation by the early gay lib movement and—years later—ACT UP.

Another wall piece, *Untitled* (2010), slathered on layers of occult reference with panache—not only by joining Ancient Egyptian kitsch and magic(k)al symbolism to the leather bar fantasia of Tom of Finland, but by incorporating a mirror background. Mirrors of various sorts have a long-standing metaphorical resonance as liminal places or gateways between worlds, and have been used by occultists such as Dr. Dee and Edward Kelly in an attempt to contact spirits, so the

reference here—surrounded by occultist bric-a-brac—was inescapable. Even more telling, however, was its position within the exhibition. When the viewer approached the central sling and stood before it in the “normal” position, which is to say in the place one would stand when fucking a partner reclining in the apparatus, an additional rich layer of signification arises; one sees one's own figure reflected in *Untitled*'s mirror.

Beyond all the clear—and on-the-money—invocations of such queer and otherwise outside-the-mainstream artists as Kenneth Anger, Harry Smith, Derek Jarman, Genesis P-Orridge and TOPY, it remains clear that one finds the real heart of *Inside the Solar Temple* in the privileged view of the self while standing at the sling. Munro's work in this exhibition points to a more central creative matrix, one that overflows the tidy categorizing of art history and theoretical genealogies. In blending and/or juxtaposing so many, and so disparate, referential fields around the central pairing of a sex toy and a looking glass (and in this context, ironically enough, its metaphorical resonances very nearly overpower its sexual suggestiveness), Munro reminds us of all the eager, DIY scramble with which we assemble, out of need—and out of books, and pictures, and movies, and songs—the tottering towers of both our culture and our identities. ←

Will Munro, *Inside the Solar Temple of the Cosmic Leather Daddy*
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