

## At the Power Plant, All Together Now

Micah Lexier takes over the Power Plant with a showcase of 100-plus artists working right here, in Toronto, right now

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COLIN MCCONNELL / TORONTO STAR

Artist Micah Lexier, who has taken over the Power Plant this fall with three exhibitions, *One*, *Two* and *More Than Two*, the latter of which is his presentation of more than 200 works by more than 100 Toronto artists. The work behind him is a self-portrait, in text.

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By: [Murray Whyte](#) Visual arts, Published on Tue Sep 24 2013

On a recent afternoon at the Power Plant, the artist [Micah Lexier](#) was busily scurrying from tabletop to tabletop, tweaking this, adjusting that. “I like it better this way, I think,” he says, flipping a long and narrow, squared-off metal object onto its back. “Yeah,” he says, hand on his chin. “Like that.”

One down, 220 to go. This week, Lexier becomes the first artist since Michael Snow, the veritable pater familias of Toronto’s and Canada’s contemporary art scene, to take over the [Power Plant](#), the country’s nominal ground zero of art-world significance. Every room, every level, every surface, inside and out, is his domain.

True to form, he didn’t show up alone. This autumn’s Lexier-palooza counts three exhibitions: *One*, for his solo works; *Two*, for three collaborative pieces; and *More Than Two*. That’s one way to put it: *More Than Two* is the careful arrangement of 221 works by 101 artists, duos and collectives that he’s assembled over the past year. All the artists in *More Than Two* are from Toronto or at least close by. (Take note: Snow is one among many here, with a tiny framed work from 1961 called *One Foldage*.)

Lexier has always been a keen co-operator and a sort of connective tissue for the vagaries of a local art scene that, over the years, has caused hand-wringing for its unwillingness to fit tidily into boxes, the better to communicate what “Toronto art” might actually be. For *More Than Two*, Lexier chooses instead to exult in its incoherence, embracing its full breadth to ply connections more intuitive than explicit.

He's done this before, most recently at the gallery [MKG127](#) a couple of summers ago, where he curated a show called *A to B*, assembling the works of 38 artists — some friends, many collaborators, all people with whom he felt deep affinities — alongside a carefully selected handful of found objects, which he then displayed in tabletop vitrines.

In hindsight, you could almost consider it a dry run. In the biggest gallery at the Power Plant, *More Than Two* runs in a half-dozen neatly arranged rows of five identical vitrines each.

Under the glass, though a world of difference: on one, a set of three prints of circles in deepening shades of grey by Dax Morrison arrayed just so under recent RBC Painting competition winner [Vanessa Maltese's](#) *Stick with 3 Bracelets*, which is exactly what it says. A cluster of small, bright-red balsa wood blobs by senior craftsman [Kai Chan](#) sit nearby, next to oil paintings by [Howard Podeswa](#). Below sits an untitled work by Tom Dean, a pillar of the formative Queen West art scene in the 1970s and '80s, an enigmatic, slim shaft of carved wood from a 1984 project *Excerpts from a Description of the Universe*, in 1984.

Young, old, inscrutably conceptual or materially seductive, what links the works, beyond their claim to the GTA and its orbits, isn't immediately apparent. That's part of the point. "I've used this phrase and some people don't like it," Lexier says. "But I'm calling it sort of like a flea market, in the sense that everything is cheek to jowl, and you as the viewer can pick out the gems. You have the power to say, "That's interesting.""

It is, Lexier says, self-consciously non-definitive of the state of the Toronto art scene or anything else. "I could do two more shows of 100 artists each and they'd be just as good," he says.

But still. This, now and especially here, in an institution that has struggled through transition and staff changes in recent years to reflect the priorities of its new director, Gaëtane Verna, is at last a full-throated declaration of self. It's her baby. It's also a risk, however calculated, but with future histories in mind. However loose Lexier wants to make it, *More Than Two* is a full-blooded expression of one artist's way of working in a context that is deep and full and resplendent with vital practices and meaningful work. It is, simply put, a landmark.

As to that flea market business, well, sure. But don't be fooled. Lexier has always had a powerful preoccupation with numbers, counting, word games and the ordering of things: the way systems can, with their unambiguous clarity of purpose, provide a structure on which to hang the somewhat more ambiguous, experimental play that the making of art (good art, anyway) demands.

He also has a keen sense of history. Nothing comes from nothing and neither did *More Than Two*. Dean's 1984 project, from which Lexier borrows three works, was a similarly enigmatic ordering of things, on tabletop. Where *Universe* might have aped a quasi-scientific cataloguing of the ineffable, though, *More Than Two* is down to earth.

Works here are carefully arranged, playing off each other either by similarity or stark opposition. One inspired pairing sets the aptly named *Bleed*, an older work by [Kelly Mark](#), four pieces of graph paper with varying impressions of ink that have seeped through, next to a piece from this year by [Maggie Groat](#), a collage of colourful "fragmented abstractions," as she calls them, "and other moments of mystical clarity." I agree.

Names and titles are in an accompanying handbook, leaving the dozens and dozens of pieces to stand alone, on their own merits, and together as coherent pieces of a greater whole. Some artists, like Snow or Dean, [Margaret Priest](#) or [Robert Fones](#), whose contribution is a beguiling red spool that reveals itself to be a stylized “Z,” are established builders of the city’s eclectic artistic reputation. Others are kids, fast-rising (Maltese, say, or [Georgia Dickie](#), with her dynamic, playful ribbon of steel, called *Subvert The Incongruity*, next to Mark and Groat), or still largely unknown, which is also the point.

This all has its roots in an award the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts gave critic Sarah Milroy in 2011. Milroy took her prize money and approached Lexier to curate a show of young Toronto artists. Lexier was game, but balked. He would do it, he said, but without the “young” label affixed. “I wanted to mix things up, make connections,” he says.

Lexier didn’t seek to divine a continuity so much as reveal form and process. Many of the works here are off-cuts and sidelines. “When I did studio visits, I was looking for the stuff shoved in the corner,” Lexier says. “I’d look under things and say, ‘What’s that? I want it.’”

In *More Than Two*, Lexier’s framework levels the field and asks everyone to play well with others. And they do. It reveals and broadens our understanding of artists working here at the same time as it connects disparate practices with a keen fascination for how things are made.

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, but it’s hard not to play favourites. In fact, you should. For what it’s worth, here are mine: The collective, [VSVSVS](#), [Tesar Lo](#), [Ron Shuebrook](#), Gordon Peterson, [Hanna Hur](#), [Abby McGuane](#), [Brian Groombridge](#), [Joy Walker](#), Dickie, Mark, Dean, Snow, Groat, Maltese, Nicol, Chan. Phew.

Your turn.

*Micah Lexier: One, Two and More Than Two is at the Power Plant to Jan. 5, 2014.*