

INSTALLATIONS » DECONSTRUCTING GRAVITY

Many ways to become airborne

FALL IN/FALL OUT
Blackwood Gallery
University of Toronto
at Mississauga
Until Dec. 13

BY LEAH SANDALS

With trees putting on their yearly show of vibrant golds, scarlets and oranges, one might think that the ideal point of departure for a seasonally themed exhibition would be colour and hue.

Not so at the Blackwood Gallery, a rigorous academic space housed on the leafy campus of the University of Toronto at Mississauga. Its two-part autumn group show, *Fall In/Fall Out*, was sparked not by fall colour but by the tumbling, mulch-ward destiny of that foliage, bringing together works that riff on gravity and downward motion.

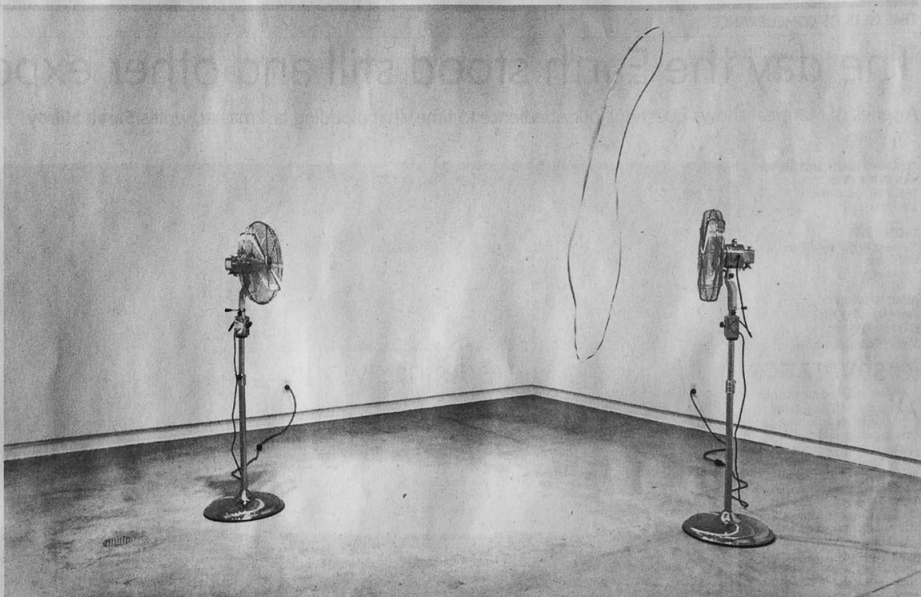
"I like themes that are somewhat redundant, like falling in the fall," explains Christof Migone, director and curator of the Blackwood. "Everyone has an image of falling. But how to amplify that and make it more complex, that was the challenge."

The strongest works from the first half of the show, *Fall In*, which opened earlier this fall, well exploit those tensions between simple and complex.

Torontonian Simone Jones's film, *Perfect Vehicle*, shows a futuristic, speedily-looking machine advancing at a funereal pace across desolate salt flats. With observation, it's revealed that the machine is moved forward by the rise and fall of the passenger's chest as she breathes. It's an absurd, yet humane, gesture — sci-fi light-speed fantasy on a slo-mo biodynamic timetable.

Zilvinas Kempinas's *O Between Fans*, like similar works by this Lithuanian-born, New York-based artist, is a delight, with two fans keeping a plastic loop perpetually dancing in the air, seemingly freed from gravity. Kempinas's installations are as direct and naked as a science-museum set-up, but are also doubly spiritual and poetic.

Montrealer Paul Litherland is represented by two remarkable skydiving videos, *Force of At-*



Two fans keep a plastic loop perpetually dancing in Zilvinas Kempinas's *O Between Fans*, an installation as direct as a science set-up.

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Christof Migone, curator of the Blackwood Gallery

traction and *Freefall Fighters* — films that marry macho adrenaline with sobering intimations of mortality and fear.

Force of Attraction in particular yields this uncanny mix, as the camera focuses on Litherland's face as it morphs during a few minutes of free fall. Seeing the artist's skin and cartilage turn to mere putty in the atmosphere's hands is by turns amusing and anxiety-provoking — Cindy Sherman-esque self-portraiture meets extreme-sports risk.

Interestingly, the second half of the exhibition, *Fall Out*, which opened in late October, courts risk in a different, rather self-reflexive way. For it, nine new artists were matched to respond to the nine original

Fall In artists.

"A recurring thing in stuff I do is this element of failure," explains Migone, "not failure in a derogatory way, but more in being vulnerable. I was also thinking of dominoes, of cause and effect, of one thing or fall triggering another."

Indeed, some of the *Fall Out* artists undermine the works they were ostensibly inspired by — albeit in a witty, open-ended fashion. Roula Partheniou brings slapstick to Kempinas's science with a well-placed replica of a banana peel, suggesting there's more than one way to become airborne. More pointedly, Josh Thorpe adds a viewer-activated on-off switch to Don Simmons's *Bachelor Forever*, a

fascinating vertical-line-tracing robot that Simmons initially argued was completely self-contained. With the flick of a finger, Thorpe's addition converts Bachelor's proclaimed solitude into something intrinsically relational.

Unfortunately, experiments in failure sometimes turn out to be just that. Some viewers may have been put off, for instance, by the exhibition's installation procedure, which continued a couple of weeks into each half of the show. The result: ladders and power-drill noise that interrupted and obscured viewer experience.

Migone explains that what some might see as poor planning was actually intended as pedagogy. "I wanted to focus

on the installation as a process," he says. "We're a university, so I also saw it as a way for students who come by the gallery regularly to see how an exhibition goes up, to demystify it." Migone admits that in future he might make that choice more clear.

Installation quibbles aside, the Blackwood's current project delivers a stand-up effort — even if it is about falling down. With eclectic program events like astronomy lectures and breakdancing sessions, *Fall In/Fall Out* rejects autumnal cravings for conceptual comfort food. The result is uncertain, yet enjoyable: a walk through a different kind of changing autumn woodland.

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