

About AWTW

Getting involved

Front line

Reviews

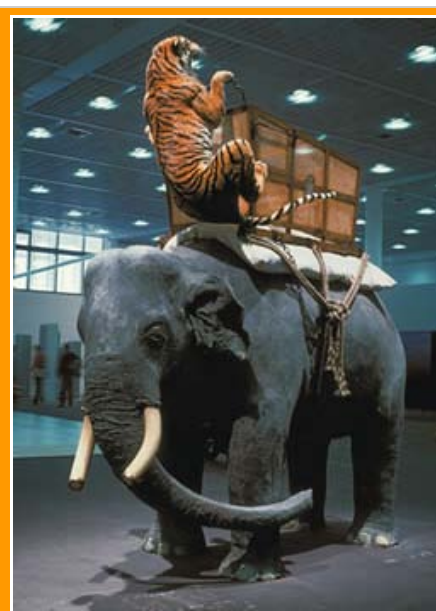
Resources

## A Few Small Thoughts about being a Tourist

Robin Richmond finds her Euro-centric prejudices are side-swiped on a visit to Vancouver

I wasn't thinking about either Velasquez or conceptual art when I stepped out of the rain into the Vancouver Art Gallery last month. It was only a shower after all and I imagined a pleasant hour or so inside its august portals might be just fine. Frankly, it was a wrench to go inside at all, as this wonderful city and its surroundings are really about being outdoors. Nature, I told myself. This was the reason for spending a month here. Culture, I imagined in my London-based smugness, would take a welcome back seat and I would spend my time looking up and out at snow-covered mountain peaks, impossibly tall and ancient trees and the wind-whipped Pacific. Whale-watching not art watching would be the focus of my energies. Well, I was truly side-swiped, and the experience of spending many a happy hour inside this accessible and appealing museum made me think long and hard about being a Euro-centred art tourist.

Understanding and navigating the cultural wealth of a city art gallery tells one a lot about its constituency. The burghers of Vancouver are clearly a discerning lot, from what I gleaned in my short stay, and this has been much on my mind as I've been thinking about global tourism. Since leaving Vancouver last month, I have been a pilgrim at two much better known cultural shrines than this rather lovely QUIET art museum, and these were not such happy experiences. It's all in the numbers, I guess. It's a rare privilege to be in front of art and pretend to be alone, whether it's conceptual arcana, photography or video art as in Vancouver - and almost succeed. Maybe this is deeply worrying for the cultural institutions, though there seemed to be plenty of happy museum goers. The white noise of tourism can be deafening..... as I realised a week later at the hyper-crowded Archaeological Museums of Athens and Delphi. Earplugs are the way to go.



Huang Yong Ping  
*The Nightmare of George V*, 2002  
concrete, reinforced steel, animal skins,  
paint, fabric cushion, plastic, wood and  
cane seat  
Photo: Courtesy the Walker Art Center

### More reviews



The retrospective of Chinese artist Huang Yong Ping *House of Oracles* at the Vancouver Art Gallery (until September 2007) is to be highly recommended. His work seems to have two rare qualities in contemporary art - humour and humility. Based in Paris now, this founder of the avant garde Xiamen Dada group in 1986, explores cultural identity and globalism every which way but loose. The installation of a



*Above & below*  
**Huang Yong Ping *Bat Project IV*, 2004-2005**  
airplane cockpit, bamboo scaffolding, plastic construction fence, taxidermic bats, documents, photographs  
Photo: Courtesy the Walker Art Center

life-sized US spy plane (alluding to an incident in 2001 when one such jet collided with a Chinese "Bat" plane and set off a major diplomatic incident) is festooned with 300 stuffed bats (I completely got over my fear of bats in this fiesta of taxidermy and angry activism) and *The Nightmare of*

*George V*, a full-size sculpture of an elephant, with a hunter's platform on its back, being attacked by a tiger really brings home nasty thoughts about colonialism. This idea is taken further in a curiously beautiful 3.5 metre sand sculpture of a British-owned bank from 1920's Shanghai.



Upstairs the photographs of the local chronicler of the city, the German-born Fred Herzog, bring a calmer gaze upon humankind in all its various glories - from large format Ektachromes of Hopper-like buildings (now sadly replaced by yuppie high-rises) to detailed, empathic portraits of Vancouver society from 50's Elvis wannabees (couldn't not think of fellow Canadian KD Lang) to Ladies Who Lunch. A glorious show.

Downstairs, a travelling show *Acting the Part; Photography as Theatre* examines the history of the posed photograph from its mid 19th century beginnings to its most illustrious stars of the still photo and the moving one - the ubiquitous Cindy Sherman and Bill Viola. But this show is what brings me finally to Velasquez. Having missed Eve Sussman and the Rufus Corporation's large-scale video *89 Seconds at Alcazar*, an exegesis and poetic reconstruction of *Las Meninas*, shown here in Europe in recent years and at the Whitney, I was just bowled over by this beautiful work and can't get it out of my head six weeks later. A mixture of dance, theatre, drama and the thrill of the movies, the enigma of the painting comes alive for these few seconds in the dark of the gallery. People come and go on screen; the scene materialises and

dematerialises like a dream. One's conceptions are prodded and pushed and pulled and of course not solved. See this if you can, and look out for the next two projects (The Rape of the Sabine Women and a piece on Malevich). The mountains and seascapes of Vancouver will always be associated in my mind now with the claustrophobia of the Spanish court. Velasquez would have liked it too.

[Vancouver Art Gallery](#)



---

[Site map](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Privacy](#)



[About](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Campaign AWTW](#) | [Campaigns](#) | [Constitution](#) | [Contact](#) | [Demos](#) | [Donate](#) | [Environment](#)  
[Events](#) | [Global economy](#) | [History](#) | [Ideas](#) | [International](#) | [Join](#) | [Membership](#) | [Mission](#) | [New writing](#)  
[Pickets](#) | [Publications](#) | [Resources](#) | [Reviews](#) | [Standing Order](#) | [State](#) | [Updates](#) | [YouTube](#)

