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VISUAL ARTS

MOCA's show Believe rewards our faith and patience

By **Murray Whyte** Visual Arts Critic

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BELIEVE say the big white neon letters presiding like a totem over the foyer of the Museum of Contemporary Art Canada. It's an exhortation, a dare, a complication that undermines itself from the inside — a work by the South African artist Kendell Geers, the 'L-I-E' portion flickers a bit more dimly, muddying the edict's purity with doubt — but a slightly more literal reading might be just as apt: Over fits, starts and, mercifully, a bracingly strong finish, believing in MOCA the past few years has been a touch-and-go proposition, to say the least.

But nothing stopped the doors from opening this weekend, and pick your preferred cliché to describe the scene three years of pent-up demand had wrought — the floodgates opened, the dam burst, and there it was — a new museum, doing museum things. Two floors of exhibitions (the second and third), interactive programming (the fourth and fifth). Even the cafe on the first floor was up and running and made a pretty solid cappuccino, at least by my standards.

The new MOCA doesn't look much like the old MOCCA, that dearly departed brick warehouse on Queen Street West that hosted so much of this city's convivial, grassroots cultural coming of age; quintupling your footprint can have that effect, but I'm inclined to believe its long-time animating spirit has made its home in within its capacious walls nonetheless.

That's got a lot to do with curator David Liss — MOCA's longest-serving stalwart at 18 years, and its soul. *Believe* — the name of Geers piece, and the name of Liss's show — is broader, deeper, more globally minded than past MOCCA efforts, but while it nestles in alongside that cosy history to make a little of its own. *Believe*, bracingly current, feels less like a leap and more like an evolution; I don't know if there's a higher goal for a beloved institution at the end of a wholesale transformation than that.

Believe, brass-tacks version, is that big tent MOCCA always loved to pitch, the better to fit a dizzying — and sometimes bewildering — breadth of ideas inside. Inclusion was always a MOCCA hallmark, and here it's fresh, urgent and on point, pulling artists from across the globe and around the corner into something that feel less like a conversation and more like a cocktail party, many voices chattering at once.

There's something right about that; it's messy, in a gloriously absorbing way, as loose threads link ideas and form with an everyone-in-the-pool ethos. You can grouse that *Believe* casts its net too wide — a show predicated so loosely on the very notion of faith, spiritual or otherwise, is ripe for just such a complaint — but the glass-half-full view of things might see such a splintering as apropos of a deeply unstable global moment.

A slate of video works here (there are four) position themselves on that shaky ground. Though their specifics are loosely related — if at all — transformation is their unifying force. Jeremy Shaw's *The Quickeners*, an unsettlingly artful collage of archival footage of snake handlers, shudders with visceral force — quavering voices speaking in tongues, rapturous believers trembling in the grips of the divine.

A different kind of transformation attends the work of Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Nikolaj Larsen, both of whose video pieces travel the fraught terrain of refugees and forced migration by very different means. Larsen's is a poetically-assembled cinema-vérité piece

that unfolds across three screens of refugee migrants living in tent cities in Calais, France, aiming for a new life in the U.K.; Nguyen's is a spooky sci-fi fantasy, woven with news footage of Vietnamese refugees landing on Pulau Bidong, where 40,000 occupied the football-field sized Malaysian island in 1979. Decades on, in Nguyen's work the island – and the planet – is deserted, but for one very lonely man who one day sees a living, breathing woman wash ashore. And so, a certain belief system might say, things start again.



In Maya Stovall's ongoing video series *Liquor Store Theatre*, reports of extinction are greatly exaggerated: A series of performances and interviews in and around central Detroit liquor stores, the city's urban Armageddon is debunked as a place where community always grew between the cracks – and is blooming anew.

What this has to do with belief is an open question, but I suspect that's the point. Enduring a torn-down-to-the-footings unravelling (something MOCA knows a thing or two about), whether it's urban, cultural or spiritual, demands something even more mercurial than faith: hope. This is not a rational thing, and I suspect that's what *Believe* is really about.

Nearby, the show shifts away from moving images to an astonishingly gorgeous array of objects by Rajni Perera and Nep Sidhu. Perera's arresting *Talisman*, two graciously curving arcs of slim wood supporting a pair of finely carved seats, each sculpted with intertwined hands, says much about hope to me.

Here, MOCA is true to its roots by letting them shift – Sidhu and Perera, both young and Toronto-based, represent the best of a next generation of artists here who embrace craft, culture and difference all at once. Perera, born in Sri Lanka, deftly merges traditional painting techniques with a feminist sci-fi sensibility; Sidhu, whose family emigrated to Canada from Punjab in India, is a polymath who fuses a mastery of textiles – tapestry, costume, weaving – with a personal brand of Afro-futurism.

Together and apart, they dazzle: Perera with a pair of big, bold figure paintings that evoke ancient gods and goddesses with decadent, electric colour and uncanny painterly precision; and Sidhu with radical costuming that look like the armour of mythic hip-hop gods. Nearby, a pair of pinball machines sit back to back, the cool funk of Shabazz Palaces flowing from within; one is a rebuilt Xenon game, a '70s dystopian vision of the future that Sidhu put Perera's paintings inside.

Upstairs – yes, there's more – things shift, the space less a warm embrace than cool, almost stark. Not everything works. A big text wall work by Barbara Kruger gives brand-name cred – and fills a ton of space – but feels obvious and out of place here, in a show predicated on deep thoughts, and doesn't excite.

Never mind, though, because others here are more than able to carry the freight. Nearby, Dineo Seshee Bopape's eerie, ominous *And-in, The Light of This* – a splay of dry earth, stone, hand-compressed clay and rune-like symbols – seems primed for dark ritual, and you may choose what you like. Here, now, today, I'm thinking of resurrection, for a long-dark museum, returned to the light. MOCA, at last, has risen to leave no doubt: Its time is now.

Believe, the re-inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Contemporary Art Canada, runs to January 6. For more information please see www.moca.ca

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