

NEW AND NOTABLE

Vancouver at the intersection of photography and painting

Heather Johnston's 'textural' additions combine best of both media for a fresh take on the known and the familiar

LUCY
HYSLOP

Go local, do deep: After five years in London, Vancouver photographer Heather Johnston now has her native city firmly in her sights.

The former art history teacher has focused solely on landmarks or places "that Vancouverites relate to, are proud of, or put on a pedestal" in a series of about 20 pictures.

"It is both a celebration and a memorial of a time past, and one that is also rapidly changing," explains Johnston, who studied for her master's in photography at the august Royal College of Art. "In London, you notice the Ferris wheel [British Airways London Eye] and other modern things, rather than the old; it's the opposite here."

On the hit list: The Lions Gate Bridge, the seawall, the Orpheum Theatre, the Stanley Park mermaid, and the East Van tag monument on 6th Avenue and Clark (by homeboy Ken Lum, who, as it happens, has an exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery from Feb. 12 to Sept. 25).

Another notable candidate is the Marine Building, otherwise known as "the most beautiful one in town," Johnston says. "I absolutely love it ... so majestic." (She worked there in a typing pool before studying history of art at UBC, and went on to work in high schools throughout the province before deciding she "wanted to do, not teach.")

Her pieces start as digital (occasionally film) images that are layered on to a painted background, and then digitally married. She then transfers the images on to a canvas, which she also has painted. "There's a good textural quality — some ridges, some real surface — and after transferring the images, I rough the edges up with sandpaper, which harks back to an earlier photographic time," she says.



Working on the Granville Street picture with this "grunge-texture feel" was especially rewarding. "It could have been photographed back in the '40s. The result shocked me," says Johnston, who tries to merge photography and painting, a continual theme of her work.

The tactile, accessible nature of a painting is more attractive to her than the glossy surface of a photograph in a glass frame, for example. "I try to have the textural quality of a painting, but to keep the photographic sensibility," she explains.

You would be mistaken if you thought these items were more for tourists. "It's probably more for Vancouverites, to be honest," she adds, "although I like people to bring their personal history to it or to appreciate the beauty of what it is: an art deco building, the seawall ... I hope it inspires memories."

Heather Johnston's canvases cost \$75 (8 inches by 8 inches) and \$125 (12 by 12) at parliament, 115 Water (604-689 0800; parliamentinteriors.com). Her website is heather-johnston.com

Is that hue you?

The design world may embrace trends (this year's 'it' shade — keep up, people! — is

honey-suckle, according to the Pantone colour experts), but when it comes to decking out your home, it's all about things that have meaning for you; whatever the hue.

That's the advice of Dwaina Sprague, a 20-year veteran of the Vancouver interior-design world, who spends time persuading people not to opt for things too trendy or faddish.

Instead, think: What will give me value, comfort and happiness. "They need to reflect who we are, not who decorated them," she says. Or, at her firm Good Space, "refining their own taste."

"People feel when they start working with a designer that they are obligated to just turn themselves over to them, and it's sad that the industry has that perception, because it's not what we do," she says.

"We just don't plunder all their stuff. It's about being creative and re-purposing things [such as old chairs] that have meaning."

Her latest notable designs — she passes her drawings to local trade-only firm, Bloom, to create — are an inventive glass table, in walnut and glass (objects can be displayed on the shelf below), and tub chairs in velvet. Made for a Vancouver project, both are modern, but



Heather Johnston's work: Granville Street (far left) and Marine Building.

that are small and function really well," Sprague explains.

To her, Vancouver is getting into its stride with its own approach to interior design.

"People are finding their confidence, and learning not to necessarily bow down to the trends or someone else's vision," she adds.

"Vancouver is just getting the bug. It's always been outdoorsy, but people are becoming more house-proud and design-savvy."

Good Space Design Group is at #704 — 73 Water Street (604-669 2064; goodspace.ca)

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with more than a hint of vintage. It's part of her insistence on making pieces — if you can't find any — that fit well in a

room. "I don't think that tables should take up valuable space that people could take up. They are necessary, but I like ones

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