

# Sometimes faking it can be liberating



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**Robert Hengeveld**  
**at Mercer Union**

Until April 30, 1286 Bloor St. W.,  
Toronto; [www.mercerunion.org](http://www.mercerunion.org)

**R**obert Hengeveld's enormous installation *Natural Revision* saved my shoes. Let me explain.

The day I wandered into Mercer Union to see Hengeveld's work, the temperature was hovering around 10 degrees, the sky was unmarred by clouds and birds were warbling from every tree. To walk in the park, or stand around an airless art gallery? Not exactly a fair fight.

But when I approached my local park, I was nearly engulfed by a nasty, deep and sucking slick of winter residue (wet earth, dog poop, road grit, more dog poop). Mother Nature, I remembered, is not my friend. So, back to art.

How wonderful, then, to discover that Hengeveld's installation offers exactly the sort of nature I get along with best – entirely manufactured. *Natural Revision* is a low-rent version of a Marie Antoinette grotto: a cleverly edited replica of a woodland retreat, a romantic boreal enclosure minus all the stinky, buggy bits.

Hengeveld's copse, which includes two floor-to-ceiling boulders, a waterfall and a clutch of flora and fauna, is bluntly, even aggressively, artificial.

The boulders are made of cardboard boxes covered in painted paper – or, to be more accurate, partially covered. The waterfall is a curtain of silver beads augmented with a misting device concocted from an upturned, hot clothes iron and a dripping plastic cup. The animals are hunters' decoys, and the trees are of the non-flammable Christmas variety, likely rescued from thrift stores. The grass is a multihued Pierre Trudeau-era shag carpet and appears never to have been molested by a vacuum cleaner.



Ester Pugliese's mixed-media works top architectural outlines with drawings of animals and floating shapes.

## IN OTHER VENUES

**Yuula Benivolski at Gallery 1313's Window Box Gallery**

Until April 24, 1313 Queen St. W.,  
Toronto

Benivolski's sculpture rests in the window like a mummified homeless person – a not-so-gentle reminder of Parkdale's poverty problem.

**Kai McCall at KWT Contemporary**

Until April 23, 624 Richmond St. W., Toronto

McCall's nymphs (of both genders) appear painted with icing sugar and unperturbed by the demonic octopi, marlin and stags that surround them. Unperturbed, or tantalized?

**Kristen Peterson at Convenience Gallery**

Until May 2, 58 Lansdowne Ave., Toronto

Peterson's installation plays with Convenience Gallery's window space, creating a visual echo, a reversed fish tank.

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Small cuckoo-clock-like birds pop out of the rock face periodically, and I am guessing they were made out of hair berets (they were too quick for my eyes).

The great fun of *Natural Revision* is that Hengeveld makes none of his conceits secret. In many places, the boulders are unfinished, and their cardboard skeletons are openly visible. The animal decoys, two of which are inflatable but only semi-inflated, wouldn't fool an alien, and the waterfall (which I read as a tribute to the dollar-store-driven glitter-and-sequin installations of Winnipeg-based artist Andrew Harwood) is intentionally clumsy, a set design from a children's pageant.

Furthermore, the motion-activated birds don't quite chirp on cue and are rigged to "fail" in their timing – another clue that Hengeveld is openly embracing his installation's inherent falseness.

What, then, is the point of all this simulacra-making?

Apart from Hengeveld's cattle-prod-subtle nature versus nurture, organic versus constructed dialogue (a conversation that is

appearing just about everywhere lately – clearly, we are collectively sharing what psychologists, and clever marketers, label "authenticity anxiety"), this exhibition is more importantly about process, about how artists actually make art.

Hengeveld shows us the workings in order to inspire us to remake our own worlds, in whatever fashion we choose. It's as if the artist is saying, "Look how easy this is, how fun" – is calling out to viewers to rekindle their innate creativity.

As such, I found *Natural Revision* a magically, happily pointless exercise in fakery for the pure joy of fakery, a grown-up version of make-believe play – one far more inspiring than any sticky stumble through a filthy patch of civic lawn.

**Carl Taçon at Peak Gallery**

Until April 23, 23 Morrow Ave., Toronto; [www.peakgallery.com](http://www.peakgallery.com)

**M**eanwhile, on the other side of the art forest (way on the other side), Carl Taçon's new suite of granite sculptures at Peak Gallery are so finished, so buttery