

Art reflects life in the Downtown Eastside

[Michael Geller](#) / Vancouver Courier

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As I listened to an Elections B.C. official describe the voting process for the forthcoming plebiscite a single thought came to mind: I hope we never have to go through this again.

What a colossal disaster this is turning out to be. Thanks, Christy.

As the ballots are about to be mailed out, I have decided to again leave town. This time I am off to Paris and Morocco in search of more planning ideas to share at a forthcoming lecture entitled 12 Great Ideas for Vancouver from Around the World. It will be presented at SFU Harbour centre on April 1.

But before I leave, I am participating in an [art unveiling and panel discussion \(http://vcc.ca/about/college-information/events/article/title-1138408-en.html\)](http://vcc.ca/about/college-information/events/article/title-1138408-en.html) at 6 p.m. tonight (March 11) at Vancouver Community College's downtown campus. It is organized by the Vancouver Biennale, a non-profit charitable organization that celebrates art in public spaces. It brings to Vancouver the works by internationally renowned and emerging contemporary artists that most people actually like.

I agreed to participate in this event since the installation by artist Toni Latour titled "Let's Heal the Divide" is intended to provoke discussion about the divide that has long existed between the Downtown Eastside and the rest of the city.



For many years, I have been concerned with how little progress has been made in the Downtown Eastside despite the million dollars a day being spent on social services.

Tonight's panel, to be moderated by SFU's Gordon Price, includes Sandra Seekins, a faculty member in art history at Capilano University, and Romi Chandra Herbert, co-executive director of PeerNetBC. Panelists are being asked to address the question whether art can be a catalyst for social change.

To my mind, there is no doubt that art and artists can be positive agents of change, which is why I was pleased SFU's Centre for Contemporary Arts decided to move into the Downtown Eastside.

While at the time Jim Green and others worried an art school might lead to undesired neighbourhood gentrification, I was confident it could help regenerate what most regard as a very tragic part of the city.

I say "most" since some Downtown Eastside community activists do not share my view that this neighbourhood is in desperate need of repair.

While they urge the city to replace single room occupancy hotels with 5,000 suites of social housing (and city planners seem ready to oblige), they are not as troubled as I am by deplorable streetscapes with crumbling buildings, desolate, empty storefronts and open drug dealing.

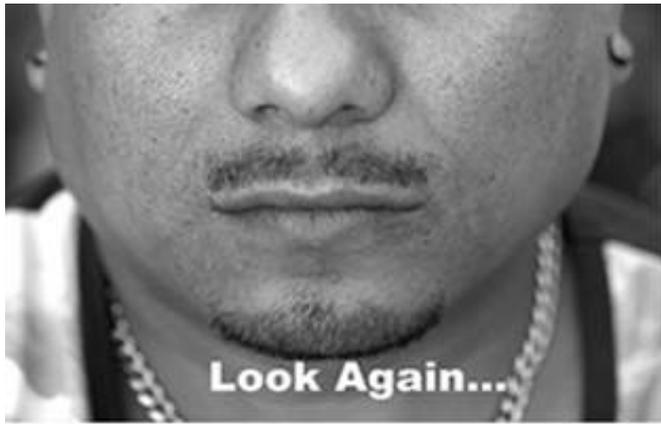
As Wendy Pedersen of the Carnegie Community Action Plan has told me on a number of occasions, if this is what it takes to keep the condo developers away, so be it.

Tonight I will acknowledge that Toni Latour's art installation may help focus attention on the divide that exists between the Downtown Eastside and the rest of the city, but it will not do much to cause social change.

I am much more optimistic about another public art installation about to happen in Winnipeg's inner city.

As reported in Maclean's magazine, this project by visual artist KC Adams titled "Perception" asked prominent indigenous Winnipeggers to pose for two photos: one during which they were to think negative thoughts including the racism they have suffered, and one while having happier thoughts.

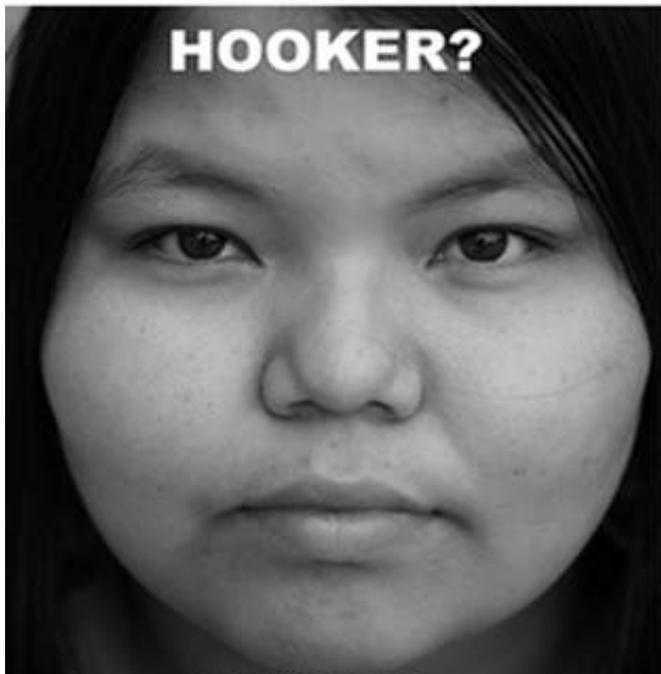
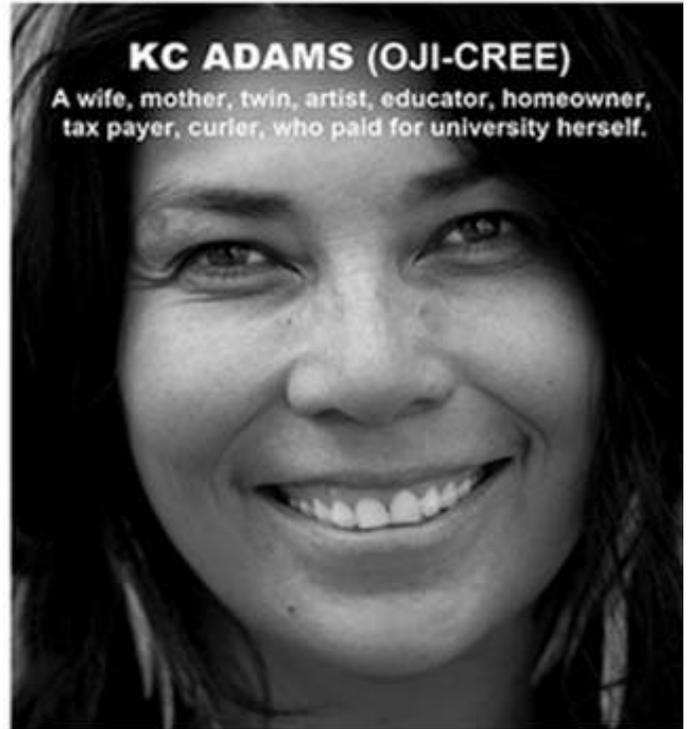




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LOOK AGAIN...

“Perception” asked prominent indigenous Winnipeggers to pose for two photos: one during which they were to think negative thoughts including the racism they have suffered, and one while having happier thoughts.

The artist then asked her models to label their photos, choosing words that reflect the way they are often perceived by the wider community, such as drug dealer or hooker.

Viewers are then invited to “look again” at the second photo in order to see that the “hooker” is really “a mother, daughter, girlfriend, sister, high school graduate, working mom (who) loves apples and coffee and is social assistance free.” And so on.

The artworks will appear on billboards, in storefronts and bus shelters and inaugurate an annual indigenous art project in a city long divided along racial lines.

While it will take more than public art to heal the divides in the Downtown Eastside and Winnipeg’s inner city, I believe it can play a positive role.

Sadly the same cannot be said for TransLink’s \$30,000 contribution to the Main Street poodle installation that the No side loves to ridicule. Ignore them.

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