

Luxury Object, Luxury Subject

The generous excess

of Andy Dixon

by Alex Quicho

Spending's become recreational in Vancouver, British Columbia. Where dollar amounts are parlayed socially, objects of definite value are preferred. Over the past ten years, its Texas-and-Gore-tex lefty-stoner reputation has been traded in for that of visible, if contentious, opulence. Limber young fiancées sip almond-milk cappuccinos after barre class, each engagement ring prominent. Young-at-heart millionaires play patron to oceanside street murals, much to the city's chagrin. Anti-gentrification activists picket every high-end restaurant opening in the Downtown Eastside. Dior and Prada finally open flagship stores this spring. Flights from across the Pacific arrive direct daily, as do flights from the frontiers of Alberta's oil-rush — both bearing high-rollers on vacation looking to keep an eye on their assets. The emptiness of downtown's high-rise residences is a favourite topic among locals: investors both foreign and home-grown cling to property they'll never live in, hoping to reap the housing bubble's reward. Vancouver is an aspirational environment, a land of day-to-day hustle overshadowed by streams of global capital which torque the city into financial distortion. A logical place, in short, to begin a body of work titled *The Luxury of Observing Luxury*.

Andy Dixon's studio is clean and airy, with walls of bare cinderblock and a view of Vancouver's historically working-class eastside. Approaching from the hallway, one can hear the premonitory bump of his constant rap soundtrack. Should the weather be good, and a patron especially flirtatious, Dixon will propose a gin and soda on the rooftop, accessed by clambering through a single-thick window. Most will be greeted by the artist in suit jacket and sock feet, shoelessness integral to keeping the floor unsullied, across which Dixon rolls out his prepped, unstretched canvases in order to paint in the flat latexes and thin oil crayons he favours.

In a past life, Dixon was a skinny, precocious kid living on the city's outskirts. When I visit, he takes me to the window to show the speck of his old suburban haunt across the inlet, and then a photograph that has him sneering and blue-haired in a bedroom papered with gig posters. From age twelve onwards, he cut his teeth on a number of abrasive ensembles — d.b.s., The Red Light Sting, Secret Mommy — as he founded his own imprint, Ache Records. His trajectory from persona to persona, from past-punk to present-foppish, reads as a project of timely self-actualization: an exuviation of nineties guilt and early-noughts irony in favour of today's hyper-conscious hedonism. And it's no coincidence that his personal paradigm shift occurred around 2008's financial crisis, as selling out became a moot point post-recession. "Our anxious anti-capitalist stances were a privilege no longer afforded to us," he tells me. "But, 2008 was also the best year of my life."

Outsider art is easily defined as the sort realized apart from The System: no schooling, no market, no accolades, no representation. The outsider artist is beloved for his or her perceived purity of intention, their works conceived without regard for trends or peer-mimesis. Dixon, on occasion, is marketed as such, his works exhibited in margin-centric venues such as New York's Outsider Art Fair. When pressed during interviews, he will 'fess up to being self-taught. The fluency with which he navigates aesthetic systems, however, is anything but dilettante. A Dixon painting is all mimicry in the most accomplished manner, layering histories and affectations with a generously of-the-moment sensibility. If Dixon is self-taught, he isn't suffering from it. He is an adroit sampler, coping elegance from Degas and freneticism from Twombly, lushness from Rousseau and luridity from Matisse. Many of Dixon's works have direct twins within art history, if not cited in title then certainly revealed in conversation. In an interview with IRL Magazine, Dixon explains the discourse of sampling via rap:

“When Kanye samples Otis Redding, he is tying himself to a rich musical history, but he is also playing with the context of the original sounds. Would one say that Otis Redding sings on that Kanye/Jay-Z track? His voice is there, of course – but it’s sampled from a different time in history and is being played or performed as a sample by someone else, a new musician. In this way, the song is simultaneously a direct nod to history and something completely brand new.”

Dixon’s canonical fixation bears resemblance to Jay-Z’s 2013 ‘Picasso Baby,’ where Hova cites every big name in his collection like he’s personally doing the paperwork to qualify as an Art Basel VIP. At the time of the release of *Magna Carta Holy Grail*, reviewers — of the generation subscribed to what Dixon calls the “guilt-ridden model of viewing the actualization of one’s desire as a weakness or a character flaw” — were wary of this happily apolitical view from the top. More than a few leaned on Jay-Z’s own tired line as a sardonic reminder: “I’m not a businessman — I’m a business, man.” Similarly, Dixon loses no sleep over playing the game. The art market is the art world’s most essential and most contentious facet. Peel back the referential layers to glimpse Dixon’s true subject matter: his role in that irregular and unregulated structure. His postmodern non-interest in either vilifying or reifying luxury coolly transmutes its weirdness. Incorporating a Fitzgeraldian spread of socialites, flamingoes, polo players, chandeliers, panthers, leopards, feasts, flowers, and nudes, his paintings are nonetheless aspirational tableaux of status and abundance that teeter, without falling, on the cusp of overindulgence.

When we arrive to be emotionally moved and find our experience diminished (Machu Picchu swarmed with tourists; a beloved painting in a too-crowded hang; mere anticipation rendering a profound experience of art impossible, as in Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station*) — we are never more aware of beauty’s unfixable nature. As he writes about Matisse’s *The Piano Lesson* (1916), a painting that employs a selfsame self-quoting device, Peter Schjeldahl notes its ability to “make us relish the disturbance” of our expectations. In this vein, Dixon represents images typical of historical European patronage in an unexpected manner. Much of the magic lies in his unapologetic use of colour, and further in the seeming abandon with which he will stipple, ornament, or redact

the painted figures under drawn texture, extending his flippant attitude towards revered material out and back to his own work. Driving Dixon’s considered compositions is the bold, directed fearlessness of a blue-collar narrative which owes nothing to the doting elite.

Conscious of its competing elitist and meritocratic attitudes, the art market prefers the trickster figure — the individual who can traverse diverse circumstances with little regard for convention. Dixon is a perfect interloper, managing to collapse many modes of wanting and having into the single plane of his paintings. Though critics are keen to pin his unruly formalism to punk rock roots, Dixon is conversely aware that his oeuvre is, as Ian Cohen describes *Magna Carta Holy Grail*, “not just an account of luxury but an accessory to it.” Moreover, he sees the paintings as a real-time representation of their own success. This meta-capitalist conceit is easiest to believe in action as we pop a bottle of champagne on the sidewalk outside his South Granville gallery. On opening night, the walls were constellated with red dots, a star-sign with only one reading: SOLD OUT.

On assignment for Montecristo, Vancouver’s beloved rich-rag, [Justin Ramsey](#) examined the stylishly fecund *Abundance* (2014) and remarked that the painting itself ought to be an object in the painting. Indeed, many of Dixon’s smaller portraits or still-lives re-appear in the well-appointed rooms of his larger works. Nested inside one another, the paintings admit their likely destination as decoration. They acknowledge richness’ cumulative aspect in the way that individual collectors can, as Chris Kraus writes, “have absolutely nothing to say about art history or curatorial practice, but [...] tell us everything about [their] belief in the force of artistic transmission.” And they provide an important window into Dixon’s central idea that even the most subtle change in context can shift a meaning, or at least a reading.

[Adam Gopnik](#) writes, “for good or ill, some idea of money has always been constitutive to our idea of art.” Circumstances that seem strictly contemporary — a hyperinflated, unregulated global market rife with corruption and secrecy — are not historically anomalous. For all of capitalist time, you have been what you’ve bought, though you’ve also been what you wanted. Which of the two is more visible? In a [panel](#) on clothes and class for *Adult Magazine*, Fiona Duncan says, “The desiring’s become as fulfilling to me as possessing.” In the same panel, Hari Nef recalls, “I first experienced luxury as something so unattainable it wasn’t even material.” As



an outsider artist preoccupied with the Western Canon, or a boy from the suburbs making it in the city, Dixon continues in the nondiscriminatory pastime of dreaming big. Who doesn't mouth all the words to 'I Am A God' without hoping for a transference of persona in incantation? Believability isn't the shtick; both Yeezy and Dixon employ luridness to reinforce unreality. Dixon's figures, stiffly arranged into affected elegance, their features worked into between-shot hesitation, further reveal this conceit. Their stilted aspect is owed as much to Vanity Fair spreads of yore as to Matisse's Fauvist echo, and each pastel face reads perplexed as if having walked into a party to wonder: why am I here?

In *The Grand Foyer* (2014), twin near-copies of Dixon's *Bouquet* paintings (2014) sit on either side of Persian and Moroccan textiles, mise-en-scene for a couple's charged crossing. Surrounded by the worldly conviviality of having, descending woman nonetheless flinches from ascending man in pimp pinstripes, colours from either textile leaching onto her limbs and face. Dixon's more recent paintings are full of these little tensions: women examining one another, men in sporty rivalry, couples disclosing tenderness or insecurity as an indicative tremor of life beneath the bright surface. Lush detail re-fleshes a story's fleeting vignette. Art can rule as narrative catalyst, as seen from Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* to every art-heist movie of this century, providing a portal into history, a pretext for self-reflection, and, moreover, the impetus to seize the future by whatever means necessary. Whether in hand or in mind, art holds more agency than money — which, after all, can travel only on one temporal plane at a time.

Not too long ago, dynastic families could still decry 'new money' and the labour undertaken to make it. Giddy excess was cast as unclassy, true wealth as truly effortless. As good genetics are praised but discernible surgery belittled, wealth couldn't be won, only inherited. But now, occupation heiress isn't enough. All contemporary icons, no matter how gilded, nod to the ruthless diligence of their ascendance. Whether illegal or legitimate, liquid or patient, begat via luck or work or womb or meme, your fortune is yours if you author its narrative. Times have changed. Or have they? Our parents' generation covetously cast *doing what you love* as a respite from the grind. But both creativity and leisure have since been effectively capitalized. We labour for our leisure, working nine-to-fives for a holiday's reward, or labour at our leisure, patchworking contract jobs with freelance work for the ostensible luxury of keeping our own schedules. The idea of self-care — a catch-all term for mindful self-indulgence — appeals with its promise of a time-out from relentless production. Each tiny act of respite is measured not by the scale of work-days and deadlines, but by the minutes and hours of what feels like, blissfully, stolen time.

Dixon's paintings hold a similar appeal of guiltless indulgence. Happiness, as says Joan Didion, is a consumption ethic. Dixon's hyperaesthetic representations, where even the fleeting lustre of skin-tone is transformed into a rainbow palette of shape and shadow, offer a utopic vision of capitalism's best side. We can have it all, and why not? We've worked hard. We deserve it.