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Sligo Heads: New works by artist Kristan Horton are monstrous

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On this St. Paddy's Eve it behooves us to turn our thoughts to the land of the little people, the shamrock and shillelagh, of peat-infused libations and (it must be said) harrowing existential black comedy, Samuel Beckett being Ireland's patron saint of angst. Fortuitously, new works by Canadian artist Kristan Horton, currently on view in Toronto and Barrie, Ont. – the products of his artist residency in the depths of a solitary and rain-lashed winter – give us a taste of the old country.

“I was fresh off a plane from Barcelona, where there had been palm trees and sunshine, and all of a sudden I was in Sligo, and it was December, and it was wet and windy and dark,” he told me when we met in Barrie this week. He had gone to Ireland for a four-month stint at The Model contemporary art space – at the invitation of former Toronto curator Seamus Kealy – and he had been anticipating immersion in the storied Shangri-La of Irish literature. (W.B. Yeats was known to rhapsodize about the place, calling it his “country of the heart.”) The reality, though, was a bit bleaker. “I was living in this kind of dorm, but there was no one there because of the holidays. It

was just me, and an alarm that went off every once in a while in the building.”

The visit was not without its high points. “I did meet Ireland’s greatest living poet, Dermot Healey,” Horton says. “Seamus and I drove through the dark to the end of this long road and there was a kind of stone barn with a thatched roof that was 300 years old and inside it was Dermot, and he just started telling stories.”

For the most part, however, Horton kept to his lodgings and worked, confronting himself in a series of photo-digital works which he has since dubbed the *Sligo Heads*. “In Sligo, I was in a kind of zero state,” Horton recalls, “and I started to make something out of nothing. I decided to respond to the poverty of the resources and the situation.”

Holding his Canon G10 at arm’s length, Horton took a series of self-shots, which he then digitally stitched together, sometimes using as many as 25 images at a time, picking and choosing from among the takes and their varied details. “I wanted them to each seem like a creature – to hold together enough to feel like one thing,” he says.

Yet, for the viewer, they threaten to disintegrate, their facial features flaring, drooping and melting under the heat of creation. Most of all, these portraits evoke hallucination, and a kind of wild free fall into the realm of the grotesque, the ravenous, the deranged.

They also evoke the central theme in Horton’s work: the tension between falling apart and coming together. His early series of 200 black-and-white photo works, *Dr Strangelove Dr Strangelove*, explored our perceptual capacities to make sense of nonsense, with scoops of ice cream standing in for atomic explosions, and marker pens for fighter planes. Perceptually, they barely add up.

A later video used stop-motion animation to chronicle the material transformations of paper scraps and metal and cardboard as they appear to make and unmake themselves in a progression from sardine tin to Starbucks cup to Coke can to cigarette pack – assembling and disassembling in jittery fast-forward. His series of drawings begun in 2008 (also displayed in Barrie) embody his experience of listening to audiobooks on First World War history, struggling to corral the complexity of details. Horton organized the disparate story bits into a spiral form, creating a dizzying narrative vortex. Chaos was tamed, but only barely.

Eventually, the opportunity to head off to Berlin brought an end to the Sligo moment. Horton completed his *Sligo Heads* in Germany, where he has now set up semi-permanent camp, incorporating the continental influence of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (in particular his grimacing marble and alabaster busts) and the legacy of the legendary Irish artist/drinker (or is that drinker/artist?) Francis Bacon, whose feral vision of humanity seems to prefigure Horton’s raw and manic monsterpieces. Call it a touch of the Irish.

Kristan Horton: A Haptic Portrait of Groping Imagination, at the MacLaren Art Centre in Barrie, Ont., was curated by Ben Portis and runs until May 26. Horton’s exhibition Sligo Heads runs at

Jessica Bradley Gallery in Toronto until May 11.

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