

AGH

SUCCESSIONS

Ingrid Mayrhofer

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Preface

Ingrid Mayrhofer is one of Hamilton's most politically-active artists, though you may not know it. Whether working independently in her studio, or collaborating with neighbours along the pipeline trail, she is continuously working to articulate the complexities of urban life. Struck by the fact that more than 80 households in the downtown core were displaced due to Hamilton's planned Light Rail Transit (LRT), she set out to document those affected addresses before, during and after their demolition. Mayrhofer looks forward to improved public transit via the LRT, and to affordable housing in place of vacant lots. *For the Archives* is the resulting body of work that tackles these many intersecting urban issues, expressed through digitally-collaged photographs, a looped video on a monitor and a dual-channel video installation with streetscape images projected onto construction fencing.

In this exhibition, Mayrhofer considers which pieces of this urban puzzle become part of the past, while also thinking of the present and future. As citizens, we are charged with the responsibility to act, and to be an active part of how the changing city takes shape. She refers to Karl Marx with the exhibition title phrase, "after all that was solid melts into air." Considering how

old and new come together, Marx was thinking about feudal society in the 1860s in contrast to the urban industrial liberal class, specifically in Europe. He observed that “anything that had any standing evaporated,” and Mayrhofer mines this theory, suggesting it resonates directly with the current landscape. Things change so quickly around us that sometimes we can’t keep up. Mayrhofer’s concerns are for the tensions in Hamilton at this time: what are we working towards? Is this a car-friendly city, versus what people really need, like public transit, walkability and of course, affordable housing?

Mayrhofer’s earlier series of collagraphs offers aerial views of the industrial sector and interpretations of the steelmaking process together with the façades of workers’ homes. The inclusion of cyanotypes from the AGH collection (installed at the entrance to the exhibition, as a segue from early images of urban development), that document steel making and the TH&B railway construction, situates Mayrhofer’s work as she explores the tensions of progress. The early-twentieth-century John Heddle photographs were Mayrhofer’s starting point as a research inquiry into the AGH collection. Invited as part of the AGH Successions series, we knew Mayrhofer would make an invaluable contribution to Hamilton’s history of picturing itself through change.



What follows is a conversation between Mayrhofer and Paul Weinberg, a Hamilton-based journalist, in which they discuss her practice and the impetus for the current body of work.

Hamilton Bridge Works,
digital collage, 2021.

Melissa Bennett
Curator of Contemporary Art

More than One Image in the Picture: Artist Interview

Visual artist Ingrid Mayrhofer and journalist Paul Weinberg discuss her exhibition *After All That Was Solid Melts Into Air*.

Paul Weinberg: Hamilton is no longer just a “steel town” where pungent industrial smells represented a sign of economic progress, and one-way streets were designed to speed up the flow of cars driven by workers going to and from their jobs. Today, Hamilton is known as the city of waterfalls and new posh restaurants.

Yet, the legacy is not entirely absent. Pollution still wafts from the industrial sector, particularly from automated steel plants pumping out plumes of carcinogens.

Living in a steel town is not entirely unfamiliar for you.

Ingrid Mayrhofer: My first job after high school was at the VÖEST Steelworks in Linz, Austria, a city similar in size to Hamilton. In the eighties, that plant significantly reduced its pollution as well as its workforce, and my former office building now houses Stahlwelt, a museum.



Steeltown 6,
collagraph, 2014.

PW: In the AGH exhibition, your *Steeltown* series of prints depict workers’ housing overshadowed by floating sheets of steel and other curious motifs in the night sky. Not a human being in sight, but the setting conjures up generations of workers and their families living and working in confined and contaminated spaces.

IM: Human presence or absence is inherent to the built environment. With my *Steeltown* series I wanted to connect the place of work to the homes of workers, and to products manufactured



Main at Kenilworth,
digital collage, 2021.

with their labour. In my prints, the terrain of the industrial sector, seen from a bird's eye view, becomes the background. It holds the sun, the moon, and smoke. Viewers have interpreted that space as the sky, as the lake, or just a deep void. The houses are seen at eye level from the street. I added elements suggesting leisure activities,

a little sailboat, and playground equipment that used to be made of steel. I only realized later that railway tracks appear in a few of the prints, and that offered me a direct connection to Hamilton's planned LRT (Light Rail Transit).

PW: This segues us to the exhibition's photo montages and videos. Both feature the by-products of demolition along King Street East to make way for the LRT. The first stage in the process involved the boarding up of now expropriated stores, warehouses, and apartments, followed by their destruction. The entire undertaking reflects the on-again, off-again and on-again nature of development projects in Hamilton.

IM: Most of the buildings that Metrolinx (the crown agency that is responsible for the LRT) tore down on King Street were already beyond repair, and the resulting empty lots are clean compared to the pre-existing wastelands. Boarded up storefronts and derelict lots are like holes in the aesthetic of the streetscape.

I understand the sense of loss that people express over the demolition of landmarks such as the popular Martin's Bowling, but there at least we have a realistic expectation that something will be built that will serve the common good—improved public transit, affordable housing, clean spaces to gather. Yet when, as a relative



Installation view , Photo
by Robert McNair.

newcomer to the city, I saw the shuttered storefronts, decaying buildings and derelict lots that still dominate the cityscape along Main, King, Cannon, and Barton streets, I felt a loss without the expectation for improvement. All these empty lots are just begging for a cynical art intervention. I also thought that the candy colours painted on boarded-up windows and doors were hilarious in their futile attempt to brighten up the condemned premises.

PW: More ironic (rather than hilarious), perhaps. Your moving image montages offer juxtaposed photos with digitally collaged elements that encourage the viewer to stick around and reflect. You can see the absurdist or dissonant elements such as a purple sky, a little Lego creature in the corner or a scary little face. Plus, in your images there are abandoned items like the leftover chairs side by side in a boarded-up interior, the leftover sign from a payday loan outlet, a shuttered upholstery shop, roadside diners and pubs. You superimpose graffiti on the walls

of boarded-up buildings, originally written by unknown taggers who ignore “no trespassing” signs, as do you Ingrid, furtively taking hundreds of pictures on a Sunday morning.

Similar images appear in the video installation *Around the Corner, There is Another Corner*, plus some new items that emerge in the move from frame to frame. I watched in earnest, glued to my seat, as students on a gallery tour surrounded me with their chatter, identifying sites that they recognized.

IM: In a recent AGH workshop, Hamilton filmmaker Dakota Lanktree commented on feeling “grey” when she walks along King Street East. The destruction wrought by the LRT is minor when compared to the ongoing “demolition by neglect,” a phrase used by our friend Shawn Selway in his essay “Dodging Demolition in Renaissance City” in *Reclaiming Hamilton*, your recent book. The sinister attitude towards the historical façades in Gore Park has been attributed to the “nihilism of capital.” Profit just doesn’t care about people or culture.¹

PW: Still intact in Hamilton are the mammoth structures from a bygone industrial era, including the Cotton Factory—an incubator for a host of small businesses and art studios. The makers of

¹ Shawn Selway, “Dodging Demolition in Renaissance City,” in *Reclaiming Hamilton, Essays from the New Ambitious City*, ed. Paul Weinberg (Hamilton: Wolsak & Wynn, 2020), 258.



Robert's Interior,
digital collage, 2021.

TV shows and Hollywood movies are flocking to Hamilton for well-preserved historical settings absent elsewhere.

IM: Yes, and Guillermo del Toro is one filmmaker who puts our local exotic to good use. The potential for fantasy and horror movies, and



Around the Corner, There is Another Corner (video still), 2-channel video collage with photographs by the artist and by John Heddle, Assistant City Engineer of Hamilton, c. 1900.

for police chases is infinite. When people visit Hamilton, I like bringing them through the industrial sector and then taking them up the escarpment to Sam Lawrence Park for a larger picture from a higher vantage point.

PW: Piles of rubble are ultimately the last depressing stage in the erasure of memory and cities. We are witnessing more of that in the media coverage of wars and military conflicts.

IM: It brings to mind cultural critic Susan Sontag's observations in her 2003 essay *"Regarding the Pain of Others,"* as well as two artists whose work

influenced me long before I went to art school as a mature student—Käthe Kollwitz and Martha Rosler. Although in different times and different media, both of them exposed the effect of war, an ultra masculine public act, through a domestic and female lens.

Rosler's 1967-1972 series *"House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home"* likely inspired me to juxtapose disparate images using diptych formats and photomontages. I first combined multiple negatives in the darkroom, by masking, burning and dodging. Photoshop came a lot later, and it probably takes just as long, if not



HUB,
digital collage, 2021.

longer than with the enlarger in the darkroom, to put more than one image on the same picture plane.

PW: You have mixed emotions about LRT and development in Hamilton.

IM: Improving public transit is worth the temporary agony, when it means lessening the eternal noise and air pollution coming from traffic along our major one-way thoroughfares. But I also feel a sense of shared public pain for the more than 80 households displaced in the name of progress. Hamilton needs to build affordable housing in the lower city, and we have the space to do it.

There were some visually rewarding moments for me, watching the demolition along King Street. The removal of the signage at Robert's Upholstery, for example, revealed a steel beam with "Hamilton Bridge Works" stamped on it, and between Grant and Wentworth, a mural ad for the SUPER SERVIS SHOE REBUILDERS had been well-preserved between two walls.

These architectural details have seen it all before.

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Paul Weinberg is the editor of, and a contributor to, *Reclaiming Hamilton, Essays from the New Ambitious City*, published by Wolsak & Wynn, 2020.



Ingrid Mayrhofer (BFA, MA, York University) is a visual artist, curator, art educator and community arts practitioner. Born and raised in Austria, she has exhibited in Canada, Austria, Korea, Japan, Serbia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Cuba and Chile. In addition to her double major media of printmaking and photography, Mayrhofer has worked with installation, site-specific intervention and video. Recent solo exhibitions include "After Krieghoff" at the Orillia Museum of Art and History featuring stereoscopic video and photographs. Her ongoing community collaboration with Red Tree Artists' Collective, Hamilton Dialogues and Pipeline Trail Hamilton will unveil the presentation of a "Trail Mix Museum" in the summer of 2022 along the Pipeline Trail in east Hamilton.

www.ingridmayrhofer.art

www.redtreecollective.org

In AGH Successions, artists and curators create new work and ideas in conversation with our collections.

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