

Art Gallery of the South Okanagan

199 Marina Way, Penticton, BC, V2A 1H3

VANESSA KWAN

Your Private Sky (Penticton)

Vancouver artist Vanessa Kwan's newest work combines a do-it-yourself aesthetic with the project of critical tourism. *Your Private Sky (Penticton)* is a large commercially-manufactured peach constructed out of fiberglass and plywood that references Penticton's annual tradition of the Peachfest held every summer since 1947 to celebrate the peach harvest. In scale, artifice and mass appeal, it aspires to the nearby concession stand in the shape of a giant peach on Okanagan Lake beach. This popular tourist site was made even more famous in the summer of 1991 when an earlier version of the fruit drink kiosk was destroyed during a riot as a by-product of the notorious wild antics of a certain rock star. Kwan's installation, however, aground in the Project Room at the Art Gallery of South Okanagan—itsself an established tourist destination—operates in a different way. The opportunity offered to visitors to enter into the minimally-outfitted core of the peach and its accommodation within the art institution emphasizes the openness of the art installation to myriad layers of interpretation. Given the prehistory of counter-culture movements and do-it-yourself aesthetics over the past several decades, Kwan's context-specific work brings forward questions regarding the process of presenting artwork, the structures of tourism and the itinerant artist's relationship to site.

Your Private Sky (Penticton) is a continuation of Kwan's inquiry into objects of consumer culture, such as souvenirs, autographs and postcards, and, more recently, monuments and landmarks—built forms of culturalized urbanism, that, aside from serving mnemonic purposes, for the most part perform socio-economic functions as easily recognizable and consumable symbols of place. This is clear from the work's title, drawn from the writings of the utopian thinker Buckminster Fuller, which prompts two very different associations: Fuller's idealistic project for his geodesic dome design, which sought to address America's housing crisis in the eighties, and the growing privatization of nature with the increasing sophistication of mass recreational venues. While the invention of the geodesic dome initially held promise as a humanitarian project, it would soon after be taken up by processes of globalization as a key structure to deploy in the service of place marketing. Erected to promote a city's status as an advanced technological centre of the future, versions of Fuller's design, such as Vancouver's Science World, would also function—not unlike the worldwide plethora of landmarks of all shapes and sizes—as a highly stylized icon of a city's place identity and become often tourist destinations in themselves. Penticton's functional over-sized peach construction on the waterfront, for example, stands out paradoxically as the organic emblem of the city, not to mention supernatural BC, while at the same time speaks directly to the longstanding agricultural industry of the South Okanagan Valley.

Kwan's work pays homage to the cherished fruit symbol in relation to these socio-economic features of the city as a whole in which it is on view, with the added imperative to consider how its monumental ersatz appearance oscillates between universal appeal and regional specificity. The form also speaks to the theme-parkization of public spaces designated as tourist sites that tends to generalize experiences of place. Here, the contemporary role of the itinerant artist-as-tourist takes on meaning too as *Your Private Sky (Penticton)* exemplifies the current mobilization of site-oriented art practices in which artist accompaniment is not only expected but the norm. Yet, while at home in the institutional settings of the art gallery that made conceptual avant-garde artists of the 1960s and 1970s so uncomfortable, Kwan's installation significantly insists on being a space within a space, architecturally and through human interaction to achieve its full realization. Hollowed out, the peach offers albeit a tight squeeze an inhabitable room into which viewers are prompted to look up and deduce a constellation of their own making from glimmers of light shining through tiny holes randomly drilled in the ceiling. It is here—between the peach's glossy exterior (not incidentally fabricated by a company that also specializes in water park slides) and under the low-tech lighting system inside, a far cry from the highly mediatized environments anticipated perhaps of similar theme park configurations—where viewers, though at first perhaps non-plussed at the simplicity of it all, can freely propose their own personal solutions for inhabiting and relating to that object of representation for where they live if they wish to make it their own. Kwan's *Your Private Sky (Penticton)* is a deliberately anti-climatic do-it-yourself project, balancing subversion with a call to imagination in its staging of a lasting encounter with the site it engages.

Alice Ming Wai Jim

Curator

Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art (Centre A)

exhibition closes August 21, 2005