

Geoffrey Pugen's vigilante women

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Geoffrey Pugen: *Sahara Sahara* at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art
Until March 27, 952 Queen St. W.; www.mocca.ca

Last fall, Pugen unveiled *Bridge Kids* at Gallery TPW, a multi-channel installation about telepathy, the future, and magic rocks, starring only creepy kids. It was as weird and wonderful as it sounds. Pugen's latest work, *Sahara Sahara*, on display in the MOCCA lobby, is a kicky tribute to grind-house women's revenge films from the 1970s, such as *I Spit on Your Grave*, or *Big Bad Mama*, with a bit of *Mad Max* thrown in for fun.

Displayed on two flatscreens (with slight time/image variations between the two), *Sahara Sahara* introduces us to a gang of sexy, tough young women who, for reasons unexplained – but, one suspects, because the victims asked for it – ride around on bicycles beating up annoying, leering men.

The women live in an abandoned RV, in a scrubby forest, and when the men regroup to attack their hideout, the film becomes a full-on action flick. Fists fly, weapons are employed, fake blood flows, and the great Johanna Householder, la doyenne of Canadian performance/video art, appears in the bushes, like a watchful owl, decked out in Yoko Ono wrap-around sunglasses. What more do you want in a five-minute film?

Of course, *Sahara Sahara* begs these questions: Are we watching a straightforward action short, a well-made piece of pure entertainment unburdened by the parenthetical provisos of art? Or is this a meta-film, a film about action films, and thus loaded with all sorts of questions about representation, homage, reclamation, etc.? Or, is there no difference any more? (Furthermore, I could not help but be reminded of Laura Cowell's 1990s Super 8 shorts, the motherload of dykes-on-bikes, rough and raw DIY cinema.)

Mainstream, big-budget action films now constantly refer to other action films, employ inter-textuality as both a nod to the informed audience and as intra-filmic nods (or simply due to lack of originality, as an act of poaching). Maybe Pugen is arguing that the tropes of the action film are so exhausted the only thing left to do with them is celebrate and

capitulate to (but not mock – *Sahara Sahara* does not feel like an ironic shrug) their very emptiness? Perhaps all we have left is art about art (to infinity)?

That's a lot of semiotic punch for a short film plunked, almost as if it were an afterthought, in the back end of a gallery lobby, just beside the bookshelf. Pugen is earning his early hype. His new work deserves a larger, more considered presentation.