

When condos rule the Eastside

Where will all the lesbians go?

ART

Nathaniel Christopher

ART HAS COME TO life in an ironic twist of events for a lesbian artist in East Vancouver.

While creating an exhibition of drawings about gentrification, Elaine Mari received news that her apartment and studio, both located in East Vancouver, had

afford to live here."

Mari's current exhibit consists of nine mixed media paintings that chronicle the changing face of the Downtown Eastside. The paintings are reminiscent of Ming prints. Elegant strokes form foliage, plants, rocks, concrete, smokestacks and other urban representations.

"The name of the show is Building for a Better Tomorrow and I guess it's a sort of ironic title because I don't believe that it is building for a better tomorrow,"

will be hidden away somewhere or pushed out somewhere else."

Mari, a full-time artist who works at the Centre on Bute St to "support her art habit," is not only facing eviction from her studio but possibly her Mount Pleasant home, which she shares with her partner and their dogs. She loves living in East Vancouver; it's home for her.

"I lived in rural areas all my life and I don't like it. I like living in the city. I like being fairly anonymous. I like deciding who my community



MARK MARYANOVICH PHOTO

BUILDING FOR A BETTER TOMORROW: 'I guess it's a sort of ironic title because I don't believe that it is building for a better tomorrow,' says Elaine Mari of her new exhibit, which features paintings of concrete, smokestacks—and creeping gentrification.

been purchased by developers.

Mari rents studio space in a converted warehouse in the Downtown Eastside. From the outside it's a nondescript building. An unassuming door on a side street opens to a small elevator with a manual door that whisks past floors of ample studio space.

When the elevator finally grinds to a halt, the door opens onto a huge room that takes up almost the entire expanse of the fifth floor. With ceilings that seem to reach halfway up to the sky, bright windows bursting with daylight and dusty wooden floors resplendent with the markings of acrylic paint, Mari's Eastside studio is a cradle of inspiration.

Mari sits in the corner, gazing out the window, cradling a cup of tea. The sight of buildings, overpasses and traffic below seems incongruous with the serenity inside. One of the more dominant features of the skyline is the unmistakable peach, beige and off-yellow hues of condominium developments.

"Every day when I walk down here to go to work, I see construction and upgrading and 'sold' signs on people's homes. It's constant building and changing and having this building going up behind us there blocking out the view of False Creek. That means I may have to move farther out of the city because I won't be able to

she says.

Each picture has a slogan or saying written on it. Sayings like 'safety first,' 'we can't keep this up forever,' and 'I don't quite get it' prod the viewer to ask awkward questions about the future of Vancouver.

"On Building for a Better Tomorrow, I had only been here a short time and I was watching that building being developed back here. Much of the imagery comes from that building."

That building is a condo development creeping up behind her studio. She remarks on the contrasting image of poverty against a backdrop of wealth and development.

"Seeing the garbage lying up in front, that is a representation of just how poor this area is—all the dumpsters being dumped out [by] people looking for stuff. And then at the same time you got this big condo going up there and [it's] this juxtaposition of these two things."

Mari's art explores not only the juxtaposition but the interconnection between development and poverty in the Eastside. Through the process of gentrification, people lose their homes, livelihoods and community.

"One has a huge impact on the other, it's going to have. It'll all be clean and tidy sometime soon. But all the people who survive by going into the dumpsters to find things

is going to be and not having it forced on me."

Many of the properties being redeveloped are houses and buildings which, until now, have been more affordable for people with low incomes. They are often replaced by prohibitively expensive condo developments. Mari worries that East Vancouver's lesbian community is particularly vulnerable to this trend.

"Many of my friends live in Mount Pleasant, but many live other places as well, including the Drive and East Vancouver. It has been a place that's been affordable for women who don't have high incomes. That's certainly been a truism about the lesbian community. There's not the affluence you'll find in heterosexual communities in the same way."

When asked about the long-term effects of gentrification on the lesbian community, Mari conjures up sobering images of a weakened queer presence. What will happen to East Vancouver? What will become of the lesbians who live there?

"They'll go different places, I guess, and the community will not be as strong," she concludes.

BUILDING FOR A BETTER TOMORROW.

Elaine Mari.

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