WHAT'S ON

THE STAR'S GUIDE TO ENTERTAINMENT IN TORONTO THIS WEEKEND AND NEXT WEEK

THE TORONTO STAR
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SECTION E
PAGES E1-E22

SNOW FOOLIN'

Snow or no, we've got two seasonal celebrations starting up this week: Frostfest and Winterfest. Brrrr! See E10

RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

Club Art.

THE HOTTEST ART IN TOWN CAN BE FOUND, NOT ONLY IN GALLERIES, BUT IN RESTAURANTS AND CLUBS, SOME OF WHICH ARE ALMOST WORKS OF ART THEMSELVES.

BY CHRISTOPHER HUME
TORONTO STAR

Andrew O1 and Jamie Osborne, artists and "environmental repair men," have pooled their talents in an effort to "integrate art into the club scene."

Once, when artists wanted to exhibit their work, they went to an art gallery. Now, they're just as likely to go to a neighborhood restaurant.

Throughout downtown Toronto, eateries are turning to art in a big way. Usually, this means paintings hanging on walls that would otherwise look cheap and bare.

But increasingly, art is becoming much more than mere decoration. In the Queen St. W. area in particular, it has acquired an importance secondary only to the menu. There are clubs/bars/restaurants around now that are works of art in their own right. Well, almost.

The places that come to mind — StiLife, RPM, the Squeeze Club, the Blue Room, the Cameron, Lee's Palace, Nut's 'N' Bolts — are showcases of contemporary Toronto art to a degree that most local galleries could never hope to equal.

More than any other factor, the fledgling Toronto outfit known as DecorAction is responsible for the rash of art that has appeared at so many Hogtown hotspots. The firm was started several years ago by Andrew O1, a Toronto multi-media artist whose name at birth was Andrew Owen (get it?). In 1986, he joined forces with another local artist, Jamie Osborne. The two haven't stopped since.

"If you're an artist in this society you have to go out

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Off-the-wall art goes on the wall at clubs

Continued from E1

and hustle," observes Osborne, 28. And — hustling — is something we're both very good at. Between them, they have managed to convince an amazing number of the city's notoriously cheap bar/restaurant/club owners to spend a little — usually *very* little — and let them go crazy in their establishments.

"We're environmental repairmen," says O1, at 25, a mile-a-minute veteran of Toronto street culture who began his career as a graffiti artist. "We encounter black boxes all the time. Usually we're given a carefully designed void that we have to humanize. We want to integrate art into the club scene."

Osborne and O1 met in the summer of '86 at RPM, the cavernous dance club on Queen's Quay. By coincidence, both were installing artwork there. Osborne, a part-time RPM employee, had talked the boss into letting him put up a series of giant painted Styrofoam rockets. Before that, he contributed 10 enormous cartoon-like paintings, all based on the theme, *Dick Tracy Meets Miss Truelove*. O1, of course, had shown up one

CHRISTOPHER HUME
Art

day, a sketchbook filled with proposals and a head full of ideas. He ended up constructing a herd of dinosaurs, actually dinosaur skeletons. To top it off, a flock of pterodactyls, with 9-foot wingspans, hovered overhead.

In keeping with DecorAction's official policy of spreading the wealth, O1 engaged talented Toronto artist Matt Harley to complete a set of six massive (8-foot by 12-foot) wraparound murals depicting prehistoric themes such as cavemen battling woolly mammoths, a volcano erupting....

After that — their installations are never permanent, lasting anywhere from one night to five or six months — they built the *Levitating Living Room*. This one consisted of an entire suite of living-room furniture spray-painted white "flying pell mell through the air." Then there were the "funky Egyptian hieroglyphs" and the "op art psychedelic spiral," which, incidentally, is still there.

Each installation gets more elaborate than the next. Operating out of two downtown studios — one for spray painting, the other for sculpting — the pair has developed a formidable range of technical skills. They paint — sometimes even with brushes, more often with cans — they sculpt, they fabricate objects, they do lighting. They also make the arrangements when other artists are involved.

These are not artists in the traditional sense of the word, but culture guerrillas-turned-entrepreneurs. They'll do *anything* — and want to.

Though they are constantly searching for new ways to apply their manic talents, and pay the rent, they always do their homework. For example, the months of January and February are slow months for the club scene in general. Owners don't feel like spending money, especially on a "frill" like art. Osborne and O1 are putting the time to good use with an exhibition at Garnet Press (580 Richmond St. W.) until Feb. 14 that is, in effect, a showcase for DecorAction.

Right now, the boys are into "clarification of some of the 'primary principles of the universe'." Sounds heavy. But not to worry. The clarification comes in the form of two pieces, *R.G.B. — 1.2.3.* and *Birch Barkitecture*. Both are instant meditations on the "five Platonic polyhedra" (multi-sided three-dimensional shapes).

In *R.G.B.*, the shapes are suspended from a wooden circle and bathed in colored lights of green, blue and yellow. The play of light on the the white wall of the gallery only hints at what DecorAction could do in a club setting.

Birch Barkitecture, which consists of the five shapes constructed in birchbark, is more obviously a gallery piece. But again, it suggests greater possibilities. Imagine, a whole room where everything is made of birchbark .... Why, even now, the pair is hard at work on a birchbark MacIntosh computer. And let's not forget their birchbark baseball caps. They, along with Astroturf pillbox hats, are available at the gallery, each one beautifully lined in "hoser plaid."

On a (slightly) more serious note, Osborne and 01 have started "processprainting," in which they have applied the techniques of printing to art-making. The term is an amalgam of process spray-painting. This means working with dots and screens and using three colors — magenta, blue and yellow — in combinations to make other colors.

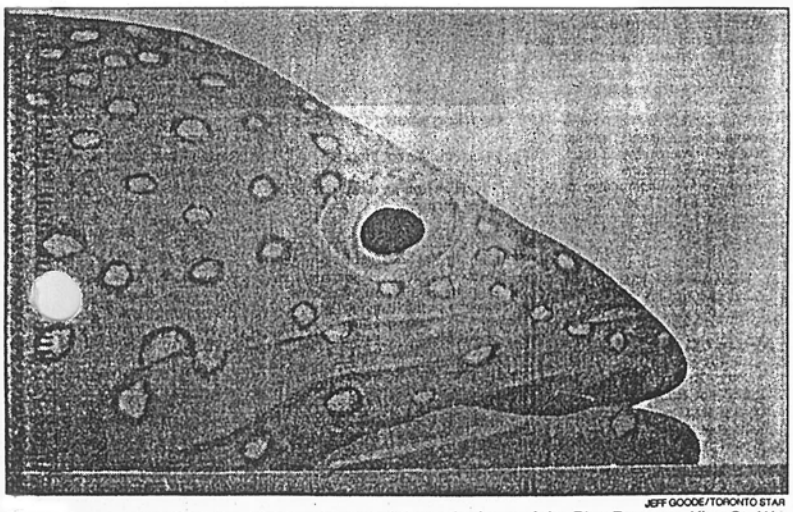
A typical example is *Mona Trout*, in which the image is actually made up of colored dots. From up close, it's an abstract painting; the trout doesn't reveal itself until we stand back.

But, as productive as Osborne and 01 may be, there's more than enough room for others. Fiona Smyth, an occasional collaborator with DecorAction, is another local artist who likes to work in clubs. The 23-year-old painter has decorated windows at StiLife, Toronto's totally designed nightclub, but is probably best known for the Dance Cave she did (with Kurt Swinghammer) at Lee's Palace. Smyth's handiwork can also be seen at Sneaky Dee's.

Then there's Melleny Melody, who specializes in wearable art such as splatter-painted kids' clothing, jackets with dolls' heads sewn in and other forms of outrageous kitsch. Melody's current offering, at the Squeeze Club on Queen St. W., consists of six framed aquaria (filled with more than 1,500 "squeeze toys," mostly little plastic dolls, from the club's private collection) and a series of photographic portraits with frames that must be seen to be believed for their sheer rococo madness. Made of dozens of tiny toys, they are much more interesting than what they enclose.

"We're part bar, pool hall, restaurant and gallery," explains Marcus O'Hara, co-owner of the Squeeze Club (and the squeeze-toy collection). "We want it to be a real gallery, with a mailing list and everything. Once we get organized, we're even going to hire a curator."

Hire a curator! A restaurant owner is going to hire a curator to keep his walls up to date. There are galleries in this city that could use a curator. But I want to know when they're going to start hiring chefs.



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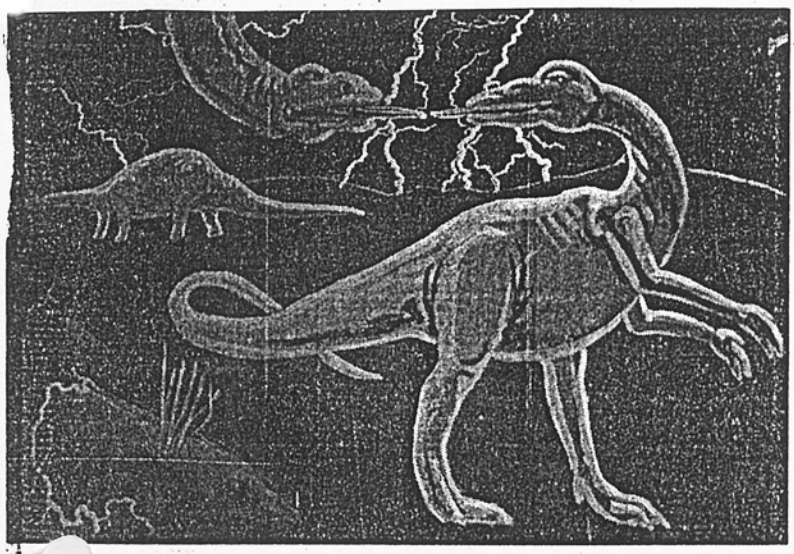
Deep Blue scenery: Wall-sized fishface is part of thematic decor of the Blue Room on King St. W., which is almost a work of art in its own right.



The hat time forgot: Battling dinosaurs by Matt Harley were commissioned by DecorAction to help fill the cavernous RPM dance club.

RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

Merry Melody: Outrageous artist Melleny Melody models wear able kitsch she has on display at the Squeeze Club.

Dance-hall girl: Part of the first club decoration — RPM's giant 10-part *Dick Tracy Meets Miss Truelove* series — created by then-employee Jamie Osborne.