

What Meets the Eye

In a faux setting, a real perspective on the city from famed artist and author Douglas Coupland



"It seems like it's always winter when I'm here, kind of this prairie-grass grey ... I wanted to make this very intense colour pesto to put on the wall, so, if it's winter out, you could change your mood."

—Douglas Coupland

Douglas Coupland and I are hanging out in the living room of a high-rise condominium with a balcony that overlooks the city of Calgary at sunset.

Or so it would seem.

We're actually in a strip mall on 10th Street S.W., site of the sales centre for the Mark on 10th condo tower project, which will feature a commissioned work by Coupland in its foyer. The announcement of this commission is the main reason behind the Vancouver-based author, visual artist and cultural icon's visit to Calgary, and how he ended up seated in the living room of Mark on 10th's mock-up two-bedroom unit.

Titled *Interpretation of Calgary, Alberta in the 21st Century*, Coupland's installation, when completed, will be a series of vibrant, target-like images inspired by the colours of local birds and other native elements. "It seems like it's always winter when I'm here, kind of this prairie-grass grey . . . I wanted to make this very intense colour pesto to put on the wall, so, if it's winter out, you could change your mood," he says. "It sort of becomes a way of luring people into re-examining nature."

It might seem ostentatious to import the views of a Vancouver lifer to impart the nature of Calgary, but Coupland's global renown transcends provincial pettiness. It's not a stretch to consider that one day his own biography might be added

to the *Extraordinary Canadians* series alongside the one Coupland himself wrote on celebrated media theorist Marshall McLuhan.

The faux-reality setting of the show suite almost seems like something out of one of Coupland's novels, in which characters are often trying to define authenticity in a world that feels increasingly contrived. That the author himself is part of this meta-tableau is almost overwhelmingly surreal, like at any moment his visage will skip and then flicker and reveal him to be a holographic projection.

But, even though the stylish condo is actually in a strip mall and the cityscape beyond the balcony is just a mural, Coupland is for real. The man who so astutely pinned the tail on the zeitgeist with his first novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, published in 1991 when he was 29 years old, now sports a gray beard, but he still comes across as youthful. His gravelly voice inflects ever so slightly in the way that teenagers do when they're recounting what happened to them at the mall. He also professes a rather youthful view that the best life is one where you don't have to wake up for anything, preferring events of importance to occur in either the late afternoon, evening or night.

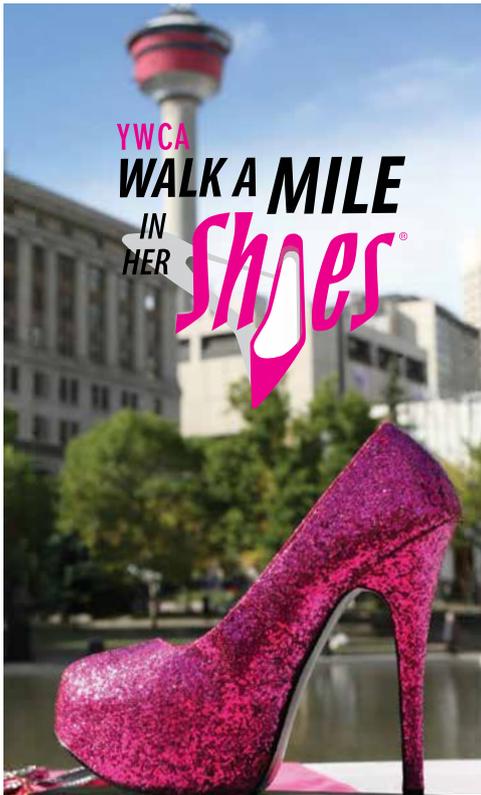
Not that he's a slacker or anything. Coupland's continuously expanding oeuvre of written, visual

This rendering shows what Douglas Coupland's work *Interpretation of Calgary, Alberta in the 21st Century* will look like in the lobby of the Mark on 10th condo project when the building is complete in 2015.

and design-related projects is testament to his industriousness. His simultaneous focus on visual art, design and writing is part of a deliberate plan to model his life after his third year at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 1983, a year when he allowed himself to be all over the creative map, doing everything from woodworking and design typography, to writing for the school newspaper ("Best year of my life," Coupland says).

He's got a new novel coming out this fall, *Worst Person. Ever.*, about a genuinely unlikeable fellow. "All the fiction in the bookstores is so earnest and so worthy, and I thought, I'm going to write the most unworthy, like, socially unredeemable book ever," Coupland says. "You're either going to be really offended, or you're going to really love it."

He's also got another art book in the works, a labour of love that will explore his current fascination with the rapid advance and proliferation of communications technology and the paradox of how access to unlimited information results in our feeling stupider. He's equally fascinated with the social impact of a government mandate that



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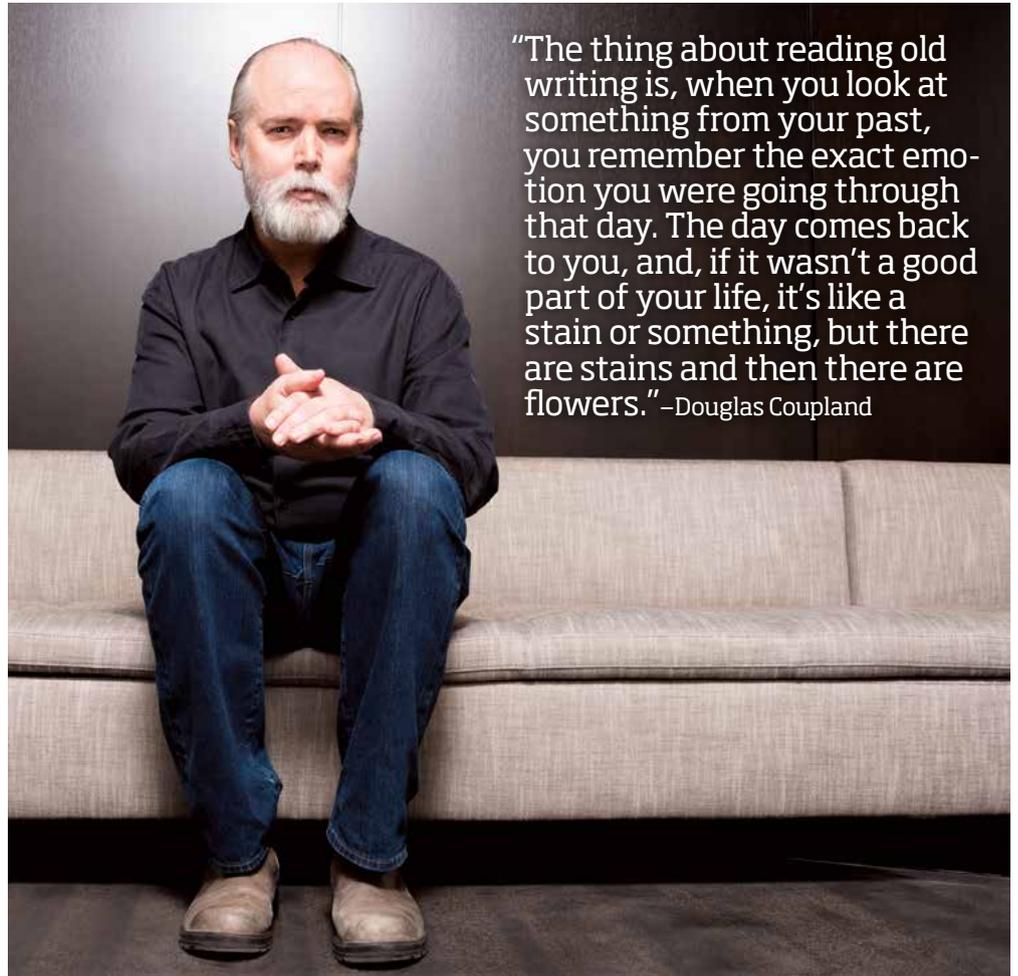
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“The thing about reading old writing is, when you look at something from your past, you remember the exact emotion you were going through that day. The day comes back to you, and, if it wasn’t a good part of your life, it’s like a stain or something, but there are stains and then there are flowers.” —Douglas Coupland

all citizens in China be equipped with cellphones by the year 2015, or the simple fact that postage stamps are almost culturally obsolete.

A longtime collector of Japanese postwar-era postage stamps, Coupland was struck one day by the wealth of stamp albums on hand at a shop he frequented in Vancouver. When he inquired as to why there were so many, he was told that most people under 30 have never even mailed a letter, so they barely know what a stamp is, or, if they do, it’s beside the point since they have no emotional engagement with a stamp. “All these stamp albums that people thought were going to pay for their retirement, you can barely give them away now for 10 bucks,” he says. “To someone born in 2000, stamps are about as relevant as a spittoon.”

Coupland himself isn’t quite so ready to discard the past, particularly when it comes to his own writing. He re-reads one of his older books every six months or so to revisit the phrases or passages that he liked the most (*Hey, Nostradamus!* (2003) is his favourite, specifically the opening and closing chapters). “The thing about reading old writing is, when you look at something from your past, you remember the exact emotion you

were going through that day. The day comes back to you, and, if it wasn’t a good part of your life, it’s like a stain or something, but there are stains and then there are flowers,” Coupland says.

For all his preternatural youthfulness, the writer of *Generation X* has become a cultural elder — though he’s yet to be fully comfortable with the distinction. “It is sometimes disorienting to meet someone who has a Ph.D. and children who *grew up with me*, with my books always being there,” he muses.

Still, as a cultural elder, he is highly sought-after as a presenter, his words absorbed by 20-somethings struggling to define their own times. In a talk Coupland gave at Ryerson University on the things he wished he had been told at that stage in his life, his advice was simple: “Just enjoy what you’re doing, because it doesn’t matter how much the world or technology changes — you’ll still enjoy what you do. If you become a success doing something you don’t like, you’ll just be contemptuous with your success and unhappy with it.”

Words that ring true — even in a fake living room. @