

## VISUAL ART

## Here's the concept

In the past year, it's become clear that Oliver Husain is one of the city's top emerging artists. In his new show, "Cushy Number," he makes his audience feel like performers BY DAVID BALZER

Oliver Husain is that rare thing: an extravagant conceptualist. Torontonians have had many chances to catch his work over the past year or so, from his short film that viewed Willowdale through stained-glass panels for the Leona Drive Project (later for TIFF), to his beautiful printed silk scarves, which Jeremy Laing showed at his Art Toronto installation last fall, to his trinket-filled solo outing, "Hovering Proxies," at the Art Gallery of York University last winter. Husain's latest, "Cushy Number," runs at Susan Hobbs Gallery to Jan. 22, recapturing and synthesizing the spirit of these diverse projects—and providing a glimpse into the eccentric imagination of one of the city's best emerging artists.

Husain's vision for the show begins with Susan Hobbs' space itself, a small, narrow, virtually windowless two-storey concrete box on Tecumseth Street's gallery strip. Husain makes the first floor into a cinema, where the lavishness, decadence and intrigue are partly dependent on its audience's imagination. Before a screen and fold-out chairs, Husain places a paper greeting on a stand; the message tells us we are about to enter an auditorium and receive an individualized letter on our seat. These are lies, of course: not only are we in a different place, but Husain's letter is a form one, available from a photocopied stack on another stand next to the screen.

The letter connects the viewer to a hypnotic film that projects on the screen in intervals. A weird, hilarious, ultra-glamorous, Felliniesque study of a naked model (the Henhouse's bar wench extraordinaire, Karen Frostitution), the film is in six fleeting parts, each one a tracking shot that glides dreamily towards the model as she stares back, sometimes wearing huge false eyelashes, sometimes opening or reading a letter. Between each part, the lights go up and one is left facing the blank screen, until a ding (each time a different tone) signals the film's recommencement.

Upstairs, Husain has, as he did at the AGYU and Art Toronto, displayed his scarves on racks, here

vintage department-store metal spirals. Many of the scarves are inscribed with the epistolary greeting "Dear (Your Name Here)" and, in a clever move, are, at the end of one rack, tied together and strung through the floor's open trapdoor, so that they dangle in front of the downstairs screen, linking the greetings with the paper ones by the entranceway and in the film.

The inferences of "Cushy Number" aren't always clear—some of Husain's aesthetic gestures, such as his poles topped with black feathers, seem like afterthoughts—but the overall effect is enchanting. The show is about breaking the fourth wall and implicating viewers—often heavy-handed concepts, which Husain nonetheless manages with coy panache. For him, art's magic lies in the patterns of its consumption: not just in the drama and excitement of going to the movies or writing a letter, but in their fake or, rather, idealized representations in both high and low culture, which we internalize and then apply to our real experiences. To remind us of this—to make us feel like performers as we enter the gallery—is, in Husain's mind, the job of the contemporary artist, for whom people have, perhaps, become the most exhilarating, versatile medium. ■

Husain's silk scarves



**OLIVER HUSAIN: CUSHY NUMBER** ★★★★★  
TO JAN 22. WED-SAT 11AM-5PM.  
SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY, 137  
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