

Art revels in scramble of ideas

The show, called *Scrinked*, shows what artist Derek von Essen can do when freed from the constraints of commercial campaigns so his mad deluge of ideas can flow

BY MICHAEL HARRIS

"They're like dogs taking a piddle in the street" complained the woman next to me at the bus stop. She was glowering, chin tucked into her Hermes scarf, at some graffiti that had been drawn along the shelter's wall.

"It's called tagging," I offered, as though having a word for it might assuage her indignation. But no.

"More like piddling!" she repeated, digging through her Louis Vuitton handbag for bus fare.

Triumphant, she procured a toonie from the logo-decked bag and stepped toward the approaching bus. "Absolutely disgusting," she insisted, "I mean, why would you need to write your name all over something?"

The bus, also decked over with playful graffiti, dropped me off near the doors of Studio Blue, where one Derek von Essen is showing graffiti-style scribbling of his own for the next month.

The show is called *Scrinked* —

a punky-sounding word derived from the conjunction of "scraped" and "ink". In each of his works, von Essen scratches a diary-load of words and doodles onto slathered coats of colourful ink. These words were initially scratched in with a four-inch nail, von Essen recalls, until he realized that art stores actually sold tools for such things.

But those tools all broke under the pressure. So he returned to harder implements.

This anti-academic approach of von Essen's is a constant in his work. He never went to art school. Thank god somebody didn't.

Von Essen never went to design school either, but that didn't stop him from creating some of Vancouver's best theatrical posters. You may recall the wild dryad posters he designed for Ballet British Columbia's *The Faerie Queen* in 2000; or the poster for Robert LePage's *Dark Side of the Moon* at the Vancouver Playhouse.

The clean, commercial messages in his poster designs seem a humorous juxtaposition with the mad scramble of his artwork. As a designer, von Essen must work within the framework of an advertising campaign, striving to convey particular information in the cleanest way.

But once the cat of commerce leaves, von Essen's mad mouse is free to flit about.

Scraps of half-heard conversation, tid-bits gleaned from CBC broadcasts, 3-D doodles — the words and signs in von Essen's works appear to shoot off in a million directions at once.

Which is not to say these works don't have focal points. They do.

Leftist politics and anti-war sentiments infiltrate many of the works, which were all painted in recent months.

One imagines the news of American dealings in Iraq flooding through von Essen's home and workplace while he painted and etched: Bits of that news crept into the works.

Also common in the paintings is a series of curved shapes, like fantastical macaroni, floating through the sheets of ink. These are biological structures smaller than cells, called telomeres — primordial building blocks tacked on to the end of chromosomes.

The micro-organism writ large might remind gallery-goers of all those tiny inputs that reflect larger concerns. The doodles we make on phone pads, or the rambling passages of our journals, even the graffiti on our bus shelters, these all come from somewhere. And they count.

Scattered inputs, then, can coalesce into a portrait of the time in which a piece is created.

Not a clear portrait, mind you. Rather, von Essen's work reads like a discovered diary, brimming over with disjointed sketches and half-conceived musings.

All of which add up to something grand but charmingly indefinite.

Michael Harris is a Vancouver freelance writer.



Scrinked

New work by Derek von Essen
Studio Blue, 202 — 1540 West Second, until June 2