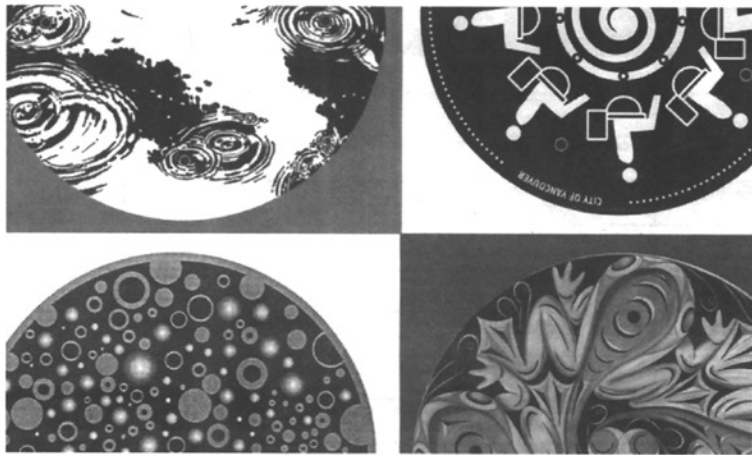


## ART



## MANHOLE ART

## DON'T TOUCH MY MANHOLE

BY ALAN HINDLE

BENEATH THE CITY, rats and crocodiles scurry in absolute darkness. Cockroaches canoe down lonely corridors of stinking soup, searching for refuse to picnic on. Noxious clouds and odious fogs every colour of the oil-slick rainbow curl and crawl through veins of brick and concrete, a poisonous circulation of fumous blood... the ebb and flow of civilisation's waste and rot.

It's a strange sort of romance, but dozens of novelists and filmmakers, (a few leaping first to mind are Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Jeune and Caro's blackly comic gem *Delicatessen* and Michael DeLarrabeiti's *The Borribles*) have set their tales in the sewers—baroque explorations of the human mind and soul, peopled with grotesques and dashing freaks. Yet sewage and sewers are probably the most basic, uninteresting example of municipal engineering, literally the foundation of civil maintenance. A subterranean labyrinth exists below most cities, modern and ancient, and Vancouver is no exception—a hidden world created in ignorance by its citizens above. Underfoot yet everywhere are portals leading to this, perhaps not magical but certainly mythical, place: manhole covers.

Taking a cue from Seattle and New York, the City of Vancouver put out a call for manhole cover designs, receiving six hundred forty submissions (who knew that so many people had their minds in the gutter?!), and have selected two to be mass-produced and distributed throughout the city. Judges for the competition included Douglas Coupland and VAG curator Daina Augaitis. All entries to Art Underfoot are on view at the Roundhouse on Davie and Pacific (for a complete schedule of viewing times go to [www.roundhouse.ca](http://www.roundhouse.ca)) and the winner will be announced by Councillor Jim Green and local arts writer Max Wyman on Wednesday July 21st at 6 PM. As this paper is produced on Wednesday, I can't tell you now who has won, but by the time you read this, some lucky artist will be two thousand bucks richer and brimming with satisfaction knowing you will soon be walking over their work, while the effluvia and effluvia of this city's collective ass flows contentedly beneath.

Most of the submissions are in black and white, presumably intended for casting or engraving, although some, usually the work of children, are in brilliant, reckless colour. Personally, and not just for reasons of sentimentality, many of the most interesting, fun

designs are those by kids. Those that are design-conscious but not so slick they come across as corporate often work because they crib from older craft techniques. Images resembling woodcuts or Japanese silkscreens seem to me to emphasise the human element over the heartless, utterly corporate, almost logo-like images that seem inevitably to have more of those goddamn orcas in them. Don't get me wrong, I like orcas. As highly evolved killers of the sea, but graceful and intelligent and certainly classier than, say, sharks, orcas are lovely. But they are being turned into shorthand for "my, what a flourishing economy we have!" and rendered cliché and therefore, as art, hideous. It's bad enough this is yet another initiative in which Vancouver has not shown initiative, but have nicked from another city—let's keep the orcas out. Anyway, enough personal peeves.

Overall, the best submissions treat the covers as simply a round canvas, not overbalancing the design but letting the image wrap organically within the circumference, or even just sit, splat, flat across on the disc. Of the kids' works, the denser, coloured ones look great, though they would be more difficult to mass manufacture. The knight in armour with a rocketship behind him battling a gold dragon? I love that one, and the abstract bunnies were also pretty fun. And the scribbled mountainscapes (there were several), if they could be accurately and permanently reproduced, would be delightful! So much better than orcas. And the idea of producing public art which isn't a stand-out eyesore, but is cunningly placed, almost hidden, under the eyeline art which you either had to search out or which caught your attention by accident, is an interesting one in the realm of public art. It's not quite the purist definition of art—beautiful but completely useless, something intended entirely for aesthetic appreciation and (sigh! Might as well admit it) collection—nor craft—handsome but utilitarian and bound to practical purpose— but somewhere in between. Although—! Wouldn't it be cool if folks started collecting manhole covers and hanging them on their walls? Obviously, I am not condoning such actions, anymore than I condone people stealing Fiberglass orcas and seeing if they will float out to sea, but as municipal Make-Art projects go, this manhole covers wheeze is an actual contribution to the look and life of this city, and is hopefully the beginning of a new wave of design consideration for Vancouver.

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