

All hail Vancouver's "Eco-man"

By **DOUGLAS TODD**



An exhibition devoted to Cascadian culture has unveiled Vancouver's "Eco-man" to the world. Here is Eco-Man in all his green-leafed GQ splendor, a symbol of the region's utopian quest to merge high-tech innovation with environmental sustainability. Thanks to Vancouver artist **Nicole Dextras** for this striking photographic vision.

Go here to read "Utopia: Are We There Yet?," in which the Seattle-based columnist, Knute Berger, discusses Eco-man and the rest of the provocative exhibition at the Port Angeles Fine Art Center, on the Olympic peninsula (across the strait from Victoria, B.C.). Director Jake Seniuk has devoted his current show to Cascadian themes, spiritual, cultural and otherwise. Berger, who has been supportive of my aim in Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia to develop a "spirituality of place" in this region, continues on the topic while

discussing the diverse art work collected from across Washington, Oregon and B.C.

Here's is Berger's inspired section on Eco-man:

"... My favorite piece in the show was a photograph by Vancouver, BC artist Nicole Dextras. It's a portrait called "Eco-Man" that shows a barefoot businessman dressed in a suit made of leaves and grasses and carrying a bamboo briefcase. He's posed while appearing to stride by the base of a manmade waterfall in an obviously urban setting. His hair is clipped short, he's young, lean, and hungry like many members of the so-called "creative class," a Cascadian fashion-plate, a man on the go. What I love about it is that Eco-Man is the current manifestation of Cascadian citizen. The Muirs and Paul Bunyans, the hippies, wild Green Men and Sasquatch are all passe. Cascadia now crawls with thoroughly urban greens who are comfortable striving in a world of glass towers, who are acclaimed in Vanity Fair photo shoots, and whose greenness is expressed by urban lifestyles and policy, not love of the wilds.

"Each of Cascadia's largest cities has a sculpture or two that attempts to capture its regional spirit in human form. Seattle has "Hammering Man," who represents labor and industry in a town of mounting skyscrapers. Portland has "Portlandia," a goddess inspired by "Lady Commerce," who holds a trident and reaches down to pull Portland along the way to progress. Vancouver has the statue of runner Harry Jerome in Stanley Park, often photographed sprinting against the towered skyline as if to suggest a fast, fleet-footed city (not to mention a burg for fitness buffs). But as regional symbol of the new Cascadia, nothing matches Eco-Man, who seems elegantly, if absurdly, pointed toward a future where nature is a fashion statement for city-dwellers encased in dense concrete habitats.

"We're too cynical, too realistic these days to take utopia too seriously. We can't help but see how we're fully capable of letting ourselves down. Yet neither can we abandon hope that we'll somehow find better ways to live here. One of those ways is to see ourselves through the eyes of our artists. "The Port Angeles Fine Art's Center's executive director, Jake Seniuk, curated the show and makes no claim that this exhibition makes a definitive statement about Cascadia. In fact, I would like to see more, rather than less, on the subject of regional identity and creative responses to it. But Seniuk's show is an outstanding contribution to an ongoing regional conversation and well worth the trip to "the westernmost center for contemporary art in the contiguous United States."

Details: Port Angeles Fine Arts Center, 1203 E. Lauridsen Rd., Port Angeles, WA 98362; 360-457-3532,
Wed.-Sun. 11-5. This exhibition runs to November 29.
It sounds worth a British Columbian look.