

# Globe Style

With hoser chic a hot commodity on the Milan runways, and the Ontari-ari-ari-o tune being hummed on late-night TV, little wonder Douglas Coupland's new pro-Canadiana design exhibition and book is hitting a chord, says ALEXANDRA GILL

## Haute hoser

By ALEXANDRA GILL

G'day and welcome to Canada House. The topic today is beer.

Hey, hoseheads. Just kidding about the beer part.

This here is Douglas Coupland's Canada House. You know, the dude who coined the term Generation X? Bitchin' idea, eh? Well, Doug's not just a writer. He's an artiste too. (That's French for artist.) And he also designs furniture and stuff. Really cool stuff like the Hockey Night in Canada table. You should get one for your basement.

So anyway, welcome back to Canada House. The only problem is, like, it's not a real house any more -- but it was. Last year, some guy gave Doug the keys to this empty house in West Van that was slated for demolition.

So what does the hoser do? He takes a chain saw to the walls, rips out the ones he doesn't want, and then he sprays the entire place with three coats of white latex paint. Like, everything -- walls, floors, windows, sinks, fireplace -- so it all it looks like a snowstorm in the Great White North. Beauty, eh?

Then he moves in all this stuff he's been collecting for years and creates a "uniquely Canadian environment." There are lots of neat ideas in here, so put on your thinking tuques.

Some of the stuff is art, and it's made from scraps. He's got quilts sewn with Canadian Tire hubcaps and catgut dream catchers. And there are some pretty cool cabinets decorated with National Hockey League puzzles and Kraft Singles cardboard boxes.

But there's also real furniture in Canada House. Doug says these "objects" are different because they came from an idea. One is a couch called Two Solitudes and the seats face different ways. The other is called the Treaty Sofa. The big seat, covered in red plaid, has a tiny seat on the end covered in a Cowichan sweater. It's so small you couldn't even slide a six-pack in there.

Then you got these standing lamps that look real expensive, except they're made from stacks of fishing floats that Doug found washed up beside Japanese shampoo bottles on the coast of Graham Island in northern Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands in B.C.).

And, oh yeah, there are a bunch of geese too. They're hunting decoys. Two of them are fused, bum-to-bum. It's supposed to say something about Canada's "slightly screwy bilingual policy." Anyway, there sure are a lot of geese in Canada House and they're not all supposed to be like serious political statements. Doug apparently hatched some goslings when he was a kid, so he's got a real soft spot for geese, eh?

When the house was up and running, Doug invited his buddies over for a big party and they all got loaded on B.C. white wine served in Styrofoam cups. Aw, geez. Anyway, first he took a bunch of photos, in case his wine-drinking buddies puked on the white floors. You can see the photos in his new book, *Souvenir of Canada 2* (Douglas & McIntyre, \$29.95). It's being released on Canada Day, eh?

Doug took all his stuff out and is now going on tour, just like a rock star. The show opens at Toronto's Design Exchange on Canada Day. Make sure you go see it, eh, because in the fall, he's taking Canada House to the real Canada House in London.

Okay, but for now, Doug's Canada House is still in Canada. And the best part of the house is the Hoser Room. It rocks! There's a vintage Rush concert poster on the wall. And the floor is a mess. It looks like the rec room after a big Saturday night. There are pizza boxes, butter tarts and empty beer cans. In the corner, there's a crumpled-up lumber jacket -- the sophisticates call 'em Muskoka dinner jackets, eh?

So this is how Doug describes a hoser in his book: "A hoser is a beer-drinking, eh-saying gallunk who lives in his parents' basement and watches cable TV while wearing a combination of hockey garb, hunting gear and army surplus accessories. He's probably a night manager at the local Petrocan and genuinely loves the cold and dark of winter. He's full of both goodwill and hockey statistics, and even if he's married, he somehow manages to continue living in his parents' basement."

That's pretty right on, eh? Well, he forgot one part. A hoser is also the new style icon.

No shit, doughnut breath. Didn't you see those Canadian designers in Milan last winter? Yeah, Dean and Dan Caten. They had Mounties marching down the runway and models wearing long johns. All the fancy fashion editors were singing the Ontari-ari-ari-o song.

Yeah, that song's making a big comeback. A couple of months ago, Jim Carrey sang it on *Late Night* with Conan O'Brien. Next thing you know, Celine Dion is gonna record it. Hey, let's hope not.

Anyway, so this thing called hoser chic is taking off in the design world. Yep, there's this exhibition called *Cabin* which will show all this kind of nostalgic Canadiana stuff at the Design Exchange with Doug. And when that show's done, there's this other group from Vancouver called *Bark* that's going to take over *Cabin*'s exhibition space. And if *Bark* can get the funding together, they're going to London too.

So we asked Doug why hosers are still so hot. I mean, that album Bob and Doug Mackenzie made with Geddy Lee came out 20 years ago. Doug says it's because "we all have hosers both in our hearts and in our basement suites."

And he says he doesn't mind being part of this hoser design movement "as long as this movement includes driving to the corner store for some shmokes."

Yeah, he was just being funny. But you know Doug really does like hosers. He knows the hoser is real. Well, he used to think it was all a myth, and then he spent some time in small towns outside Ottawa. And in St. John's too. Now, he thinks hosers should be on our money.

"Our five-dollar bill is the world's ugliest bank note," he says. "It looks like an ad for dinner mints from the 1950s. What was the Mint thinking? Why not show two guys with mullets playing air hockey -- with some wood-grain panelling in the background?"

Cool idea, eh?

One of the brains behind *Cabin*, Michael Erdmann, he's also a big hoser fan, even if he's never worn a Muskoka dinner jacket. (Doug has lots of them. And he's always losing them. He says they're like "the Bic pens of the Canadian Shield.")

So this Mike dude wanted to do something to increase the profile of Canadian designers. But he thought that in order to elevate design in Canada it had to, like, kind of be lowered. That way, people who thought the design world was a bit too posh might become interested.

So he and his friend Lynda Chau formed this company called *Motherbrand* that would organize design shows. The first one was *Cabin*. And they put out a call to designers across the country, asking them to update stuff you'd find in a cabin (some people call it a cottage), but make it cool.

It worked. In May, the show opened in New York and everyone really liked the bags Jayn McIntosh and Reid Bayly made out of lawn-chair webbing and Mike's tin-can lanterns. Some people thought they were being ironic and it was all just a marketing gimmick, like the fashion designers in Milan. Mike says the timing was pretty good, now that all the Japanese hipsters are wearing Cowichan sweaters and everything. But he says their intentions were sincere.

"We're obviously aware that we're dealing with something heavily burdened by ironic references. Still, we didn't want to pass up on something so rich and so true just because of the inherent ironies."

The folks at *Bark* say Canadians have to stop apologizing for that sort of stuff. Well, this Vancouver design collective isn't really into Mounties and moose and maple syrup, but they do believe that Canadian designers need a better profile and should stick together. That's why they got 26 designers together for the first countrywide exhibit at Tokyo's Designer Week last fall. It was kind of like Team Canada kicking ass in Russia, but in Japan. And they called it *No Apologies Necessary: Design from Canada*.

The designs weren't sweet and nostalgic or nothing. Some, like Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas's Haida manga *Rocking Raven* in fishnet stockings, were actually quite naughty.

Robert Studer, one of the six *Bark* members that organized the show, explains it like this: "We're not working against nostalgia, but we're trying to provide more opportunities for Canadian designers and a new confidence so Canadian culture doesn't always have to reference the past."

The new show *Bark* is bringing to the Design Exchange on July 29 is called *Cultural Currency*. This time, they've asked designers to showcase concepts or objects that might, like, improve Canadian society.

The Massie Brothers from *Matter Office* have made a bunk chaise that's supposed to say something about homelessness and the need for public shelter. And Barbara Bell is going to design something out of this wood material that a company called *Forintek* invented. It's like this really strong, watertight board that's made out of the resin from melted bark. But the only problem is, the company doesn't know how to market it because it smells like a wood-burning stove.

Okay, so like we're not trading Hudson Bay blankets any more, but it still sounds like a pretty Canadian idea, eh? And if they can make some cool stuff out of this bark, we won't have to cut down so many trees.

Doug would definitely approve. He's got a big problem with plywood. But you'll have to read his book to find out more about that.

So, that's the end of the story. Happy Canada Day to all you hosers out there. Take off!

Canada House by Douglas Coupland runs at the Design Exchange in Toronto from July 1 to Aug. 29. Admission is free on Canada Day. For information, visit <http://www.dx.org>; or call 416-363-6121.

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