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I have never been to Rome. Or lived during the Renaissance. I have not seen the mosaics of Pompeii. I have not been to the Vatican Palace or St. Peter's Cathedral. I have not felt the smoothness of a marble column within Sophia Hagia.

Yet these are the sources of my work.

I often wonder if the real thing could ever live up to my imagined expectations. Reading about these structures in history books, the words "once had" and "used to be" seem to proliferate.

*"...marble lotus rosettes encircled by pietra dura inlay (most of it unfortunately missing). The perforated marble screens...have also largely disappeared..."<sup>1</sup>*

Everything is a description of the past that is no more. A past that I'm sure the authors of these various books did not live. And so I go on, reading glorified versions of history, filling in the gaps and holes with my imagination.

One definition of nostalgia is a longing for something that never really existed. I think of my relationship to Piranesi's overly romanticized depictions of Rome in this way <sup>2</sup>. I am influenced and compelled by a false reality. Longing to see and experience something that not only doesn't exist, but never did. My work then, becomes a simulacra. It has no genuine referent.

My icing installation titled "pipe dreams" is like a "gusto antico"<sup>3</sup> – a deliberate borrowing of elements from the Renaissance and Baroque. I spend my time looking through architecture books filled with partial diagrams, axiometric views and isolated elements detached from their source. Together they form a whole. But of course all I ever see are the pieces, so I sample and collect.

I use the wall as my scrapbook. A screen to project onto. Watching a good film can transport us, make us forget about our day to day troubles, even just briefly. The cinema is often a place where we project our desires and ourselves onto other people and lifestyles. The walls of our homes can act like screens as well. The surface cannot be penetrated, yet the façade can give the illusion of where we would like to go, who we would like to be and lives we wish we had.

I don't think I am alone in this thirst for history and grandeur. Historical referencing proliferates in contemporary decoration and architecture. The difference now is that these pilasters and cornices are plaster with a tell-tale straight-from-the-mold edge outline. Gothic arabesque scroll-work are now wallpaper borders, found at every Reno-Depot. Marble comes in a spray can. Gold in a tube.

Build Rome in a day.

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pipe dreams

It's the sixth day of installing. I'm sitting in the Second Cup on the corner of St. Laurent watching the rain fall. Not just a light sprinkle to freshen the air, but a torrential downpour.

This is now the third consecutive day that it has rained.

I think of my title for this piece: pipe dreams. The irony seems too much to bear right now.

Here I am, trying to decorate an exterior brick wall with water-soluble cake icing and it won't stop raining. My blue tarps cling precariously to their nail supports, billowing in the winds. As I climb my 12 foot scaffolding to cover my corinthian-topped columns, I feel like a sailor on a schooner that's being tossed in the waves, struggling to raise a mast. The ill-protected perimeter icing begins to soften and leave a stream of coloured residue down the wall. The truth of this title now seems more poignant than I had ever imagined it would.

I wonder if the completion of this piece will be just that – a pipe dream of mine.

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But all good things must come to an end, as the saying goes. And this proves true for my installation. The delicate icing scrollwork and rose lined arches will not sustain their crisp, lush original state. Their fate will be akin to that of the structures they mimic. The sun will fade their colour and the rain will slowly dissolve their features. Decadence will de-volve into decay.

Like the putrefaction of modern day capitalism, excess turns on itself. Beauty and decadence have the power to seduce. But viewers are lured in only to discover the temporality of this beauty. With each passing minute the life of this piece shortens. They can never possess this piece, but instead must watch it slowly whither away. Becoming more grotesque with each day.

This reference to grotesqueries is not merely with disfiguration. My lines of sugar, as well as the graffiti occupying the lower area of the wall, reference this type of early cave painting. Like the literal underground location of these grotto-esque ancestors, the general public considers graffiti in a lower esteem than that of classical architecture. Similar to the general views of domestic decoration. After all, Adolf Loos equated decoration with graffiti as being signs of degeneration<sup>4</sup>.

And degenerate it shall.

As the humble sugar dissolves, the colours will mix and flow, leaving mineral-like deposits on the wall akin to those left in caves. Eventually the columns and arches will crumble down, accumulating in a mass of rubble at the base of the wall.

There is a fine line separating excess and nothing.

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Notes:

1. (Description of one of palaces at the Red Fort in Delhi, India.)  
Harle, J.C. The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent. London: Yale University Press, 1986. P. 442.
2. Referring to Italian engraver Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) and his engravings of Rome (Vedute di Rome).
3. Literal translation of “gusto antico” is “antique taste”.
4. Viennese architect and writer Adolf Loos (1870-1933) in his 1908 Manifesto titled “Ornament and Crime”.