

GALLERY GOING GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Joan Kaufman
at the Red Head Gallery
\$650-\$3,000. Until June 17,
401 Richmond St. W., Suite 115,
Toronto; 416-504-5654

Joan Kaufman's sonorous exhibition, *Sure Sign*, generates a compelling, bittersweet anxiety that is an unlikely by-product, I should have thought, of such a highly staged, downright operatic suite of photo-based works.

Kaufman's large-scale, stone-grey installation appears to be set, as a sort of proto-drama, in some historically remote location — the photos are actually based on images made at the ancient Roman baths of Bath, England — where the denizens of this formerly stable, if

rather creepy, environment are suddenly made to face the meaning of a creeping, cataclysmic change: the baths are slowly beginning to flood. "The dark waters of the Roman baths, normally luxurious and therapeutic," writes Kaufman in her deliciously melodramatic artist's statement, "begin to flood their stone borders. A persistent and foreboding dark stain rises, causing the inhabitants of this new and threatening world to take heed."

And they do and do not take heed. Or, at least, they do the best they can, which seems tentative and ineffectual — just the way we do ourselves.

For the most part, the suddenly destabilized citizens of this inexorably de-evolving world turn to makeshift, stopgap solutions. One luminous, feverish young woman has trussed herself up in a sort of trapeze-like device in which she

dangles, like a baby in a Jolly Jumper, over the dark, rising tide. What to do? Will this be enough? For now, perhaps, but for how long?

In the end, Kaufman's exhibition is both moving and exhausting: moving in its acknowledgment of human bravery and a perhaps doomed resourcefulness in the face of disaster, and exhausting by virtue of the depth and relentlessness of its metaphor-making.

The whole show is a sensuous indictment of the hubris that blinds us to our own precariousness. It isn't long before you want to leave the gallery, troubled beyond the trouble art usually addresses. It is a splendid exhibition, nevertheless — because of the beauty of its seriousness.