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### **Stephen Schofield's udderly precipitous ride through art-making**

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Why did I have to become a critic in the snoozy nineties? Imagine, if I'd started out in 1910 or 1960 – then I'd really have something to write home about: Cubism and Suprematism, or Pop and Minimalism. Try to spell out the trademark style of 1990s art, and you come up against a great big blank. But it recently came to me, more strongly than ever before, that that very blankness makes our latest *fin-de-siècle* a quiet watershed in modern art-making.

I was on my way to preview new work by well-known Canadian sculptor Stephen Schofield, now based in Montreal but showing as of today at Toronto's Pari Nadimi Gallery. And I suddenly realized that I had almost no idea what to expect. Would it be some more sand-filled dolls, like the piece he sold to the National Gallery of Canada in 1997? (Similar pieces are touring right now in a National Gallery show called *Odd Bodies*, coming to the Oakville Galleries west of Toronto on March 18.) Or maybe some more of his shiny, plaster-filled rubber gloves, standouts in a recent group show at Toronto's Power Plant? I might even get treated to some new ceramic work, riffing on the craft where Schofield started out, or to the latest product of his skill at the sewing machine.

With artists like Schofield, who hit their stride in the past 15 years or so, and before that trained among the anti-style conceptualists of the 1970s, almost every show is an occasion to rethink the way they make their art. Maybe that's because the search for a recognizable, personalized artistic *look* has been exhausted over an intense 500 years of Western art-making. Contemporary artists don't hope to spend a career working up a visual vocabulary, the way Titian, Rodin, even Picasso could. Instead, they bite off a set of trademark *issues*, in the very largest sense, then figure out new ways to talk about them.

As Schofield says in his statement for the Pari Nadimi show, his works "start in the wonderment of materials being made to do things we never imagined they could." Yup, that gives a good picture of what he's up to. It accurately conveys the unpredictable range of his material experimentation, and how the process of solution-seeking is as important to him as any one result.

"We are taken on a precipitous ride," he goes on later, "leading from pink cheeriness to humour, nastiness and sex." Again, an accurate description of an attitude toward objects and art-making, without ever tying him down to a single style.

One of the brand-new sculptures in the Toronto show, called *Gideon*, is both like and unlike other works I've seen by Schofield. Cast in a compound called Hydrocal, a sturdy modern substitute for fragile clay or plaster, the piece looks like a living, walking, cow's udder crossbred with a ceramic vase. Four giant teats, mottled in a dainty pink-and-white on top but ending in brown dugs, mince their way across the kitchen draining board that support them, cast in porcelain white.

The domestic world is here, as it most often is in Schofield. And the frankly pretty-pretty is here too, in *Gideon's* delicately modelled, berries-n'-cream surfaces. (Shades of Royal Doulton, or even of the Franklin Mint.) But both are undermined by the muted surrealism of Schofield's object. Or maybe it's not surrealism so much as a glimpse of the quite normal contents of some entirely alternate reality. By viewing it, we become that much more aware of the usual makeup of the world we actually live

in; by twisting things just slightly out of true, Schofield comments on the way they usually come together.

That's also not a bad account of the other two new sculptures in the Pari Nadimi show.

Both use a technique that Schofield came up with more than a decade ago, whereby he sews a form in fine silk or polyester, dips it in a sugar solution, then blows it up so it can dry and stiffen in its inflated shape. (A major, well-known 1990 piece using this same technique is also in this show.)

Blow-up sculpture is not that new, but Schofield's ability to freeze forms in their blown-up state makes for an uneasy, vibrant mix of the kinetic and the static. And, as usual, he uses his novel technique toward a bunch of different ends.

*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* is a kind of headboard from a cartoon brass bed – or maybe a side view of a cartoon crib – sewn in goofy sausages of pink or beige fabric, then inflated, dried and mounted on the wall. It has some of the same range of references as *Gideon*, though it's less aggressively surreal and more determinedly domestic.

*Ils causent des systèmes*, on the other hand, leaves behind both the strange and the quotidian, in favour of a pseudo-glimpse of science. Small, repeating forms in blownup fabric evoke the models used in Grade 9 chemistry.

At one end of an oblong plinth, fist-sized cubes of dark-hued silk assemble into something like a crystal lattice. A few inches away, at its other end, wonky little dumbbells in shocking-pink polyester seem to be components of some giant organic molecule. In the building blocks for Schofield's world, natural raw silk becomes the matrix for the rigid and repeating; a synthetic fabric in neon colour is used to model biomorphic nature.

Is it possible that what we have here is the ultimate detail shot? Are we given a glimpse of the indivisible components that, forever recombining into different-looking works, reveal the hidden order of a Schofield-created universe of art?

*Sculptures and drawings by Stephen Schofield are on view at the Pari Nadimi Gallery, 179 John St., Toronto, until April 1.*