

Elizabeth Mackenzie

Main Exit

Vancouver

October 5 to 16

In this room movement is arrested. Life is still. Painted figures and objects loom large, ascending half way up the eighteen foot high, white gallery walls. The figures seem to be graphically playing out an unclear story. I contemplate their frozen and isolated gestures and feel compelled to interpret them, however, there is no specific storyline to apprehend. These isolated gestures are fragments of a series of events like flashbacks to a memory, or apprehensive imaginings of an encounter yet to come. In effect, I tell my own story and you tell yours.

Elizabeth Mackenzie's show, *Still Life with Flowers*, consists of two adjacent gallery walls which have larger than life silhouettes of figures and objects painted, with gold paint, directly onto their surfaces. There are four separate "scenes", each accompanied by a smaller sketch executed on paper, also in gold paint, and pinned to the wall. The first scene depicts a woman and a man embracing; the second is a flower vase filled with gladiolas; the third shows a woman dragging a man beside a table; the fourth is the silhouette of a man slouched forward, apparently just rising to his feet.

Within a deliberately ambiguous narrative structure, the artist depicts what she perceives to be stereotypical images of Man and Woman. Mackenzie is more interested in form arrived at conceptually rather than optically. These are cartoon images. They endeavour to represent everyone's mental image of Man and Woman through salient characteristic features: she wears a dress and high-heels, he of course sports a suit.

Is there a danger here of perpetuating our modern cultural malaise of sexual stereotyping? The danger in Mackenzie's mind is slight. We are probably beyond modelling ourselves after Mary or Dick from the *Dick van Dyke Show*. At the opening to Mackenzie's exhibition there was a general consensus that her figures had a definite late fifties, early sixties look and a self-conscious melodrama in their frozen actions. Like scrapbook stills from the *2:00 Matinée Movie*, the distance time has put between us and these nostalgic images makes them relatively harmless but also impotent. One may be annoyed at their use for reasons of personal politics, but it is hard to be threatened. More threatening perhaps is their reference to the mindless seduction of present day media and advertising by virtue of their size and colour.

The colour of gold is suggestive of the opulence and warm lustre of precious objects, however, the metallic sheen of the gold paint on the white gallery walls is austere. The emotional effect is one of distancing. The paint is applied freely; one viewer suggested the edges have the fuzziness of television definition. Mackenzie is interested in the difficulty of gold as a colour. The two walls she did not paint house huge windows which flood the gallery



Elizabeth Mackenzie, installation view of *Still Life with Flowers* at Main Exit Gallery, Vancouver

with daylight. This in turn plays off the brush-mottled surfaces in a subtle dance of light. Depending on where you stand in relation to this complex light-play, the painted surfaces are either lustrous and seemingly volumetric, or flat and ephemeral, likening themselves to shadows or back-lit silhouettes.

The size of her vision is megavision: billboard, bar-room video, film and mural proportions. The figures are heroically big. Mackenzie's work, by its elegant shapes, spaceless setting and surface splendor quotes from restaurants and expensive department stores — sans muzak. The uncluttered and meditative space of the gallery brings to mind such public spaces eerily deserted.

This brings me back to the deliberate ambiguity of the piece. It alludes to a narrative but there is no beginning and no end. I feel the images attempt to "embody" all the pallid drama, suspense and comedy of a half-hour television show or a drugstore novel by their general reference to these forms. They are, in effect, clichés, derivative or at least reminiscent of Robert Longo's work which likewise elicits voluble interpretations through deliberately glib imagery. ...The Embrace ...Is it the beginning or the end? Does she love him or is she plotting his murder... Further along the wall a woman is dragging a man. Some say he is poisoned or drunk. I contest he's been struck an unweilding blow to the back of the skull, black and white movie thriller style. The suspense music in my head becomes shrill and climaxes. ...On the opposing wall he drags himself groggily to his feet. Alone.

The piece does not live until we as an audience participate. It does not tell a story until we infuse it with our own, deliberately. One may be discontent with the recurring preoccupation of some contemporary visual artists with images evocative of what seems to be wistful and sentimental yearnings for a *Leave it to Beaver* life that never really was. Is this preoccupation an amusing reverie? Is it a deluded sense of derision, or perhaps a concealed and latent cynicism towards images which never really did or will touch us very deeply? There is an air of ennui about the piece, an

intrigue with the nostalgic and therefore possibly a resistance to deal with the immediate. The artist points to the symptoms of an age which is daily and collectively desensitized to basic human emotions through perpetual media image overload. Soon we will not wish to go beneath the splendid surface, will not have the patience to get involved. Perhaps we lack the emotional equipment.

Mackenzie's work does not ask us to carry out the Revolution. It does not pretend to do that. Rather, it points towards these images and all that they evoke and asks us to contemplate. Figures from Mackenzie's previous installation at YYZ in Toronto were isolated, lost in their solitary domestic tasks. Now they interact. The tacit tension of the previous work is now direct. There is, I find, too much mutual emotion in the Embrace to regard it as only an image of sophisticated boredom: the woman rests her head on his shoulder and he, reciprocally, gives in to her. One detects a very real sense of passion below the flat, gold, surface. The figures are, however, ultimately faceless, flat, awesome in size and frigidly metallic. They represent images and consequently evoke emotive responses with which we as denizens of the post-industrial automated age are not unfamiliar.

Mackenzie has taken up the artist's "move to the wall"; in doing so she avoids the ongoing arguments about the fundamental issue of conceiving painting as a finite object/commodity, and for the duration of the show captures a commanding presence which a video screen (her former medium) misses. The show is consciously temporary. It has a two week life span and then it no longer exists. It can only live on in documentation, like so many contemporary objects, edifices, experiences and social arrangements — like the building you once stood before which is now torn down, with the lover you once loved and no longer see, on the trip you once took but somehow forgot the experience because you know you could relive it through the Polaroid picture you held in your hand. That too, with time, disintegrates.

Merike Talve

Stephen Schofield

Articule

Montréal

September 16 to October 1

Recent concurrent showings of two works by Stephen Schofield, an installation, *real to real* and a series of life-size sculptures, *Le fini d'amour*, provided an excellent opportunity for comparison and questioning of changes in the artist's work. In addition, the subsequent showing of *Le fini d'amour* in *New Directions, Montreal/Toronto*, a group exhibition, allowed an appraisal of this work within the broader context of "new image" figuration.

Real to real was conceived as a possible performance environment, continuing Schofield's previous exploration of simple, ideal structures and events. The antecedents include the whimsical abstraction of the installation, *Du début au commencement* (1981, Montréal, and Québec), where the movement of the visitor through the work set off tipsy circular movement, triggering changes in the wooden propellers and ceramic cones populating the room, and the earlier free and open structure of the swimming choreography *Sphere* (1980, Campbellford, Ontario), in which the performers followed and encouraged changes in sculptural forms, this time fired and unfired ceramic spheres as they floated down the Crow River. Schofield, with his joyful wonderment at basic shapes and materials and their ability to animate human relations, conceived *real to real* as yet another utopic co-habitation of form, environment and human presence. An expression of "naive faith", the installation would recall the dome forms of the Byzantine basilica, decorated not with mosaics but pierced with small holes arranged in constellation-like patterns, like "domes of heaven". The eight domes would be arranged in a square pattern reminiscent of a Greek cross church plan. Light from sources above the domes would sparkle through the pin-holes to be caught in patterns on the shiny inner surface of eight large copper-rimmed clay and cement bowls rubbed to a dull glow inside with graphite. The heavy, hemispherical bowls would be capable of limited movement when nudged by the spectator or performer, the player in this garden of light. The *papier maché* domes were painted bright yellow and the installation, as conceived, suggested a rich play of colour, light, movement and texture, a balance of reason and sensuality, ideas and craftsmanship.

This conception of *real to real* was not executed according to plan — the disturbing emotionalism fully expressed in *Le fini d'amour* was permitted to infiltrate the ideal space of the installation. As he assembled it, the artist transformed the piece into an enigmatic and difficult environment. Slight wrenchings and humorous reversals in the classic formal language recalled the unsettling distortions of Italian mannerist architecture, with its slipped keystones, strategically rearranged consoles, expressionistic proportions. Schofield reversed the



Stephen Schofield, *Le fini d'amour*, installation at Motivation V, September 1982; detail: "You go down into the streets/And you tell it to the peoples."

domes, so that they hung sieve-like, directing the light from the pin-holes outward; rather than appearing concentrated within the bowls, the patterns spilled out onto the floor. The angle of the whole ceiling structure was made to tilt slightly, leaving the spectator with an uneasy perception of disequilibrium. Finally, all light was blocked from the space, except that entering through pin-holes, such that virtually all colour and texture were obscured and only faint glimmerings of copper and graphite surfaces were perceptible. The spectator entered the darkened space warily; the light patterns trembled at the entry of a second person into the room, due to a simple hidden wiring of the suspended lighting system to the door, making movement of the lights involuntary and somewhat inexplicable to the spectator. The uneasy, disoriented visitor focussed on the patterns of the lights, the strongest apparent feature of the piece, trying to read their elusive forms. The constellations had become confused and the dome of heaven no longer a sure thing. The spectator was left with suspended sieves, humorous derivatives of the flying saucer concept — a cynical, sophisticated, mannered transformation of the idea of naive faith. The leap from the church to the disco was only a short distance in Schofield's realization of this work.

Historically, sixteenth century mannerism allowed the intrusion of elements which the ideal balance of classical artistic schema could not admit. Inadmissible elements included the idiomatic, the inexplicable, the specific, the personal, the peculiar emotional reaction, political factionalism, all the complications of a world too complex to fit even the highly developed idealism of the renaissance. Mannerist artists exploited the power of classical forms and the technical

achievements of renaissance style for their own expressionist purposes, turning away from the universalism epitomized by the classical style.

Le fini d'amour showed many of the characteristics of a mannerist crisis, a crisis signalled by the formal transformations of *real to real*. This series of four small sculptures was, as the artist stated, "neither abstract, nor ideal, nor generalized. It does not tell the story of an ended love affair, but it is fascinating for me, because its creation paralleled one such experience in my life." (Artist's statement, my translation.) Here the artist adopted a strong figurative imagery which verged on the grotesque as a vehicle for his own emotional outrage at love's finality. The four pieces in the series were arranged in an ambiguous continuum which could be read in several directions. I preferred to read the two canine groups, fighting and fornicating in wriggling, toothy, unthinkingly instinctive, destructive fashion, as the centre and the beginning of the series. Both end pieces suggested "higher" natural and human states related to the central bestiality. To one side of the central groups was *Self-portrait with Yves*, a life-sized figure of the artist which terminated at mid-buttock; placed lower than eye-to-eye with the spectator, it suggested wading, in a direction out and away from the centre. The fingers were passively interlaced and the head tilted back, mouth open and tongue extended. The pose and positioning of the figure suggested both a difficult meditation and a death-wish. The tiny somersaulting figure balanced precariously on his tongue could have been on the point of choking the figure or finding himself spat out, begging the question of whether he would come to his senses and decide to resume living.

This bizarre self-portrait was

matched at the other end of the grouping by the piece entitled *Le fini d'amour: les pauvres crottes*, depicting a large vortex (water or wind?), leaving behind or threatening to consume two formless silver-coloured droppings which reminded one somewhat of grazing animals. The apocalyptic iconography of the whole series and its loosely structured groupings of the forms and imagery of romanesque church decoration, especially the tympana interpreting passages of the Book of Revelations. All that was missing were a Christ Saviour or Christ Seated in Judgement and a few apostles and angles to make of *Le fini d'amour* an excellent meditation piece of the folly of sin and lack of faith for the medieval pilgrim. The titles of the two canine pieces, *You go down into the streets/And you tell it to the peoples* and *Les chiens de pâques* both suggest a dormant or uninitiated Christian spirituality. Such indirectness and deliberate absence of message, coupled with intense emotion and spiritual life, were also characteristic of mannerist art. The rich symbolism of Schofield's piece was right at home in the forest of symbols found on the walls of *New Directions: Toronto/Montréal*. There, in the work of the new image painters, a similar intensity of spiritual seeking was very much in evidence. The emergence of figuration in Schofield's work was dramatically demonstrated in the above two pieces, providing some indication of the energy behind this trend in recent art.

Janice Seline

Yana Sterbak

Mercer Union

Toronto

September 21 to October 9

Even considering that art galleries are seldom frequented by lummoxes, most of the sculptures in this exhibition are so petite and vulnerable someone might inadvertently stomp on them, meek and squiggly upon the floor. At the entranceway are three

little lumpy lead feet. Elsewhere, a trail of thirteen anatomical simulacra straggles toward a doorway: seven hardened hearts, a squarish slice of red metal spleen, a silvery bone-like thing, two small stiffened hands, a puny black rubber stomach and a flabby slice of rubber liver. On one of the walls three bronze sculptures sit side by side, semblances of human ears, except that instead of ear canals they have gnarled, spindly protuberances. The exhibition includes in addition two photographic works and the fact that the interior walls of the main, specially-built display area are a very serious, mineral blue. The construction of this area did not appear to imply that architectural elements were contributing anything to the interpretation of these sculptures; rather, the redesign of the gallery space seemed simply to allow a direct attention to the autonomous, tangible integrity of the separate sculptural projects. The evolution of the meaning of these works, it seems, begins in their tangible qualities; the paradox of central value to these sculptures is that an intimation of something immaterial could be accessible to the sense of touch. It is as if the ephemeral could be felt with a finger if only tactile sensitivity were intensified to an extreme, or that metaphysical can be palpated unseen in the physical, the inert quickened through contact with the hand. The cool gummy surface of the liver object, when it is prodded or picked up, for example, shudders in one's grasp, though not with slimey hysterics. What has happened is that in poking at such a pulpous object, one's own subjective shiver ends up becoming an objective feature of the things being handled. What has been aroused by the tactile presence of these bodiless organs is uncertainty as to where subjective experience leaves off and perceptible substance begins. These sculptures fully embody the promise given in the exhibition's title — *Objects as Sensation*.

Malleable materials, bronze, lead, rubber, have been distorted into homely ersatz body bits for a fluently expressive, indeed canny, articulate purpose, however: this exhibition has another dimension, the other half of its title, the metaphor: *Golem*. The mystery that is fundamental to sculpture, that inanimate material can be



Yana Sterbak, *Ears* (1982), cast bronze, life sized, part of *Golem: Objects as Sensations*, courtesy: the artist