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New Sculptural Realism: Rethinking Objectivity

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When he first exhibited the seminal sculpture "Age of Bronze," so the story goes, Auguste Rodin was accused of casting his figure from life, effecting a fraud on the academy and the viewers. The story holds that this response was a mix of professional jealousy and a conservative backlash against Rodin's revolutionary approach, the academy versus modernism. Of course, Rodin was duly vindicated. Regardless of its historic accuracy, this story brings home the profound difference in how we have come to view sculpture. Such a controversy would be unlikely in our pluralist age. But echoes of that old dust-up were evident in some of the public reaction to Halifax sculptor Greg Forrest's recent work, "Drum Kit." This piece, executed in wax and cast in bronze, is a full scale replica of a 1964 Premiere drum kit, the same model used by Keith Moon in the early days of the British rock band, The Who. "Drum Kit" was displayed in an artful disarray, suggesting the scattering of his tools at the climax of the band's performances that was a hallmark of Keith Moon's public persona. Many viewers of this work, which was exhibited in an exhibition called *Heavy Metal* at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax[1], assumed that Forrest's sculpture was a *bronzed* drum kit, and as such treated it as a kind of conceptual pun. In essence, they thought it was cast from 'life.' But, rather than outrage, this misapprehension bred a kind of ennui – here, they assumed, was another too-clever-by-half art world in-joke. Their pleasure at finding out that piece was the result of a year's painstaking labour was infinitely telling. There is a hunger, it seems, in many of the viewers of recent art works, for the *real*.

Forrest, and several of his contemporaries working in this port city on Canada's East Coast, are feeding that hunger with complex, layered and undoubtedly *realist* sculptures. Realism, of course, has a long history in the fine arts, and there are many different kinds of real-isms. Here, on the East Coast of Canada, the dominant strain is magic realism in painting, as represented by Alex Colville in particular. As such, writing of a *new* realism in sculpture is fraught with pitfalls. The Halifax artists practicing this sculptural approach are mostly graduates of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, one of the continent's leading art schools, and one renowned primarily for its prominence in Conceptual Art. Emerging from such a milieu few artists welcome comparisons with Realist painting, a style often dismissed as retrograde (with varying degrees of truth). The aptness of that prejudice aside (reams of articles could be written reassessing the place of hyper- or magic

[1] The author and Dale Sheppard, AGNS Educator curated Heavy Metal for an exhibition that was on view from 9 March – 23 June 2002 at the AGNS.

realism in 20th century painting), when one looks at objects such as Cal Lane's steel "Doilies," which are based on both existing lace patterns and invented ones, or Thierry Delva's remarkable "Cooler," a meticulous recreation in white Carrara marble of a disposable Styrofoam beer cooler, one cannot help but think of realism. In both cases the simple act of re-imagining common objects in unexpected materials has added an extra lustre of reality to these objects, which, as with surrealist objects, adds a certain strange attraction.

Realism has many manifestations, and this new sculpture, for all it's more-real-than-real appearances, is more related to the sober realism of Gustave Courbet than it is to the overheated realism, the *over ("sur")* realism of Salvador Dalí and company. These sculptors, and many of their contemporaries in other cities, are trying to show how things are, not how we wish the world to be, or how we imagine it could be – these are not idealists, but neither are they cynics. Showing how things are, especially in a society as wedded to the illusory fulfillment of artificially created desires as is ours, is beyond the narrow politics of left and right, and one that fosters a certain sense of unease in the viewers (the consumers?) of these objects.

"New Realism," of course, was another name in the 1960s to describe Pop art, and the echoes of that movement reverberate throughout the work of this newer school. Oldenburg, in particular, is owed a debt, although it is one that is not always acknowledged. Pop art, influenced as it was by surrealism, has in turn influenced this work, though it has done so through the distorting lenses of Conceptual and Minimalist art.

Colleen Wolstenholme, for instance, uses plaster, bronze and cement to create monumentally scaled pills, all of which are accurately detailed, fully recognizable models of anti-depressant, anti-anxiety, and anti-psychotic drugs, replete with the various trademarks and drug company logos that have become part of our pop culture: Valium, Paxil, Xanax, Prozac, Buspar and more. The severe modernist designs of these pill shapes, their clean lines and slick typography, hark back to the design precepts of the Bauhaus. Yet her use of these forms owes as much to Duchamp's ready-mades as it does to late modernist sculpture. Wolstenholme started making these pill sculptures when she realized that more and more of her friends were being prescribed these drugs, and when she herself was prescribed anti-depressants. For Wolstenholme, there was something problematic in the notion of taking pills to solve what, for many people, are really issues of life style – it seems easier to take a pill than it is to change the things making people unhappy. These sorts of drugs change behavior, they disrupt the patient's habitual, often self-destructive, response to certain stimuli. This, of course, is what art often aspires to do, to present a way of looking at the world that cuts through the assumptions we inherit with our citizenship in the modern age. Wolstenholme doesn't dispute the efficacy of her subject matter, but she does present a critical alternative to the essential passivity of prescribed change. Her recent works, "Column" and "Daisies," are perhaps her clearest evocation of her stance to date. "Column," an eight-foot high bronze sculpture depicting Buspar tablets stacked end to end, references Brancusi's "Endless Column" in its form, while wryly commenting on both the addictive nature of the subject matter and the persistence of certain

modernist tropes. "Daisy," a cement sculpture made up of seven petals (again modeled after Buspar tablets) and one central, yellow, circle (another anti-depressant), suggests the promises of drug advertising, satirizing the "hearts and flowers" message of wellness. Wolstenholme thinks of her works as cautionary, as providing an alternative approach to being in the world. Pills, as tools, can only go so far; like any tools, they're only as good as the uses to which they are put. Wolstenholme's realism lies in looking clearly at these tools, which for all their potential for good, are too often abused, both by individuals and by systems. Her newest work addresses the body and that cliché of sculptural form, the *figurine*. Through her renditions of female shrouded figures (nuns, Victorian matrons, veiled Muslim women) she also rethinks the history of western figurative sculpture, in the process querying our culture's fascination with the body beautiful, while all the while suppressing the individuality of those bodies.

Greg Forrest, too, has made sculpture that addresses aspects of our culture's dependence on pharmaceuticals, although "Ecstasy Molecule" references an illegal drug, rather than the legal, if only by prescription, subjects referenced by Wolstenholme. His welded steel sculpture takes as its starting point the molecular model for the active ingredient in the "rave" drug, Ecstasy. Humour is a key ingredient in Forrest's work, and his re-envisioning of the molecules as mirrored "disco balls" undercuts the weighty monumentality of this work, mixing the coolness of welded steel sculpture with the insouciance of Claes Oldenburg. Pills have become part of popular culture, and despite their periodic protestations to the contrary,[2] drug companies profit mightily from the way that their products have become part of our society's collective consciousness. Eventually, we all "take a pill."

Forrest's take on popular culture differs from Wolstenholme's in his subject matter – there is an element of "guy culture" in his choice of objects – stereo speakers, guitars and drum sets, mountain bikes, beer, sports and hero worship. Forrest's realism is rooted in a suburban basement, and it is a realism that mixes disdain and desire. Not ironic so much as sardonic, Forrest is creating a wry picture of what it is like to be a male in the shadow of the baby boom generation, a tag-along little brother whether he likes it or not. Forrest's "Drum Kit," a life-size bronze drum set, is a monument loaded with the ambiguity that seems the lot of his generation. "Drum Kit" is a statue of a frozen moment in time, a gesture presented as it may have been when it was still pure, before it became just part of the show. The gesture was Keith Moon's – a climax to a performance, an explosive burst of energy that scattered his drums at the end of a concert. It was a gesture, Forrest chooses to believe, that began honestly, only becoming part of a pat routine later on. I suppose that points to a certain romanticism in Forrest's sculpture, but that fits – don't little brothers often romanticize their elders? Forrest's humorous take on our culture, and on the demographic realities faced by those of us in our mid-30s, is steeped

[2] Colleen Wolstenholme, for instance, has been served with legal papers threatening lawsuits unless she ceases making objects depicting trademarked pills.

in a knowledge of art history, a keen interest in pop culture, and a refusal to privilege one over the other. That, too, is a realist stance.

Alexander Graham's galvanized steel sculptures such as "Traps" and "A Cord," also owe much to pop art, albeit filtered through a stripped down sense of design that has been influenced by minimalism. "Traps," a stack of 30 sculptures based on the traditional design of lobster pots, evokes the pop cultural cliché of the tourist returning from the east coasts of Canada or the United States with a lobster trap tied to the roof of their cars, a souvenir destined to be a lawn ornament in the suburbs of middle America. Graham's stripped down, industrial traps act both as monument to a fast vanishing rural culture, and as a witty riposte to the picture of Nova Scotia, which bills itself as "Canada's Ocean Playground," as a land of happy hunter-gatherers, fiddle players and step dancers. "A Cord," too, references the rural, to the ubiquitous woodpiles stacked behind or beside countless houses in rural North America, where wood is still used as fuel. "A Cord" is a measure as well, a perfect cord, figured out to tolerances that seem more the purview of a machinist than of a sculptor. Like the platinum meter stick in a vault in Paris, "A Cord" creates the only kind of perfection available to us – a fictional one, arbitrary and abstract.

Thierry Delva also creates a seeming perfection, representing objects not through their attributes but through their containers. A dozen long stem roses or a case of beer is suggested by their respective boxes, carved in sandstone so that they permanently suggest the potential for representation, while actually representing something else – the ubiquitous cardboard box. Delva's series of carved boxes was followed by another series of cast boxes – plaster sculptures made from casting the interior spaces of the packing material that consumer electronics come nestled in. The "electronic models" take on new lives in plaster, often bearing no obvious relation to their ostensible subject matter. Delva follows a relentless logic in his sculpture, eschewing any overt working of the surfaces, refraining from anything that could be called style. There is an element of neo-industrial process to his sculptures – the creation happens in his selection of the objects to be subject matter, not in the fashioning of them. His process pays homage to the rigorous logic of Duchamp, while his choices explore the consumable, ephemeral world of pop culture.

Cal Lane's steel "Doilies" and her recent "Towers" use lace as a motif and demand to be read as part of the ongoing conversation around the use of domestic crafts in fine art – a conversation carried on in the 1960s and 1970s by Feminist artists such as Joyce Wieland and Judy Chicago. Lace, with its dual use as domestic ornament for furniture and as decorative feature of clothing, inhabits both the home and the public sphere. Lane's large scale installation of nine lace "towers" in the courtyard of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia[3], applied lace trim to the gallery, adding a domestic touch to the gallery's public face. This dressing up of the gallery can

[3] *Cal Lane: Fabricate* was on view at the AGNS from 26 April – 28 July 2002 and was curated by the author.

be seen as a Feminist subversion of a powerful site, an intervention into the dominant discourse. A subtext to this conversation is the debate of high versus low arts, the distinction between crafts and fine art, and the relative merit attached to work that has been primarily practiced by women. As much as Modernism attacked the hierarchies of the academy, it left in place the hierarchical structure that determined the relative merit of various disciplines, and the sexist structure that devalued work by women. Lane's realism addresses this intellectual debate as much as it does the objects depicted – the lace ribbons and trim of little girl's dresses.

Halifax has had a reputation as a hotbed of conceptual art, and that history is never far from the minds of each succeeding generation of its artists. Neo-conceptualism was dominant here, as it was elsewhere, throughout the late 80s and the 90s, and many of the artists now concentrating on realist objects cut their teeth making conceptual statements. Others, Thierry Delva in particular, developed their practice in contradistinction to conceptualism's attempt to dematerialize the object, though not without aspiring to the same sort of intellectual rigor displayed by influential local artists such as Garry Neill Kennedy and Gerald Ferguson.

These five artists share more than a history at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (Delva, Forrest, Wolstenholme and Lane graduated from that school, Graham works there as the metal shop technician). They also share a commitment to mastering the techniques that they need to fashion their objects. Whether it is mold-making, stone carving, bronze casting or steel fabrication, each of these artists is capable of making their work themselves, and do so with a high level of technical skill, even virtuosity. Ironically, they all (with the possible exception of Cal Lane) attended art school at a time when those technical skills were not considered all that important. Their virtuosity, in part, can be read as a response to that institutional indifference, a way to be different from their teachers.

Their insistence on labour is in itself a hallmark of the various styles that have been called realism. Realist painting, for instance, is often more overtly concerned with matters of craft than is, say, expressionism. But don't confuse this work with an exercise in technique. The realism of these artists has its roots in a pragmatic response to materials and the history of sculpture. This work is the result of a logical progression, a response to, and an adaptation of, conceptualism, as seen through minimalist lenses, flavored with a tongue-in-cheek pop sensibility. The world these artists are interested in is the one of our creation – the world of our culture. These artists represent fabricated things, the materials of our material culture, and through their observations they return to the roots of realism, showing things as they really are.

In a culture addicted to illusion, new sculptural realism is a radical response, a disruption in the collective trance. These artists, in choosing to seek reality in the ephemeral world of popular culture, mine illusion to create islands of the real. This sculpture, like all good sculpture, roots ideas in things. What this realism does, is to think about pop culture, and how it has formed us into something other than what we think

we are. Pop culture is almost all we have now, but, occasionally, the juggernaut that Marshall McLuhan called “the mechanical bride” can still be stripped bare by her bachelors, even.