

JAMES CARL

Turning trash into treasure

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STAFF REPORTER

About four years ago, by his own guess, James Carl experienced a significant creative epiphany. "I found a venetian blind in the garbage," Carl recalled recently. "It was just one of those moments. I couldn't leave it there."

Of course not. Not if you're James Carl, who has built a considerable artistic reputation creating work placed directly at the intersection between consumer junk and his own playful, meticulous, highly ordered craftsmanship.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

James Carl's sculptures made of discard venetian blinds are on display at the Diaz Contemporary gallery.

Having shown extensively in Europe and across Canada, for the first time in his hometown, examples of the Carl oeuvre abound.

At the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto's Hart House, where an exhibition of Carl's work since 1990 is now on display. At the Diaz Contemporary gallery, where Carl surveyed the fruits of his most recent creative epiphany late last week, three huge sculptures are on display, amorphous and organic-seeming, woven out of brightly-coloured venetians – virtually all of them cast-off colour errors from manufacturer Hunter Douglas.

The forms seem to be a gravity-defying paradox – massive but near-weightless, comprised of a complex hexagonal weaving technique.

Carl's wry manner belies the depth of his project. The pieces are arresting in scale, form and colour – off-kilter blobs that shift from kelly green to royal blue to salmon, yellow, orange and brown, curling into variant shapes.

But then there's the space inside – "ghost forms," Carl calls them, the sense of an absent, organic object having been wrapped.

Here, Carl launches his signature, a paradoxical interplay between form and material. His ghosts are eerily reminiscent of a sculpture of another era, when Modernists such as Henry Moore coaxed rough, fluid forms out of giant blocks of stone.

The result, so the grand romantic theory went, was dictated as much by the stone as the artist; the finished piece was deemed to be something pure – beyond conscious intent, guided by something essential in the material itself.

And then there's Carl. At its core, it's hard to imagine vinyl blinds – and rejects, at that – being imbued by some kind of universal aesthetic purpose, though Carl's wrestle with their creation is no less collaborative than was Moore's, with his stone ("I've had great ideas of what I wanted, but it tells me what to do a large part of the time," Carl says.)

The suggestion, of classic modernist sculpture imprisoned by its anathema – bright, colourful post-consumer junk – is exactly the kind of play that has helped define Carl's career. Replacing the precious with the everyday – and vice versa – Carl confronts us with a very basic question: In a world drowning in its own waste, what's valuable and what's merely trash?

At Hart House, where curator Barbara Fischer has assembled works by Carl from 1990 to present, those career-long concerns come in to sharp focus. On pedestals made from industrial composite wood (Carl built those, too) sits a selection of otherwise unremarkable objects – a portable CD player, a video cassette, a CD, a laughably huge late '80s-era cellphone – except for one thing: Carl has rendered them almost perfectly out of stone.

At the Beijing Academy where Carl studied, Fischer explains, they wanted him to carve figures, so Carl turned to a more proactive artistic question: Adopting disposable junk and rendering it with both precious material and the skilled hand of a master carver, how does the value proposition change?

Does a pre-Cambrian (give or take) cellphone become a valuable object when carved from marble? Its presence here (and in a private collection) suggests yes.

There's no question Carl's work is intended to amuse at the same time it provokes and confounds. One set of pieces at Hart House, Styrofoam meal containers and coffee cups carved with eerily perfect verisimilitude from marble offer a laugh, while the expectation-defying weight of the objects are a comic revelation. There's a sense here of a career coming full circle – an opportunity to look back exactly as Carl pushes ever forward.

It is, most would agree, about time. In a city marked more by indifference to its own artists than embracing them, the cross-town Carl-fest now on display plants a flag firmly in the ground. Fischer intends to mount two shows every year of Toronto artists, like Carl, who have established themselves nationally and internationally but remain below the radar on home turf.

"If they don't get recognition here, then how do we sustain a viable art community?" Fischer says.

The Hart House show will be accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue of Carl's work, the first of its kind.

Taken together, there's a strong consistency to Carl's concerns. But all is not simply the consumption and waste. Carl's interest is also in a simpler, formal question: What happens when a familiar object, remade in another material or context, loses its purpose?

In the early '90s, Carl built outdated household objects – TVs, old stereos, a washing machine – out of cardboard and left them on the sidewalk to be recycled.

For an installation in Vancouver, Carl built an entire replica dumpster out of cardboard and left it on the street next to a standard-issue steel one. With no indication of being "art," the visual quandary that confronted those who happened by was both playfully confounding and provocative.

Which brings us back to the blinds. The show at Diaz is called "Jalousie," the inexplicable term for "venetian blind" in France and perhaps more inexplicably, Germany as well. But it could also be a post-modern jonesing for the naïveté of a bygone era, when artistic value was more simply defined and passed off as pure – an invitation to see and feel, not think.

Carl's work throws that simplicity headlong into a world drowning in a disposable culture wrought by its own indifference. The results play with your head, while keeping your eye and heart happy – a suitably confounding circumstance for these complex times.