

VISUAL ARTS » JAMES CARL

# Getting under the skin of things

The first major retrospective of James Carl's work puts the focus on a tradition of Toronto sculpture we are only beginning to understand, **Sarah Milroy** writes

Every once in a while in an artist's life the stars align, and right now that's happening for James Carl.

At 48, the Toronto sculptor is one of the city's leading artists, with a snappy new exhibition of current work at Toronto's Diaz Contemporary that's got everyone talking – a gallery full of buoyant, brilliantly coloured open-weave abstract shapes conjuring the ghosts of Henry Moore, Jean Dubuffet and Jean Arp. As well, a comprehensive survey of his work of the past two decades has been jointly organized by three galleries: the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, the Cambridge Galleries in Queen's Square in Cambridge, Ont., and the University of Guelph's Macdonald Stewart Art Centre. (Carl has taught sculpture at U of G since 1999.)

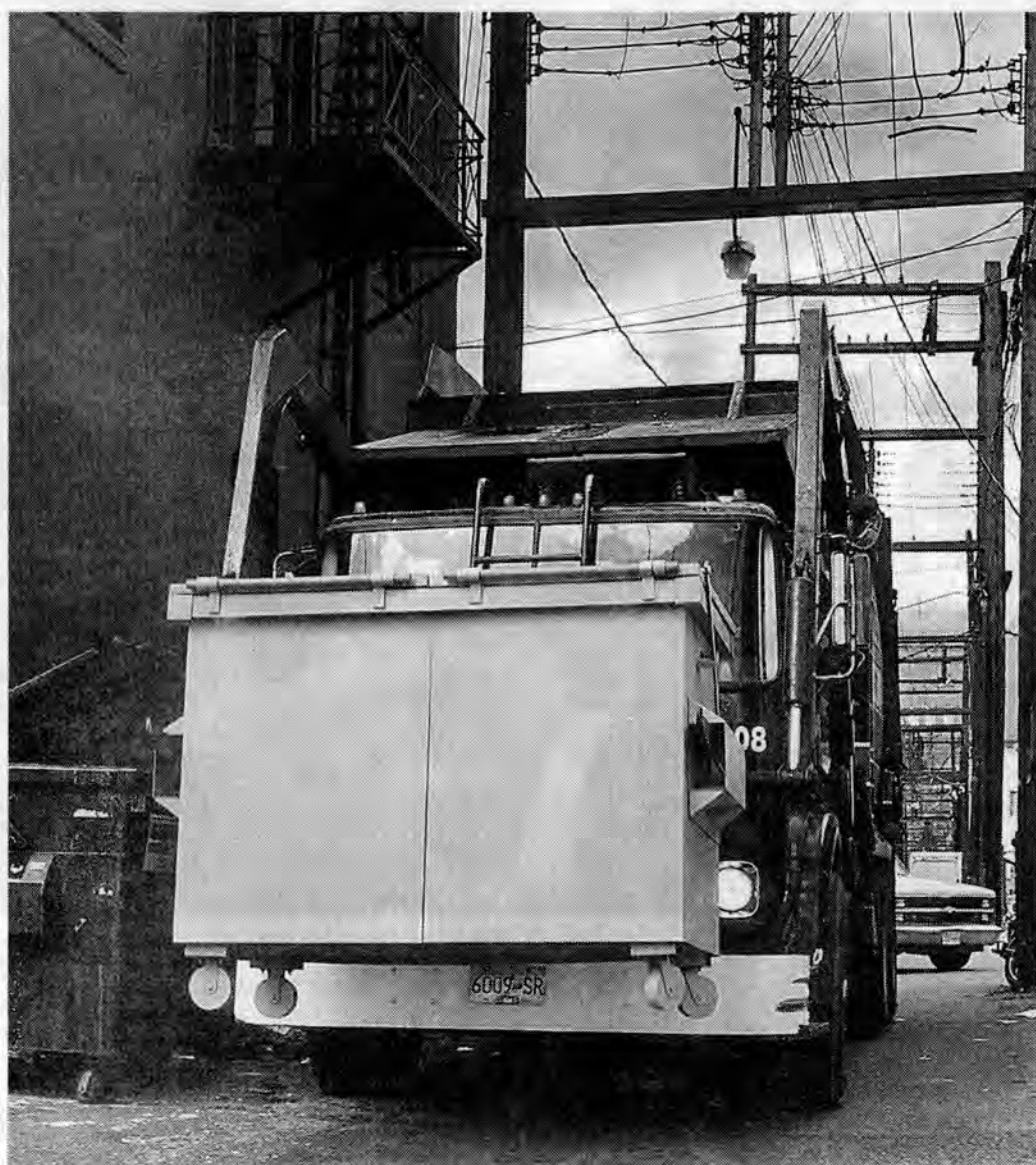
It makes for a time of reckoning. What exactly has James Carl's work been about all these years? And where is it headed?

One thing is for sure: He stands in a tradition of Toronto sculpture that we are only beginning to understand, one that includes the work of wise elders such as Ian Carr-Harris and Robin Collyer, and the former artist collective General Idea. All of these artists have made objects that evoke the replica or model. The classic example is Collyer's *The Zulu: European Version* (1985) – a slightly smaller than life-sized trailer unit that only reveals itself as faux upon second glance – but one can think as well of Carr-Harris's architectural models, and General Idea's Colour Bar paraphernalia and ersatz archeological remains. It's as if the artist's assignment was to worry at the foundations of representation, revealing its provisional nature. Not a bad definition of art, when you come to think of it.

Carl's career has a kind of rigorous clarity about it, grounded in a field of inquiry that still propels it today: How do we experience objects in the world – both as signs and as utilitarian objects – and how do we come to understand their value and meaningfulness in relation to us? We puzzle over such questions when we look at his art.

Following his studies at the University of Victoria (where he studied with Roland Brener and Mowry Baden), the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and Rutgers University, and with a degree in East Asian studies under his belt from McGill University, Carl first cropped up in the art scene in Montreal in the early 1990s, where he made art by salvaging cardboard material from alleyways, refashioning it to replicate the objects it had once enclosed and then putting the resulting objects back out in the streets to fend for themselves. Photographs that he took of these works show crude life-sized cardboard replicas of washing machines, stoves, fridges, TVs – even a cardboard dumpster – huddled against brick walls in laneways amid the refuse.

Word spread, and Carl's witty urban interventions gave way to highly stylized, minimal cardboard sculptures of an instant banking kiosk, a FedEx drop box, an X-ray luggage machine – the kind of things we walk by daily and don't consider, crafted with increasing refinement. While the early works are now all lost, swallowed up in the maw of urban garbage disposal, the later pieces (on view in his trio of museum shows) were made for



Above, Carl's *Cardboard Only* (1993), one of his urban interventions in which he designed cardboard facsimiles of utilitarian street objects and placed them in alleys, and at left, *Takeouts* (1993 to present). What look like typical Styrofoam takeout food boxes are actually made of marble.

art galleries and have been preserved.

Then he changed the game. Instead of pricey consumer goods presented in the disposable material of cardboard, Carl started creating representations of disposable packaging carved in marble, as in his series of faux Styrofoam takeout containers or drinking cups made from smoothly polished white stone. Next came jade, marble and limestone sculptures of cellphones, VHS tapes, stereo components and portable Walkman and Discman units – objects that, in the real world, are always strategically poised by their corporate manufacturers on the verge of obsolescence, ready to be supplanted by the next fad. These stubborn, opaque sculptures were very precisely of their times. Carl immortalized the disposable, displacing functionality to reveal the aura of the consumer fetish.

All of these representations were pared down to the threshold of recognition. You can tell what they refer to, but sometimes just barely. "You evacuate the content," he said to me the other day. "That's what Collyer did with *Zulu*. Essen-

tially, in semiotic terms, what you have is an empty signifier. It's about the surface, about the skin of things."

It is this idea that links his old work with the new. The abstract sculptures that currently fill the airy galleries at Diaz Contemporary are, essentially, all skin. Instead of referring to the world of consumer objects, however, they refer to the canon of art history – to the mid-century formalist sculptures that they call to mind. These are objects from, and about, the world of art. But they are also the result of ingenious acts of retrieval and reconfiguration, made from Venetian blinds that are woven together in a three-way pattern (a favourite of Buckminster Fuller), allowing for taut convexities and hollows. Internal space is framed with a minimum of material. You see the contours of the object – a whispering evocation of a reclining Moore nude, say, or even a Jeff Koons rabbit – but you also look through to the space at the core, to what Carl calls "the palpable absence."

The show is titled *Jalousie*, a term that in French refers not only to the deplorable emo-

tional state of covetousness but also to this particular form of window dressing (no doubt because of the opportunity Venetian blinds afford for voyeurism). As Carl points out, *La Jalousie* is also the title of one of the seminal novels by the great postmodern French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet. It's a book in which, he says, "nothing happens, a story in which the narrator is a negative space at the centre of the thing."

This postmodern mystery conceals as much as it reveals, and Carl's sculptures do likewise. With their 50/50 slats of vision and blindness, they offer an apt metaphor for our frustrated ability to make sense of things, and our fascination with knowing more.

» James Carl's exhibition *Jalousie* continues at Diaz Contemporary in Toronto until next Saturday. His first major survey exhibition, *Do You Know What*, is being jointly presented by the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto (until Jan. 25); the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph, Ont. (Jan. 17 to March 22); and the Cambridge Galleries at Queen's Square (Jan. 17 to March 1) in Cambridge, Ont. (416-978-8398).