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What You See is What You Don't Get: The Art of James Carl

Terence Dick · Articles · Issue 110 · June 2009

Bankers Boxes The place was the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre in Guelph, Ontario, the first of a four-part, four-gallery retrospective early in 2009 that would shine a light into the grey area known as “mid-career” for a select someone who lucked out with the zeitgeist in order to emerge from the murk. The artist was James Carl, a mid-career Canadian who'd been around for a while (since the early 1990s, which now constitutes “a while”), known for his handcrafted replicas of mass-produced commodities. When I say “handcrafted,” I don't mean a papier-mâché blender or a macramé tv screen. The works are carved in stone with nary a hand in evidence, or assembled as if from kits of Coroplast or cardboard.

The floor of the first gallery was scattered with bankers boxes and stacked with binders. This was Carl's standard MO—replicating the everyday with a

modicum of similitude. Like mock-ups for the real thing, his work would, on closer inspection, reveal itself as less than real, stripped of all distinguishing marks and emptied of all innards. Not the thing itself but a representation of it, a sign. However, Carl was cracking a joke here because the boxes were real ...

Elastic Bands Next stop, the Justina M Barnicke Gallery, buried in the back of Hart House, a multi-use student centre at the heart (left ventricle) of the University of Toronto's rambling downtown campus. I push through the heavy doors and see hundreds of elastic bands in all their variety (and there's a surprising variety here in colour, length, width, configuration) spread out before me, scattered on a huge white plinth like they'd just been dumped out of a bag. Yet I knew, because I had already been told by someone who'd been here before me, that none of them was elastic. They were, in fact, brittle, made as they were of clay and painstakingly hand moulded one by one ...

"jalousie" Toronto's Diaz Contemporary is clearly a commercial art gallery and Carl's newest sculptures have taken up residence, but the works are barely there. Vague shapes that resemble the kind of Modern art that would appear in a hip television show from the '60s, imagined by some unnamed Hollywood set designer. The curves are ... sensual? The shapes ... biomorphic? The influence ... Henry Moore? The truth is far from concrete. They are representative abstractions without content, stand-ins for art concerned more with formal gestures, that suggest some possible content but in an ambiguous way so that a multiplicity of readings can arise. In the past, they were meant to be open-

ended, but these are literally empty, hollow again, waiting to be filled by...?

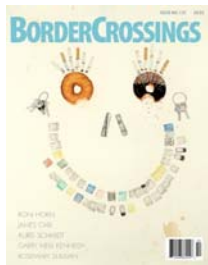
The material, a web of woven slats from disassembled venetian blinds, is all we have to work with. Once again, there is an overwhelming aura of fragility. Unlike the earlier inert fabrications in stone or the careful constructions in cardboard, these are delicate webs held together by their own inner tension. A misjudged poke could collapse the entire thing in an explosion of twanging metal, spraying the room with slats, flattening the whole ...

Empty Vessels My last stop is Southern Ontario's Cambridge Galleries and so I stand before three cardboard constructions. Each one familiar, each one a key to the puzzle: an airport x-ray machine, an ATM, and a FedEx box. These, Carl admits in his title, are dupes. But why them? What links them together? Why did he choose these three things? They are transitional units that carry something on its way. Not useful in themselves, only meaningful when content is supplied by the user. But the content is always temporary, always on its way from one place to another.

And then suddenly it becomes clear, like a veil has dropped and the whole picture comes to light: everything that Carl produces is an empty vessel. His project, intentionally or not (maybe he's fooled himself), is to monumentalize these transitional structures that require input, that must be put into use to particularize their meaning. Each one does the same thing: they are all carriers, transitional zones, machines that move material from one state to another, not containers but transporters,

conduits, and as such, in need of content ...

See Issue 110 to read the entire article!

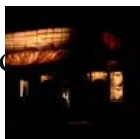


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