

Right: Robert Fones, *Whiz*, 2009. 1997. Casein on wood and plywood, 24.5 x 91.4 x 30.5 cm. Below right: Robert Fones, *House Viruses*, 1979. Mixed media, installation view.

TORONTO

Robert Fones

Art Museum at the University of Toronto

"Signs | Forms | Narratives" presented a concise, meticulously organized, and wholly thought-provoking overview of Robert Fones's five-decade-long career. Over the years, this determinedly inquisitive artist has investigated history, modes of communication, and the parameters of vision by producing works that span sculpture, photography, painting, installation, books, and design. In addition to being intellectually rigorous, much of his output is also visually elegant. The thematic, as opposed to chronological, organization of the exhibition not only illuminated the various phases of Fones's work, but also clarified various connections and related concerns, a strategy that greatly amplified the cumulative impact.

At first, much of Fones's work seems playfully uncomplicated. Yet complexity and contradiction gradually emerge out of seemingly simple premises. In *Whiz* (1997), one of several brightly hued sculptures that remodel letters as a sequence of freestanding geometrical shapes, the shift prompts what amounts to a revelation, as the forms, which first appear illegible, coalesce into a clear rendering of the title. *GSY Types, L Set (Yellow, Blue, Red)* (2007), a triptych of colorful bevelled paintings/bas-reliefs conveying the topography of gabled rooftops seen from above, invite examination from numerous perspectives. Though the process ultimately verifies their two-dimensionality, it fails to diminish their convincingly three-dimensional appearance. The extremely effective rendering again delays recognition



of the title letters. One letter can be found lodged in the bevel arrangement of each canvas.

Fones also employs text fragments and single letter forms to manifest the complex interplay of concept, design, history, meaning, and perception in window-filling transparencies, mobiles, and large-scale, wall-mounted pieces. Works like *Egyptian Expanded M / Chinese Lions* (1990), a black and white photograph mounted on a voluminous M-shaped aluminum box, weds the original Chinese context of a local museum's well-known sculptures with the prototype of a typeface developed in Scotland in the mid-1800s. Such seemingly incongruous juxtapositions fascinate and perplex. Here, they raise questions about language and visual forms of communication, cul-

tural significance, and shifts in time, place, and perspective.

An interest in local history, archaeology, and design led to the meticulously researched and nostalgic *Butter Models* (1979). The installation includes retail display cases holding about 150 one-pound-size mockups, each one enclosed in an authentic wrapper, as well as lists and a map registering the names of brands and creameries in the province of Ontario. In contrast to this factuality, *House Viruses* (1979) presents a humorous and highly imaginative take on wallpaper reclaimed from the renovation of a Toronto house. Fones sees the material as a virus and creates specific names—Taiwan Fantasy, Gnostic Memory, and Snow—for the dozens of samples, setting out swatches on a structure

that replicates the shape of an infectious agent.

Interestingly, many of Fones's artistic statements manage to forego the stylistic and analytical coolness of much conceptual art. There is something coursing through his work—whether subject matter, development of form, perceptual attributes, or a combination of such factors—that invites engagement. Many of the pieces have an inescapable tactile component. It seems that one should be able to slide one's fingers across the surfaces or tap on them, to hold them and see how they feel in the hand. Encountering art that possesses such a rich multiplicity of traits and operates on so many levels is a rare experience.

—John Gayer