

1:1 Recent Halifax Sculpture, Thierry Delva, Phil Grauer, Lucy Pullen

SL Simpson Gallery, Toronto Canada, April 4 – April 30, 1996

Catalogue essay

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1:1, the scalar relation that denotes life-size, can stand as an emblem for the idea that has dominated recent sculptural practice in Halifax.¹ This practice consists of reproducing ordinary objects –a bucket, a piece of fruit or driftwood, a cabbage- at their original scale, but in different materials, sometimes by meticulous reconstruction, but often by direct casting². Variations of this practice have developed in the work of Lauren Schaffer, John Kennedy, Greg Forrest, Dona Hiebert, Davia Smith, Marcus Jones, and Kathyrn Ellis, as well as the artists in this show. The scale 1:1, with its attendant notion of the direct copy, declares that these artists give priority to problems of mimesis and reproduction over those other issues that have concerned sculptors, such as composition, site, and construction. It is also this scale that distinguished the work from Pop, for which inflated size was essential. Whether the approach is interpreted as appropriation, nominalism, or simulation, its particular conjunction of banality and cunning signals the legacy and continuing influence of Marcel Duchamp in the development of conceptual art at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, where these artists studied.

The interest of the work in this show lies in its varied responses to the specific relation proposed by the formula 1:1. The logic of 1:1 is not simply that of reciprocation, correspondence, reflection, or even equivalence, although it subsumes these relations without being exhausted. 1:1 makes the larger claim of identity, the very identity that underlines the concept of authenticity, and that permits the fantasy of a universal fungibility, that is, an ideal exchange without remainder or loss, one that is therefore infinitely repeatable. This proposition's very capacity to be expressed in the abstractions of number and symbol betrays its ambition to a code-like mastery that would overcome language's problem of translation. The model of this relation is money, since it is money that presents itself as the universal equivalent, despite being in itself utterly incapable of satisfying any human need.

The artists here have engaged this relation, but not with the intention to realize or advance its ambitions, which they recognize as deeply counter-aesthetic. Theodor Adorno noted that <<...all art contains in itself a negative moment from which it tries to get away>>³. 1:1 is in this sense the negative moment of mimesis. These artists use laborious and ingenious techniques to duplicate banal objects, not with the aim to produce the perfect copy, which would be truly inane, but rather to assert precisely the non-identity of things and their artistic representations. Art objects, they assure us, are not just the same as other objects, no matter how life-like they are made. Representation is a distinct order within reality, and does not, as some claim, threaten our sense of the real; only those who stand to gain from confusing this matter would ever say so. These works do not have the pious intention to be as real as possible; for them, the inverse of the old saying is closer to true: imitation is the sincerest form of mockery. 1:1, with its metaphysical promise of presence, is not the condition they desire to fulfill, it is the presumption they contest. The

various ways in which they do this require individual readings, since it is out of this struggle with representation that they produce specific meanings.

Unlike the other artists in this show, Lucy Pullen does not identify herself primarily as a sculptor. Her work includes tiny constructions, computer animation, painting, marginal publications, food works, and counter-media tactics, and she is involved in the local music scene through the Dalhousie student radio station. Her work is marked by conceptual ambition, technical daring, and an antic humor. The piece shown here, **Sucker**, is a life-sized self-portrait cast in hard-rock candy. With this piece, Pullen boldly inverts the terms of Halifax sculpture: where other sculptors laboriously render banal objects in noble and honorific materials, she has produced the supreme icon of traditional art, the figure of a young woman, in a perishable and vulgar, 'pop', material. The work effectively radicalized the practice of life casting that, as practiced by George Segal, Duane Hanson and others, and in Canada, notably by Evan Penny, was a conservative, even reactionary, part of the art of the sixties and seventies. It also moves beyond the familiar feminist practice of using dresses to metonymically represent the female figure. The sculpture's novelty could easily obscure the fact that it must count as one of what is undoubtedly a very small number of monumental self-portraits by Canadian artists.

The engaging effect of the sculpture arises from the intense disjunction between the expectations that form around it as a concept and its actual qualities as a thing. Upon hearing the proposal for a life-size figure cast in candy, one might imagine the work as something bright and insouciant, but it is nothing of the sort, and stands instead as a monument of disenchantment. The sculpture is coloured a classic Candy Apple Red, but its mass and density make it appear very dark, almost black.⁶ Where we expect it to be translucent, it is totally impenetrable. It is also impossibly heavy, it is a clothed figure, and with the generalization and conglomeration required to cast, it weighs the same time it is also environmentally sensitive: when the air is humid, the candy surface liquefies, and it drips red syrup; eventually the figure stood in the centre of a sticky red pool. When first displayed at Eye Level Gallery it was the only piece in the space, which intensified its air of loneliness. There the figure gradually slumped, tilted to an alarming angle, and after two weeks, collapsed and broke into shards. The work stages its own demise and must be recast for each temporary showing.

The material candy provokes the taboo that prohibits an animal-like attitude toward the object, say a desire to devour it or otherwise to subjugate it to one's body. This provocation reinforces the work's pathos, which arises from it having only a being-for-display, a social relocation dominated by and restricted to a visual one. By suggesting an unrealizable or forbidden relation to the art object, the work protests the constraint that forces women to be images instead of makers of them. Transformation of one's self into a transcendent material, often crystal, is a persistent fantasy in the western mystical tradition, and it is particularly associated with women, such as Teresa of Avila and Hildegard of Bingen. The false identification many women make of desiring only to be what is wanted of them: passive, quiet, composed, in a word – sweet, is effectively critiqued by its literalization, which reveals it as grotesque. Adorno, with characteristic pessimism, advises that <<the woman who feels herself a wound when she bleeds knows more about herself than the one who imagines herself a flower because that suits her husband>>.⁷ Sweetness in excess expresses its exact opposite, a bitter unfreedom. This

inversion could be called the Karen Carpenter effect: it is not incidental that the work speaks to the bulimic-anorexic nexus that has been explored by Janine Antoni, Jana Sterbak, and numerous feminist artists. The work also has a great deal in common with the candy pieces by Felix Gonzales-Torres, not just by virtue of its material, but even more by the implied self-dissolution.

<<It's just the saddest thing in the world>> is a phrase Pullen often uses to express misgivings and dismay, sometimes over an art scene that is often bitterly divided. This hyperbole aptly describes her sculpture, with its defensive pose and excruciatingly slow collapse. To title a self-portrait Sucker is either a shockingly candid admission of gullibility or an affront to the viewer. Both meanings are no doubt intended. Pullen's approach is always knowingly ambiguous: in this case, the ineluctably to an image that, unencumbered by its material presence, could all the more readily circulate as media spectacle. Yet this possibility is one Pullen has not exploited. Her current work with computer animation for television enters the space of the spectacle itself, where she practices a game of complicity and subversion.

¹ For other accounts of recent Halifax sculpture see Metcalfe, Robin, *Object Lessons* Halifax: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 1995.; Peck, Robin, *Ghosts: Sculpture photographed at Halifax Pier 21*, C magazine (Spring 1994).; *Sculpture Expo '94: The Mall Show*, Canadian Art, 11:4 (Winter 1994)

² The new popularity of full-scale casting is partly due to the remarkable success of Rachel Whiteread, who has developed one small aspect of Bruce Neumann's early work into a complete practice.

³ T.H. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 16. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984

⁶ This aspect of the work recalls Barnett Newman's statement <<Two feet of red is red, but five feet of red is redder>>.

⁷ *Mimima Moralia*, p. 95, London: New Left Books, 1974