

*Lucy Pullen, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver
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Silver is central to Lucy Pullen's exhibition "A Thousand Miles of Dust and Ashes." Compared to gold, silver is utilitarian and industrial. Aesthetically and economically, gold denoted ostentation and wealth, while silver is more modest and bourgeois.

The melancholy and sublime cast to the exhibition's title seems at odds with the idiosyncratic quality of the works: a silver print of the artist in a reflective silver skirt (*Flash*, 1999), a rope sculpture covered in the same light-sensitive silver material from which the skirt was made (*The Thing*, 2003) and a series of double-line drawings on circular grounds of metallic paper (*Portal*, 2002). The title's commutations of ruination, even apocalypse, serve as a linguistic enticement into a closer investigation of possible meanings.

Product and invention never seem to be the point. Discovery, arising from the process of creation and destruction, does. As in an alchemical experiment, the multiple qualities of silver, as metal/colour, run through all the works. In turn, the notion of alchemy leads to a sense of investigation into the nature of materials and to an encounter with a magical effect. An otherworldliness emanates from the silver print. Photographed with a flash, at night, Pullen's skirt becomes a void of glowing light, an opening through which the viewer enters or is sucked in (like the door in *Poltergeist* or Malevich's *Black Square on a White Ground*). The snake-like sculpture, *The Thing*, is a meandering tangle of ropes that rise and fall in defiance of gravity, recalling mythic Laocoon being strangled by sea snakes, or, likewise, the viewer's gaze caught up in its sinuous, reflective mass. The silvery "snakeskin" covering the ropes is so much about artifice that one wonders about what lies beneath the skin, as if the ropes were the musculature of the sculpture. The cloth is hiding something, the way the wooden horse of Troy concealed a veritable war machine.

While largely abstract, Pullen's work has a tendency toward figuration. *Portal*, the series of automatist double-line drawings, unconsciously takes on the form of plant life or breasts. A sense of exploring the fundamentals of time and space is also present. It is in instances of exposure time, capturing impressions of light onto film; the swallowing of a three dimensional body by a glowing void; the phenomenological aspect of *The Thing* and its dependence on a perambulation; the following of a single line through three-dimensional space with multiple positive/negative entrance points; the illusion of three dimensionality in drawn contour lines on a two-dimensional surface. All of these basic elements reflect back on the mediums themselves: flatness, light, dimensionality and defiance of gravity. The spectre of modernism returns, or rather we are reminded that it never went away. Maybe it also evokes the idea of a return from the future, the idea that

the future and past fold in upon themselves. If modernism is here, it is a ghost. Or a rhizome that buries itself under the ground. Or a geological vein.

The associations of silver have something to do with the nature of history and memory after modernism. Pullen's work plays off how history is embedded in memory. In <<These on the Philosophy of History>> Walter Benjamin's words are consistent with "A Thousand Miles of Dust and Ashes": <<this is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet>>.