

Lucy Pullen & Mitchell Wiebe

*Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, Halifax Nova Scotia
Review, C Magazine, Sept – Nov 1997*

Mimi Fautley

Curated by Gordin Laurin, this show featured the pairing of two recent graduates of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, Lucy Pullen and Mitchell Wiebe, whose works combined to create an intriguing intellectual and emotional playground. Pullen's ever-broadening oeuvre seems motivated by an excitement about ideas and the ways in which they are communicated. Each work she presents here is a *sui-generis* expression of an idea, a thread plucked from the common web of human thought and knotted to mark the place.

Portable library, 1997 is made from two bookcases, hinged like steamer trunks and filled with books culled from the university's library. Although the subjects covered in the volumes are diverse, there is a sense of interconnectedness that makes it evident that their selection was associative rather than random, a sort of improvisational research inspired by the artist's curiosity. In many ways, **portable library** is a metaphor for her own practice.

Another piece thematically central to Pullen's work is **Chance Operation wht Blue Buttons**, 1997, a pile of 2000 plain blue lapel pins which visitors are expected to take and, in turn, redistribute at their discretion. Drawing upon the heritage of Dada and Fluxus, the work hijacks and subverts the meaning of the tags, which resemble those distributed by museums and galleries and function as proof of admission and thus, as cultural status symbol. In the end, those wearing Pullen's blue buttons may not have even seen the show, but have nonetheless become an extension of it: the buttons are a visible indicator of the potential for the transmission and retransmission of an idea.

Wiebe's paintings, on the other hand, are an exploration of the carnivalesque, a riotous inversion of conventional morality and society. In **Pee Garden**, 1997, a prostrate figure appears to be vomiting his own identity (his face seeming to actually fall off with the violence of his heaves) while a perky cartoon critter cheerily advises him not to eat yellow snow. In the works like **gray**, 1996 and in his self-published comic *Duncan*, Wiebe makes use of poetic language in order to capture ideas and experiences that conventional syntax cannot express. Meanwhile, his painted figures are invariably trapped in anxiety's idiotic paralysis, offering up glassy eyes, pasted-on smiles and cryptic speech-bubbles.

Wiebe's canvases, trampled and painted with surcharged pastel hues, are at once dingy and vibrant. They inhabit a liminal zone where the adult experiences of bitterness, doubt and unsolicited responsibility collide with the frosted nonsense and saccharine architecture of sentimentality. It is as though the North American nursery, exposed perhaps to toxic goo, has come to life in a pastel dementia that mocks and mimics those very qualities of human existence from which it was guarded. Though Pullen's and Wiebe's works are expressed in radically different aesthetic and conceptual languages, their pairing gave rise to a disarming landscape of ideas. Wisely, Laurin chose not to draw any explicit thematic connection between the works, allowing their fragile coincidence to speak for itself.

