

Rococo
TATTOO

The Ornamental Impulse in Toronto Art

Rococo
TATTOO

The Ornamental Impulse in Toronto Art

Philip Monk

The Power Plant

Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre

26 June – 7 September 1997

4
Essay by Philip Monk

| | | | |
|--------------|----------------|--------------|--------------|
| 12 | 14 | 16 | 18 |
| Evan Penny | Douglas Walker | John Massey | Barr Gilmore |
| Angela Leach | Judith Schwarz | Robert Fones | Carlo Cesta |
| 28 | 30 | 32 | 34 |

| | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| 20 | 22 | 24 | 26 |
| Stephen Andrews | Louise Noguchi | Regan Morris | Jeannie Thib |
| General Idea | Fastwürms | Robert Flack | Lisa Neighbour |
| 36 | 38 | 40 | 42 |

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| Works in the Exhibition | 44 |
|-------------------------|-----------|

| | |
|------------------|-----------|
| Acknowledgements | 47 |
|------------------|-----------|

Rococo Tattoo is an exhibition that considers Toronto art from a particular perspective—the ornamental impulse in art. The intention is not to present a comprehensive view of the local scene but to take a somewhat oblique look at the art made here over the past ten years. Nor is the exhibition meant to be authoritative, as if this selection of work or this particular theme encapsulates the city’s dominant trends in contemporary art. The fact that no one has attempted to stage a large group exhibition dealing with Toronto art in ten years (aside from non-curated collective shows or The Power Plant’s own exhibitions of young artists) suggests the difficulty of encompassing the currents of contemporary art in one exhibition. Furthermore, many of the artists involved here would not think that their art responds exclusively to a single impetus.

Decoration, after all, is one of the debased elements of modernist art, and embracing it implies breaking a last taboo. Associated with gender—or, more recently, sexuality—it has been depreciated by its “low” sources in women’s crafts,

popular art, or decor, in contrast to the “high” ideals of modernism, which maintained an austere separation of the arts. Decoration was anathema to the modernists: “Ornament is a crime,” said the modernist architect Adolph Loos at the turn of the century. Why, then, do we find a decorative basis in so much contemporary art across media, even, or especially, in modernist-derived contemporary abstract painting?

The title’s combination of the terms *rococo* and *tattoo* attempts to bring together some of the wide-ranging influences on the work of artists exhibiting here. *Decoration* and *inscription* were two concepts loosely used in the the consideration of types of works to include. As the name of one of the most elaborate of historical decorative styles, *rococo* stands for an inclusive ornamental mode that treats the smallest object and the room it inhabits in the same manner. *Tattoo* suggests not only the currency of that graphic style in contemporary street fashion but also the body-centredness of tattoo imagery and the means of its inscription. Although these terms suggest a look or a technique, what they refer to in an individual work—let’s be clear—may only be one element among many that enters into its making. What is essential to the works shown here under this theme is that some transformation of source or influence takes place through artistic process. *Rococo Tattoo* is not an exhibition about tattoos or decorative arts.

The presentation is organized around clusters of works that manifest particular tendencies. Something in each cluster—a technique, a material, or a process—links one set to the next, and so the exhibition has a path from beginning to end.

I take decoration to have its origins in the ornamentation of the body while inscription refers metaphorically to the practice of marking the body as well. The body is not the subject of this exhibition, but its presence is implicit in many of the works. Its full presence, therefore, is stated in the first piece of the exhibition, **Evan Penny**'s four-fifths-scale rendering of a man's body, which, though it bears no ornamentation, has been tinted blue. The sculpture's scale and realistic detail contribute to our fetishistic attraction to it. Penny's skin drawings go in the other direction: he magnifies areas of his own skin, and transfers its pattern to a beeswax panel. Such archetypal markings suggest our skin as the fundamental ground of art's inscription and so prepare us for the ensuing motifs of the exhibition.

In the next section, we are immediately confronted by the tattoo image as it is drawn or projected on representations of the body. Tattoos are signs of identity and forms of expression. (The use of the tattoo as a mark of individuality belies its collective origin, a situation that parallels the separation of decoration in art and architecture from its ancient communal

social setting.) By adopting drawing styles (grafitti-like, decorative, emblem oriented) common to the popular-culture worlds of adolescence, white trash, or criminality, **Douglas Walker** taps in to a particular psychology and identifies himself with those vernacular practitioners through his bad-boy aesthetics. **John Massey**'s computer-manipulated photographic prints employ the body as either the site for the external inscription of society's imperatives or as the internal somatic symbols of an individual psyche. Whatever the source or transformation of one into the other, the evidence is a tattoo-like "hysterical" imprint.

In various works in the next section (which we could call "digital skins"), the image of the face is composed by techniques that have their origins in age-old crafts. **Barr Gilmore**'s *closer eXamination* relates to Massey's *Compound Eye*, both being depictions of the artists' own eyes, but Gilmore's image is created from about 2,000 buttons that are strung together in a weave so as to appear to be digital. (Here the eye is not receptive, as in the case of Massey's work, but observant.) **Stephen Andrews**'s series of *Fingerprints* are digital in the original sense, being derived from his fingerprints, which he then embellishes into a portrait. These modest elegies to anonymous persons merge Andrews's individuality (his unique fingerprint) with another's depiction. Similarly, **Louise**

Noguchi's *Compilation Portraits* combine two photographs of different persons. Starting from a photograph of either a murderer or a victim, she poses herself in the same position for her portrait. The two cut-up photographs are then woven together into a composite image. Such works as Andrews's and Noguchi's show decorative devices to be intertwined with the deepest humanist sympathies.

In the paintings and prints of **Regan Morris** and **Jeannie Thib**, familiar decorative motifs, reminiscent of fabric design, prevail, but in their cases the appeal of ornamentation is allied to the frailty of the human body. The decorative elements in their works are not so much laid on a surface as integrated into the process of fabrication, so that figure and ground become one body. In Morris's paintings, such as *India*, based on a fabric patch that the artist found in India, the design is embedded in skin-like distressed surfaces so that the painting appears to have aged, a metaphor for our accumulation of experience and remembrance over time. Decorated cloth has always been used for bodily cover or domestic habitation, and clothing is a common metaphor for the body. So Thib's *Blueprint*, even though it is presented as a clothing display, is a natural stand-in for the body. The combination is even more apparent in her multi-part linocut, *Glyph*, a series of body fragments—leg, arm,

hand, torso, foot—which are each covered with textile patterns or other markings derived from their use in history.

Many decorative motifs are traditionally derived or stylistically refined, even to the point of abstraction, from the organic world. In [Angela Leach](#)'s paintings, the influence comes from textile design. Their similarity to the digital image can be traced back to the weaving loom and the grid formed by the warp and weft of cloth. But in the examples shown here, the meandering motifs of her paintings have an abstracted linearity. The line's discursive emphasis leads us to the laser-cut steel reliefs of [Judith Schwarz](#). Whereas in the preceding works images were constituted on surfaces, or figure and ground were melded together, Schwarz's linear swirls separate figure from ground so that the wall itself becomes the background for the free-floating image. The graphic energy of these vortex images defies gravity's shackles. Schwarz's "clean-graffiti" look is carried over to [Robert Fones](#)'s photo-sculpture and paintings of ornate nineteenth-century typographic forms derived from sign paintings. Just as typographic form has been divorced from its sign function, so these emblematic "tags" stand against the background of the wall. Fones's *Egyptian Expanded g/Lion's Mane* joins a typeface (the Egyptian Expanded g) to a decorative detail from a photograph of the Chinese stone lions that stand outside the Royal Ontario Museum.

This hiatus of more formalized constructions—where the decorative component becomes separate—is interrupted by a wall of works by [Carlo Cesta](#). Although typographically related to work such as Fones's, now with the admixture of vernacular vocabularies Cesta's installation leads to the next section of the exhibition. In his work, the decorative components are derived from culturally specific, commonplace materials such as the wrought-iron work typical of Toronto's immigrant neighbourhoods. In other pieces by Cesta, utilitarian materials such as manifold gaskets and muffler tape associated with guy car culture are transformed into ornate abstract hieroglyphs.

The next section of the exhibition is conceived somewhat differently in its “scenographic” treatment of space. Here walls are painted or wallpapered to produce a total environment for the artists' statements. [General Idea](#) and [Fastwürms](#) have created new installations using the walls and space of the gallery as decorative frames in which to incorporate past works and to contextualize new ones. Such a device binds together diverse works within each group's ongoing individual iconography, Fastwürms being the “hillbilly cousins” to General Idea's sophisticated media savants. This stage setting in works by both, however, does not function merely as background but as an integral element of the design. Particular motifs mirror each other in different scales and media.

The exhibition starts with the body, and when the viewer has ascended to the second floor of The Power Plant, it ends in a decorative ambience of light. This “spiritualization” begins in the fifteen photographs from **Robert Flack**’s *Empowerment* series. Against gaseous coloured backgrounds, photographs of the chakra sites of the body are overlaid with graphic images of swords, jewels, or ornate filigree. From this work, it is only a short step to light itself. The final piece in the exhibition is **Lisa Neighbour**’s *Super Power*, an installation comprising dozens of thrift-store lamp bases and their intertwined electrical cords. Just as Flack’s *Empowerment* implies the transfiguration of material into a more speculative dimension, Neighbour’s kitsch lamps with their flashing coloured lights substantially transform the space they occupy.

If I imagine the body as a field and figuration the act of its interpretation, the skin becomes the surface on or through which the interpretation is enacted. A detailed reading of the nuances of this surface describes the particular features of time and place while paradoxically serving as a reminder of the profoundly unknowable status of the subject itself.

Evan Penny

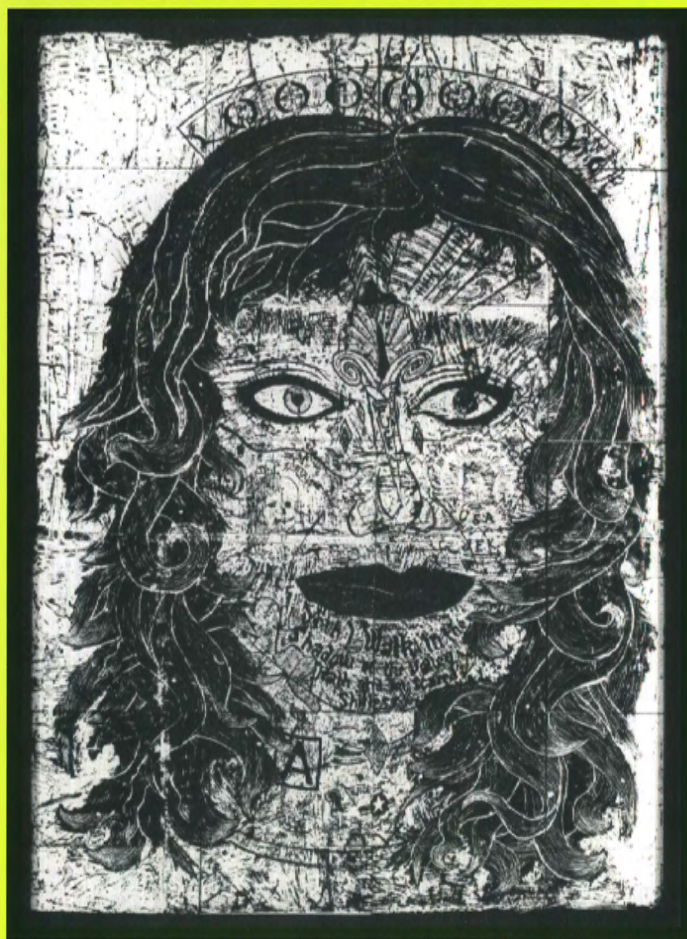
Untitled, 1997 (detail)





Untitled, 1997

Douglas Walker



Untitled, 1984



Untitled, 1986

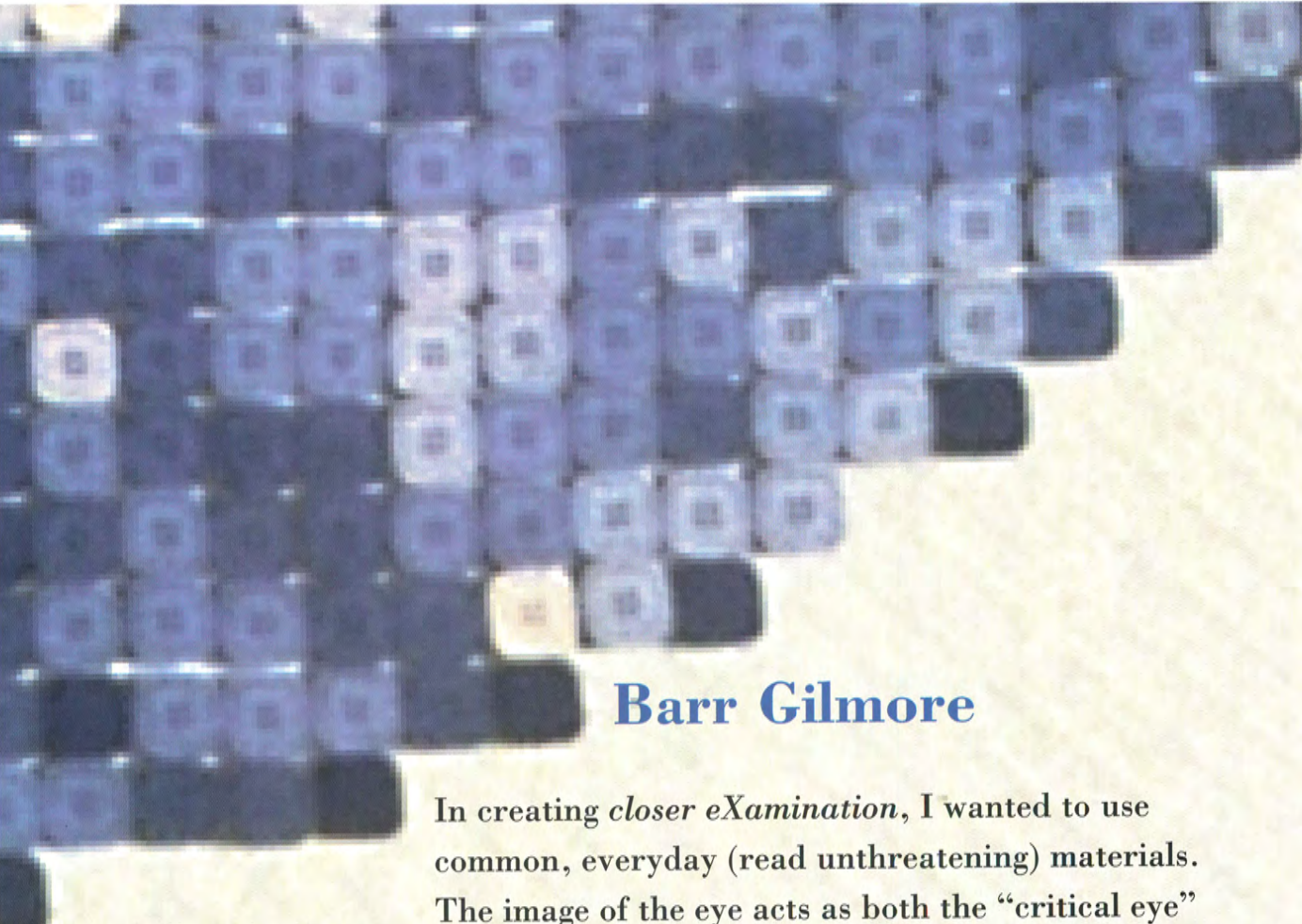


Compound Eye, 1988-89

John Massey

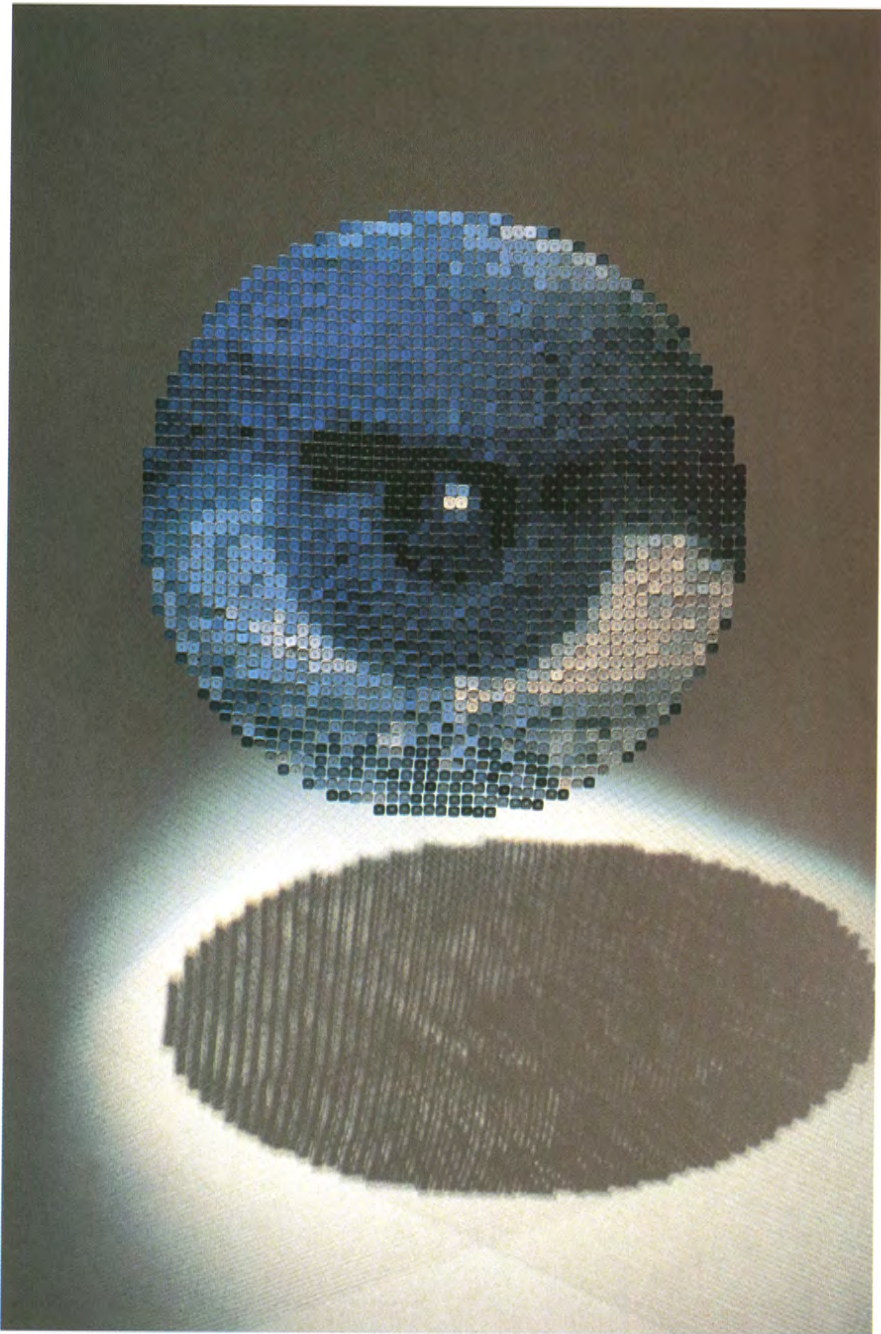
These prints illustrate a body subjected to psychic disturbance. *Versailles 1985* shows an arm encased by a totalizing imperial imagination. In *Compound Eye*, intense willful looking has deposited a vortex of cinematic monsters on the eyeball. The untitled collage, in the style of a medical illustration, pictures the indelible result of scopophilia.





Barr Gilmore

In creating *closer eXamination*, I wanted to use common, everyday (read unthreatening) materials. The image of the eye acts as both the “critical eye” and the “window to the soul.” The pixilation of the photographic image refers to the technological age we live in, and lends itself nicely to the shape of the square buttons and the tonal range of available button dyes. The way that the artwork is installed—slightly above the viewer and tilted down—intentionally suggests looking through a microscope.



closer eXamination, 1996

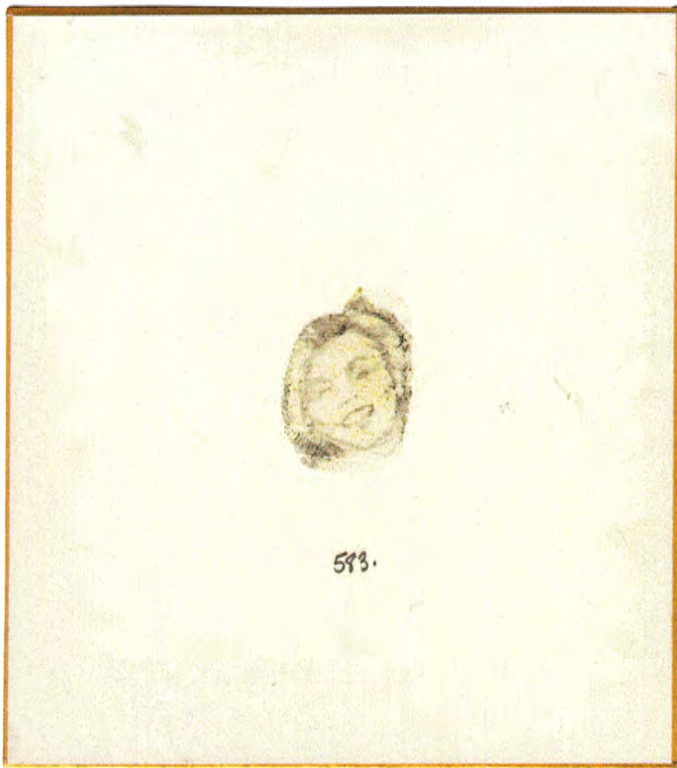
Stephen Andrews

Digital comes from *digit*, meaning “a finger.” The fingerprints we leave behind are mute testimony to our presence. They are the barcodes by which we can be identified. They are us. Digitalization has been popularly used by the media to mask the identities of both criminals



Tree, 1997 (details)

and victims alike. In this series of digital drawings, I fuse two means by which we can be identified, our faces and the whorls at the tips of our fingers. This is not to incriminate us but to remind others that we were here.



Louise Noguchi

This selection of photographic work investigates the role of the artist as spectator in the media. The work is achieved by weaving a portrait of a murderer or murderer's victim with a portrait of myself posed in the same position. The nature of this work somewhat relates to my previous three-dimensional work, which explored the act of the prehistoric hunter drawing his prey, and the transformations of the artist as hunter.



Compilation Portrait #1, 1995



Compilation Portrait #2, 1995

Regan Morris

My work is produced using an involved process consisting of building up several layers of material on bedsheets and subsequently peeling them apart to reveal images, texts and pattern integrated within “skins,” which are mounted as “paintings” or embedded within shroud-like wall hangings. The surfaces of these works look like bark or as if they are made of dried,





India, 1992

cracked mud. This process and the work derived from it function as a metaphor for the body and the human condition. I am interested in the transience of existence, and in aging, illness, loss and the properties of memory. Throughout these explorations I attempt to retain a sense of the ephemerality and sensuality of physical and emotional pleasure.

Jeannie Thib

My works examine the body in relation to history, cultural production, nature, and identity through the nexus of the fragment. Redrawn and altered material quoted from diverse historical sources is incorporated into my printed images/objects to form new composites in an exploration of both the ephemerality of the body and our desire to leave a mark: to create, organize, and understand. The work posits the body as artifact and archive, and as a region of the imagination—a territory of uncertainty.



Glyph, 1995 (detail)



Blueprint, 1995 (detail)



Glyph, 1994



Angela Leach

Over the past five years, I have completed a series of paintings that I refer to as “abstract repeat.” Setting restrictions for the manipulation of paint and the embellishment of line creates repetitive rhythm and spatial depth. Using a specific method, pattern and style to contrast opaque acrylic paint over translucent colour, repeating the same process differently each time, has resulted in a shift from a rigid



Long-Thin-Contour, 1996

pattern painting to an organic, abstract surface. As in the early 1996 painting, *Long-Thin-Contour*, a pattern similar to knitted fabric traced from a cardboard template suggests a different atmosphere from the gourd inspired, chalk-drawn *AR-Gourd #2*, painted in the fall of the same year.

Judith Schwarz

The sculpture I make is usually wall mounted, framed by the architecture of the space where it is displayed. To use the wall for the presentation of the sculpture is to undermine the traditions of weight, volume, and physical presence associated with that discipline. The wall, the realm of illusion, is used to subvert the presence of the work, establishing a tension between



sculpture as physical experience and as cultural projection. The object/image interplay is intentionally destabilizing and requires a constant adjustment between modes of perception. This adjustment, a subtle mental and physical shift, relates to the dynamic of the mind/body construct that is the locus of my creative interest.



Rope, 1996

Robert Fones



Egyptian Expanded g/Lion's Mane is one of four sculptural pieces I exhibited in 1990 that juxtapose photographic images with horizontally expanded three-dimensional letter forms. The photographs applied to the front surfaces of these four works—some of them archival—document the origin, crating for shipment, and present location of a pair of Chinese stone lions acquired by the Royal Ontario Museum in 1923. Like an archaeological fragment missing critical details, the letter form displays only a portion of a larger panoramic image and represents only a moment in the long history of the stone lions. Both the letter form and the Chinese lions are symbols that have moved through space and time, transposed from their origins and relocated to a situation where their meaning is not immediately apparent.

Terre Verte A on Palings, 1992

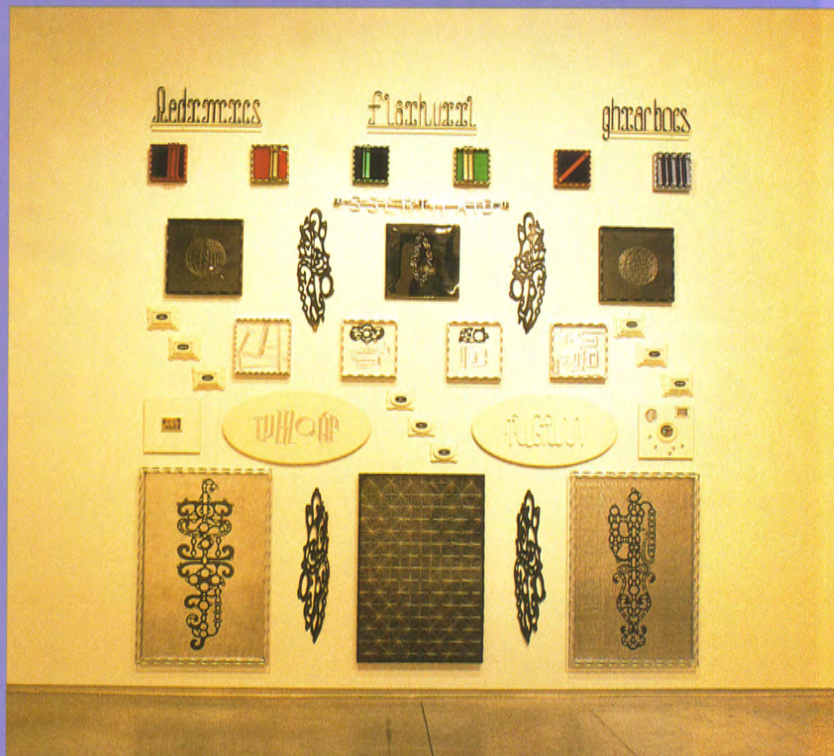


Egyptian Expanded g/Lion's Mane, 1990

Carlo Cesta

Addressing architecture, history and issues of class, is central to my process and methods of creation. Much of my current sculptural work makes reference to ornamental railings and specific architectural details associated with immigrant culture. I'm engaged in a process of juxtaposing and manipulating materials in an effort to explore various themes—for instance how vernacular modes of expression, such as dialect and ornament, act as counterpoints to official language and architecture, offering forms of resistance as well as new potential for meaningful insight.





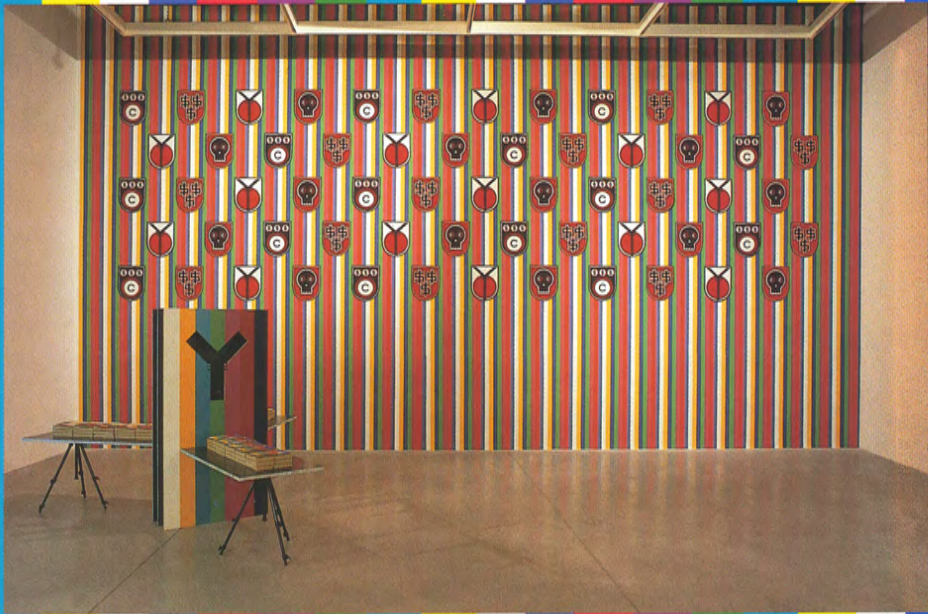
Romance Language (Home Version), 1991-1997

General Idea

We conceived the *Fruits de mer* in 1991 but left it incomplete owing to the difficulty of fabricating the gold fishing nets. I have finished it now, especially for this exhibition. The pink, gold, and blue refer to the signature colours of the French artist Yves Klein. The mis-en-scène in the J.S. McLean Gallery of the *Yen Boutique*, the *Test Pattern* wallpaper, and various multiples demonstrate our typical construction of a riot of colour and pattern from layers of conflicting imagery. We used both heraldry and the languages of advertising and television to form our own complex of visual languages.



Fruits de mer (Leap into the Void), 1991
(completed in 1997)



Installation incorporating
Test Pattern, 1989
Control Group, 1990
Yen Boutique, 1991
TV Dinner Plates, 1988

Fastwürms

Fastwürms is always working, day in and day out, to create outstanding visual art that upholds the highest ideas of beauty and truth. At the same time, Fastwürms' bio-genetics division is moving ahead with amazing

innovations that will make the world a better place for everyone.

Combining the simplicity of a snake with the docility and milk production of an entire herd of dairy cattle, Fastwürms' Anacowda is happy to feed the world.



ANACOWDA *'Happy to feed the World'*, 1987-1997



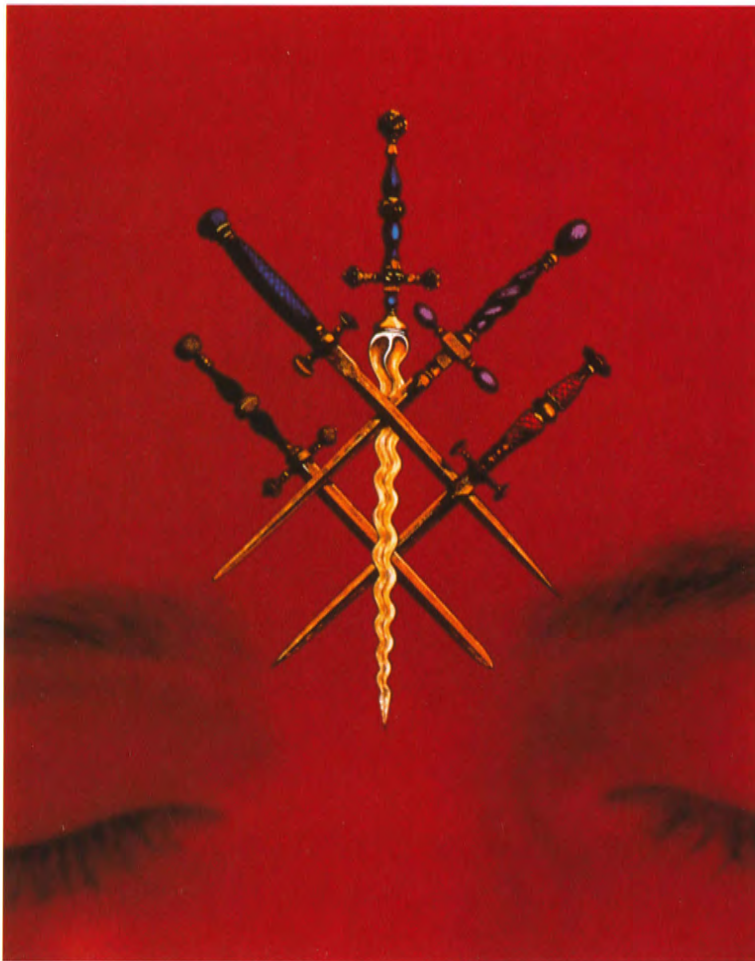
3 Flavour Sno-man, 1995



Robert Flack

1957-1993

Anatomical Garden, 1990



Warrior, Empowerment series, 1990-1991

*—see the light-light up my life-light year-lighten up-lightheaded-light
at the end of the tunnel—*

Turning on a light is a simple action that we perform unconsciously, many times a day. The lamp fixture is illuminated by a form of magic that we call electricity. Unseen turbines are driven, perhaps by a dam or a furnace. Power is sent through the transformers, cables, towers,



and wires into the switch, but mechanical details do not entirely explain the mystery or the transfiguration that takes place. Like human beings, lamps are lumpy, smooth, graceful and odd, full of pathos and dignity. They receive their “life force” from a source almost as mysterious our own.



Works in the Exhibition

Stephen Andrews

Tree, 1997
oil and pencil on card, shelves
Collection of Jennifer and Morey Chaplick, Toronto

Carlo Cesta

Romance Language (Home Version), 1991-1997
Site specific mixed media installation
Collection of the artist and Garnet Press, Toronto,
with loans from the collection of Eileen Sommerman
and Michael Rothfeld, Toronto, and Nancy
Campbell, Toronto

Fastwürms

3 MOON, 1997
mixed media
Courtesy of the artists

ANACOWDA 'Happy to feed the World', 1987-1997
Site specific mixed media installation
Courtesy of the artists

Robert Flack

Series of fifteen works from the
Empowerment series, 1990-1991
Collection of Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph
Gift of the Flack Family in memory of Robert Flack,
1994; and Purchased with assistance from the
Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Recreation and an
anonymous donation, 1993

Robert Fones

Terre Verte A with Cast Shade on Grey Ground, 1992
Gouache on paper
43 x 35.5 cm
Collection of Thomas H. Bjarnason, Toronto

Terre Verte A on Palings, 1992
watercolour and gouache on paper
43 x 35.5 cm
Collection of Kelvin Brown, Toronto

Terre Verte A with Cast Shade, 1992
watercolour on paper
43 x 35.5 cm
Collection of The Canada Council Art Bank /
Collection de la banque d'oeuvres d'art du Conseil
des Arts du Canada

Egyptian Expanded g/Lion's Mane, 1990
black and white photograph mounted on wood and
aluminum
107 x 241 x 25 cm
Collection of Susan M. Tanenbaum, Toronto

General Idea

Fruits de mer (Leap into the Void), 1991 (completed
in 1997)
installation consisting of ten golden fishing nets, ten
fluorescent pink loofas, ten brass rings, thirty blue
starfish, ten fluorescent light fixtures, ten pieces of
gold-plated barbed wire
Courtesy of General Idea

Fruits de mer (Broodthaers), 1991 (completed in
1997)
gold plating on lead
Courtesy of General Idea

Test Pattern, 1989
silkscreened wallpaper
Courtesy of General Idea

Control Group, 1990
installation comprising sixteen sets of four chenille
crests, each set signed and numbered from an edition
of thirty
Courtesy of General Idea

Yen Boutique, 1991
mixed media installation with video component
Courtesy of General Idea

TV Dinner Plates, 1988
porcelain plates
Courtesy of General Idea

Barr Gilmore

closer eXamination, 1996
custom dyed buttons, nylon thread, eyescrews
Collection of the artist

Angela Leach

AR - Gourd #2, 1996
acrylic on board
30.5 x 152.4 cm
The artist, courtesy Wynick/Tuck Gallery

Long-Thin-Contour, 1996
acrylic on board
30.5 x 152.4 cm
Collection of Sally Spath and Nestor Kruger, Toronto

John Massey

Versailles 1985, 1985
silkscreen print
127 x 96.5 cm
The artist, courtesy Olga Korper Gallery

Compound Eye, 1988-1989
offset lithograph
76 x 66 cm
The artist, courtesy Olga Korper Gallery

Regan Morris

India, 1992
acrylic and latex on gauze and masonite
269.2 x 304.8 cm
Private Collection

Flowers for Acteon, 1993
acrylic and latex on gauze
144.8 x 142.2 cm
Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto;
Gift of Alison and Alan Schwartz in loving memory of
Tamara Goldman

Lisa Neighbour

Super Power, 1996
site-specific installation
78 lamp bases, coloured lights, electrical cords
Collection of the artist

Louise Noguchi

Compilation Portrait #2, 1995
2 woven B&W photographs
162.5 x 110.2 cm
Collection of the artist

Compilation Portrait #3, 1995
2 woven B&W photographs
136.5 x 107 cm
Collection of the artist

Compilation Portrait #4, 1995
2 woven B&W photographs
136.5 x 107 cm
Collection of the artist

Compilation Portrait #16, 1995
2 woven B&W photographs
136.5 x 107 cm
Collection of the artist

Evan Penny

Untitled, 1997
resin-bonded hydrostone, pigment
132 cm high
Courtesy of the artist and Wynick/Tuck Gallery,
Toronto

Untitled, 1997
beeswax, pigment
61 x 548.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Wynick/Tuck Gallery,
Toronto

Untitled, 1997
beeswax, pigment
162.6 x 162.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Wynick/Tuck Gallery,
Toronto

Judith Schwarz

Rope, 1996
steel
60.9 x 167.6 x 3.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and S.L. Simpson Gallery,
Toronto

Network, 1994
steel
55.9 x 137.2 cm
Collection of Nancy Hushion and John Beck,
Toronto

Jeannie Thib

Glyph, 1994
linocut on mulberry paper
5 panels, 183 x 91 cm each
Collection of the artist

Blueprint, 1995
ink on mulberry paper, thread
seven parts
installation, approx. 122 cm x 12.2 m
Collection of the artist

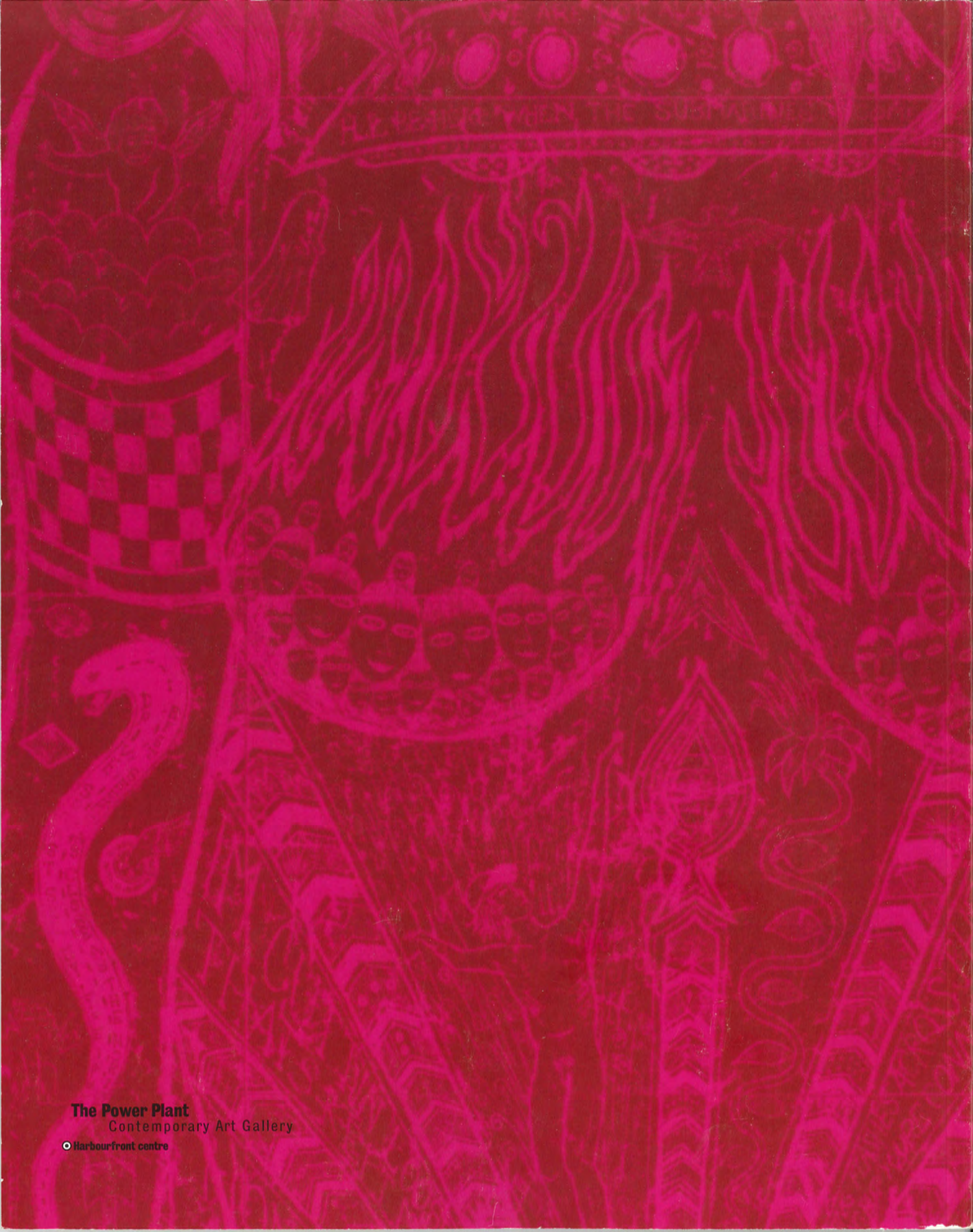
Douglas Walker

Untitled, 1984
photoprint
188 x 137.1 cm
Collection of Shelagh Alexander, Toronto

Untitled, 1986
photoprint
238.8 x 127.6 cm
Collection of The Canada Council Art
Bank/Collection de la banque d'oeuvres d'art du
Conseil des Arts du Canada

Untitled, 1985
photoprint
88.9 x 76.2 cm
Collection of Carla Garnet, Toronto

Untitled, 1985
photoprint
88.9 x 76.2 cm
Collection of the artist



BY THE FIRE WHEN THE SUN DIES

The Power Plant
Contemporary Art Gallery

Harbourfront centre