

provisional worlds

james carl

tony feher

christie frields

sara macKillop

damian moppett

kelly richardson

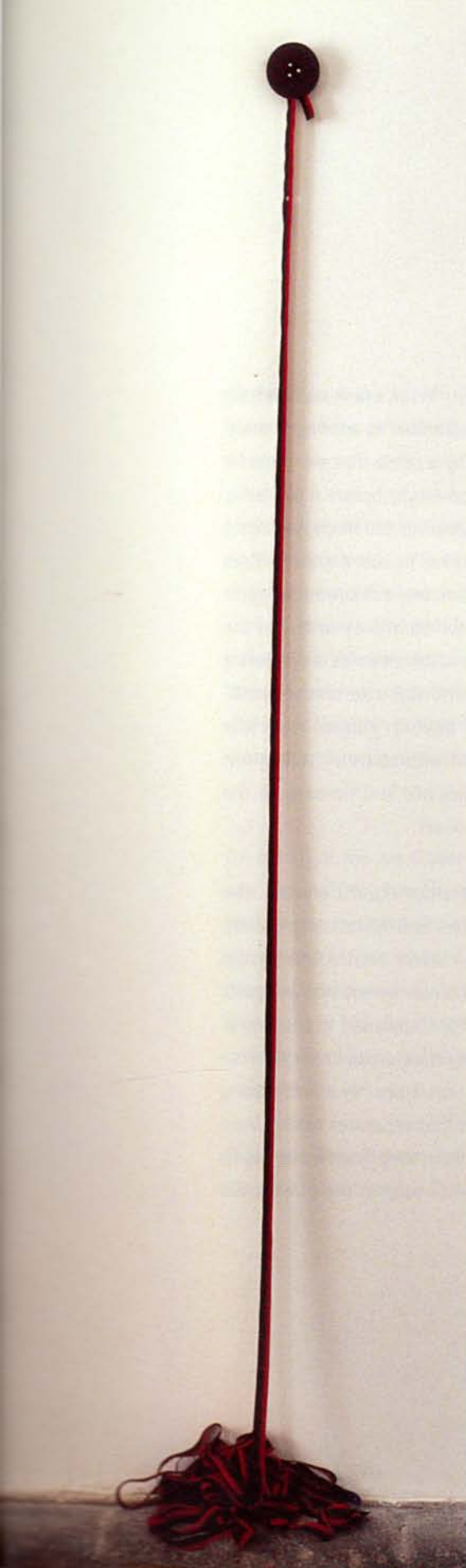
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Art Gallery of Ontario

Toronto



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When John Cage declared at the height of Pop art, "the object is a fact, not a symbol," he undermined an enduring precept of art, insisting on the world at hand as a self-sufficient source of meaning.¹ Already more than forty years earlier, in 1913 Marcel Duchamp fixed an ordinary bicycle wheel to a stool and exhibited them. His aesthetic impudence astounded the art world and

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irrevocably upset the sanctity of the immutable art object, defying commonly held belief in its intrinsic and transcendent meaning. Since then, the meaning of art has become more complex, no longer reliant on the purely visual, contingent rather than stable. Though Duchamp's ready-mades profoundly influenced the course of twentieth century art, Pop art, a less radical but equal affront in its time, brought his momentous move closer to its logical conclusion. In philosopher Arthur Danto's view, Pop art marked the "end of art" – that is, the

end of the history of art as a narrative wholly distinct from the everyday world.² Pop art readily accepted mass-produced, urban culture. With its embrace of a post-war world of increasing commercial production and consumption, Pop art *did* celebrate the ordinary as fact rather than symbol. Or, as Roland Barthes said, "now the fact, in mass culture, is no longer an element of the natural world; what appears as fact is the stereotype, what everyone sees and consumes."³

Provisional Worlds presents the work of seven artists who reinvent and raise questions about what everyone sees and consumes. They indulge in and critically transform the everyday excess and commodity-based aesthetic of a world of continuous object and image production. The "fact" of a world of provisional rather than permanent commodities, both disposable and easily replaceable, is no longer novel. It prevails, without Pop art's open embrace of a market economy, as subtle undercurrent or provocative critique, in the work of many artists who emerged in the 1990s. Their immediate heritage is Minimal and Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. That period – often more myth than memory for many of these artists – importantly signalled a resistance to the commodity culture that Pop art had willingly absorbed. The so-called "dematerialization" of the art object marked Conceptualism's self-reflexive retreat from the marketplace and the museum, while the spare and impersonal industrial forms of Minimalism reasserted the special domain of art in a perceptual accord between spectator and object. During the 1980s, artists had appropriated popular imagery, analyzed the mechanisms of meaning in representation, and using photography and time-based media, critically adopted popular media formats. The art object itself referred to the social, political and cultural realities of the everyday. Conscious of these artistic legacies, the artists in *Provisional Worlds* make the daily spectacle of the provisional – packaging, display mechanisms, rapid-turnover technologies, product obsolescence and its shadow of cast-offs in the urban landscape – a staging ground for practices consciously situated within the public realms of an economy of convenience.

The quiet presence of Sara MacKillop's diminutive works depends on deft compositional shifts that transport familiar objects into imaginative realms. Pinched at the centre and suspended in space, the bright red "L" of the vinyl

British learner-driver sign becomes a diamond-shaped vortex of potential chromatic energy, or, when viewed from the opposite side, a white field dramatically interrupted by two dashes of intense red. This piece and other ordinary things she has abstracted from their functional associations punctuate rather than claim space, recalling the modest wonder of Richard Tuttle's painterly sculptural gestures. In *Skyline*, 2001, the grid structure of a cardboard game board – folded, stood on its edge and perched precariously atop a pedestal – evokes modernist skyscraper architecture. Its pastel hues have become fashionable again, but the board itself is a reminder of a recently out-moded analogue era. MacKillop's casual installation of a typewriter ribbon reel conjures other associations with late-modernist art. The reel's concentric circles of black and red ribbon form a bull's eye on the wall. Left partially unwound, the ribbon traces a gravitational path to its own demise in a heap on the floor. In another work, two tiny graphically patterned pieces from a jigsaw puzzle interlock and pulsate with the intensity of an Op art painting (*Jigsaw Pieces*, 2002). Focussing on minor everyday fragments of an aesthetic that once championed expansive scale and depended on the neutrality of pristine gallery spaces, MacKillop's concentrated engagement with the ordinary recasts these formal and material preoccupations into day-to-day world experience and observation.

MacKillop's choice of materials reveals a clear predilection for those things that have fallen from use within an ethos of disposability and technologically accelerated change. Domestic wares and entertainment products – old tape cassettes, earphones, record album covers and sleeves, and speaker wires – figure among her preferred materials. She rearranges these and subtly wrests specific design features from their functional forms, as if to reunite them with the larger aesthetic and cultural context in which they originally entered the market. Using such commonplace objects, no longer current but

not quite retro, gathered from trash cans and found in thrift shops, MacKillop revisits the weighty history of late modernism with a light touch. Her humble materials and conceptual economy, like the practices of some other British artists of a new generation – such as Martin Creed and Jonathan Monk – distance her work from the restlessly bombastic gestures, sensational content and publicity frenzy that characterized much of the British art scene in the mid-1990s.

Christie Fields has developed in her work a lexicon of materials that reflect her fascination with the invisible and autonomous nature of many of the complex systems that drive our economy. For example, she has created works based on barcodes downloaded from the Internet, and used industrial products like plastic piping. Alluding to the self-replicating networks that shape our world through technology, Fields draws attention to equivalencies. In her work, transient and fluctuating urban capitalist culture mirrors the organic world, which is commonly both revered for its harmonious balance and feared for its potential for unbound chaos and mutation. Her fanciful titles evoke new age utopias and magical formulae, ideal states and occult practices. They offer the promise of well-being and instant gratification, like an expansionist economy's speculative promotion of a better life as its ultimate product. The "magic" of technology sardonically revered by Fields operates through systems which, while assuring product distribution and availability, go about their business of gathering myriad forms of consumer data to assure a self-perpetuating cycle of growth.

In a world that is becoming, in Fields's words "spectacularly synthetic", everything is mutable. Borrowing compositional methods from traditional Japanese forms such as *ikebana* (flower arranging) and calligraphy, which are modelled on a harmonious balance between nature and culture, she



implies a less assuring convergence of the technological and the biological. Her barcodes dissemble into organic tangles as if growing like weeds, those emblems of invasive proliferation. Alternatively, she skews these densely massed columns of digital information taken from Internet product code sites, recreating them as modernist optical fields with aggressive visual energy. Fibre-optic cable and its PVC casing act as conduits for the ceaselessly expanding global communications networks that claim more and more subliminal territories. In Fields's work, PVC tubes arc and criss-cross buoyantly across space. Like the bamboo plant, which Fields has also used in her work, relentlessly seeking its sources of sustenance, this new economy of signs resembles a voracious organic world of boundless flux and regeneration. Fields's work refers to a world that has become second nature, and as she has said, "in this context – our techno-global-capital network – stasis is death".

At the other end of the global economy's production-consumption conduits is the throw-away material effluent that inspires Tony Feher's work. He accumulates consumer detritus, those ubiquitous plastic bottles and caps, straws, tins and trinkets, the taken-for-granted generic excess of our lives. His studio resembles a warehouse for things that have lived out their brief usefulness – a stockpile of salvaged drink cans, bleach bottles, plastic broom handles, Styrofoam packing forms and much more. With Feher's recognition of the extraordinary lying in wait amidst the banal, these discarded items take on new life in his work, often inherently conveying through their unassuming collective presence a poignant trace of lives lived. Bottle caps and soft drink crates remain unsentimentally mere bottle tops and crates in Feher's work, however their product identity has been removed. Replete with familiar associations and freed to embody a quotidian magic of their own, they radiate a startling charm.

Though Feher's work often adopts the reductive serial aesthetic of Minimalism, it is anything but detached. His sculptures can be expansive or unobtrusively humble, invading space or subtly articulating it. He brings a street-smart vernacular to a cool compositional language, arranging and categorizing his orphaned and anonymous commonplace objects so that something of their overlooked essence is captured. Pure colour, light and form appear in unexpected places. An ordinary plastic bag becomes a thing of beauty when folding reveals the intensity of its milky translucent blue; the radiant range of broom-handle colours seems implausibly up-beat; red-coloured water in a suspended plastic drink bottle looks luscious, and at the same time recalls the fragile link to life of blood in an intravenous bag. A work such as *Enjoy*, 2001 has the fortress-like body language of a primary structure. But it is also a modular cube of soft drink crates with the playful image of a giant Lego construction. This work invites the viewer to fulfil the imperative of its title, and take pleasure in its exuberant presence, the words of the marketing phrase "Enjoy Coca Cola" scratched off but lurking as ghosts from a past life. The city street origins of Feher's work are never far, especially in his recent wall pieces. These "object drawings" are linear haikus of the life and death cycle of stray wires and packing tape, curb-side remnants left to the will of a passing truck's wheels and Feher's watchful eye. His recuperative sleights of hand claim the extraordinary in the expendable, assert their presence with a minimum of gesture, and declare a refusal to add more stuff to the world when so much can be made of what is already there.

James Carl fashioned his first life-size models of household appliances, such as stoves, refrigerators and televisions, from the same cardboard containers that assured their unblemished delivery to the consumer. By painstakingly hand reproducing the contours of these generic manufactured objects, cutting and forming them from their own blank packaging, Carl brought the cycle of

production and consumption, and its dubious ethic, full circle. He returned his sculptures to the street where his materials were first found, ironically condemning them to commodity oblivion. Here he left his recreations for removal with other trash, conceivably by whoever might wish to have them. Toward the end of this series, Carl made a life-size dumpster bin and three automated banking machines with corrugated cardboard. These emblems of the opposite ends of a continuous cycle of exchange were displayed in public spaces, the banking machines in a downtown corporate passageway and the dumpster bin on the street.

Public gestures, including production of his work in multiples, collaborative projects and the mounting of several outdoor projects by other artists on his apartment balcony, are characteristic of Carl's artistic activity. Most recently he has created a font, accessible on disc for use on anyone's computer, and to any purpose, from 204 drawings of standard plastic bottle forms. (The bottle caps are accessed by pressing the CAPS key on the keyboard.) By returning to the world such mute models of common objects, Carl gives trenchant if amusing visibility to the things we take for granted, their proliferation and ubiquity. Blending with an unsettling chameleon-like ease into a growing stream of appealing consumer products, his work has an uncanny ability to catch us off guard.

As he has begun to use Coroplast, a commercial corrugated plastic signage material, Carl's sculptures have become reincarnations, not only of standard manufactured objects, but also of an environment of mechanisms for strategic retail marketing and temporary display. Less transformed than re-presented, the world Carl gives back to us is one we see, covet or consume, and one we inevitably participate in. Social space is porous, malleable and above all, formed through exchange. Carl's work is a mordant material image of an

exchange fundamental to the cultural and economic sustenance of capitalism's moot social contract. For this exhibition he has colonized the austere glass retail façade of the AGO with his own graphic "awning", a cheery vinyl decorative frill that adopts a storefront language of accommodation and invitation.

Damian Moppett's made-for-the camera sculptures, once described as "tiny monuments to bad habits and wasted time" are, among other things, carefully constructed tableaux of anti-heroic, idle processes of creative experimentation.⁴ Initially trained as a painter, Moppett soon began to experiment with casual three-dimensional constructions composed of everyday consumer products. He has become known for his *mise en scènes* of these ingenious temporary structures made explicitly for the camera. Moppett's abject yet humorously controlled agglomerations of trash and his explorations of the grotesque, recall the spirit of Surrealism or the crude special effects devices used in low-budget horror films. Typically held together with blobs of insulating foam, stretched balloons and other provisional methods, these works appear to have been conceived in the hobbyist's workshop or a teenager's bedroom, yet they are savvy and inventive rehearsals of art historical genres, such as the still life. Moppett sees his work as a kind of self-portraiture, an identity formed between his consumption of art history and a contemporary social context of anarchic youth culture, mass marketing and throw-away kitsch. His use of Pop-culture products and dollar store bricolage may recall, for example, Fischli and Weiss's entropic theatre of the everyday and Paul MacCarthy's libidinal scenarios.

The *Impure Systems*, 1999–2000 series of photographs marked a direct impromptu entry into the everyday for Moppett. They were created while doing a model shoot as a favour for friends. The spontaneous sculptures in this series emerge slowly from a cluttered visual field of familiar objects that

virtually fill the picture plane. The occasional French fry and ashtrays full of cigarette butts allude to aftermath rather than action. Other objects in the scene point to Moppett's role as photographer, to the elaborate preparation of models for the session, and extended periods of waiting. Moppett's sculptural gestures appear as extemporaneous products of boredom. Fiddling with commonplace objects to fill time, his minor feats of balance and tension give momentary form to chaotic excess, presenting an oblique portrait of the artist's presence. The "impurity" in Moppett's work is a willed artlessness, an intentional formlessness where conflicting genres collide in ambiguous territory. The mood of playful adolescent ennui can shift into a sinister note of angry frustration. Like the teenage rec room spirit of his doodle drawings, Moppett's made-for-the-camera sculptures have a low-ambition/high-imagination factor. Temporary rather than definitive, they are protagonists in a solitary drama. Artistic authorship takes shape in a loud messy place – the metaphorical teenage basement with too much stuff and too little to do – where false starts, the sullen blare of heavy metal and a play of productive disjunction triumph over seamless ends.

Several of Kelly Richardson's early works originate with evenings spent in the bar and music scenes. Filling time while bartending, she amassed bottle caps, corks and foil paper from cigarette packages. The caps she refashioned as an ambitiously towering but fragile monument to repetitive boredom; corks became a fanciful fleet of tiny canoes; foil paper formed numerous pathetic but visually effective patches applied to broken cymbals. Choosing ordinary expendable materials, rather than those readily identified with art, Richardson made public the banality of her life and the material associations that marked its shape. Her work is based on seizing moments that represent the minor tragedies and epiphanies in the everyday flux of life. She chooses her medium according to the sensations she wishes to convey. Between her

cork-restored drumsticks and her foil-repaired cymbals, we may imagine the sound of a shattering strike, or sense a shimmering vibration.

Restitution of the sublime from an ordinary or flawed moment recurs in her recent photographs. Dreamier and more lurid than standard landscapes, they are unreal, strangely flat and a little eerie. Richardson has watched hours of low-budget horror movies made for the home video market, pausing on and indulging in elusive scenes found within absurd, repetitive and impoverished storylines. She records these fleeting moments with a standard Polaroid camera, then scans and reproduces them many times larger on photographic paper. Several steps removed from anything natural or original, her degraded yet disturbingly familiar "landscapes" are re-fabrications of images cheaply created in popular entertainment industry studios. They toy with our notions of natural and unnatural and the fantasies culturally associated with both these states. In a similar manner her videos, *Camp*, 2000 and *There's a lot there*, 2001, present clichés of outdoor life: the full moon on a summer evening and a perfect sunset seen from the cottage screen door. But rising vapours distort the moon and a crackling fire is soon recognized as the sound of corn popping. The wonder of the wilderness shrinks like a plastic wrapper too near the fire. Similarly, the menacing hum of mosquitoes gathering on the screen interrupts the final moments of the sun's glorious descent into the lake. The familiar invasive whine was not made by an insect however; it was electronically synthesized from the artist's and a friend's voices. Richardson's art plays gently with our expectations, humourously re-presenting the artificial and predictable, and optimistically finding something interesting when it appears nothing at all is happening.

Twentieth-century wonder-simulacrum of everything from snakeskin to wood planks, but increasingly appreciated for its innate qualities, plastic continues

to be developed in seemingly limitless forms and derivatives. Shirley Tse has used Styrofoam insulation, packing moulds, bubble wrap, straws and translucent sheets of plastic to explore this expanding universe of polymers. She hand-crafts industrially manufactured, commercially available plastics, creating sculptural plays of scale, and positive and negative form. Her phantasmagoric objects morph from familiar to futuristic, appearing at times to represent model metropolises, enlarged micro-circuitry, or mutating cyber prosthetics. Plastic is multiple yet generic, a product, as its name implies, that yields to any use. In *Polyworks*, 2000, Tse has found and reworked polystyrene forms, creating a complex labyrinth of interconnected modules. Interior corridors and multi-leveled strata resemble dense industrial spaces or the inner workings of an inter-galactic research station. Spreading under a canopy of clinical white Styrofoam sheets, the structures below glow from within, their contours catching the reflection of coloured vinyl set into intricately worked surfaces. Though the ghosts of predestined function and process inhabit its modular elements, *Polyworks* sets these free in an imaginary micro-environment.

Tse's sculpture invites associations with disciplines like industrial and landscape design, and architecture. Conversely her recent wall pieces cut from squares of semi-translucent plastic lining material in delicate pinks, blues and yellows relate more closely to biological processes. Composed by subtraction, the malleable skin-like surface of these works turns in upon itself, looping through its own voids and reattaching to itself. In these pieces, Tse's abiding artistic concerns about surface and structure suggest painting rather than sculpture. Using this flexible, neutral material, she produces the illusion of growth and depth from a two-dimensional surface. The cultural ramifications of a pre-fab world are not lost on Tse, but she also recognizes the potential for re-inventing a self-replicating aesthetic of mass-production.

The artists in this exhibition invite a reconsideration of our relationship with the real. Here art occurs in an emphasis on what appears to be insignificant. The innovative juxtaposition and reconfiguration of the familiar in many works in this exhibition reveal a productive tension between an aesthetic of purity and abstraction and the clamour of popular everyday objects. For example, Christie Fields calls upon the everyday with her bar codes and graffiti tags operating as opposing symbols of proliferation and territorial expansion. Alternatively, James Carl's schematic awning across the front of the AGO recalls the more austere revelation of place and context carried out in Daniel Buren's ubiquitous colour stripe works conceived in the 1970s. The artists expose systems of production and consumption, which deliver both standardization and greater variety, while creating new categories of the superfluous. Sophisticated technologies and consumer delivery systems have spawned this almost disabling abundance of products, including information. In contrast, with resourcefulness and an incisive awareness of the flux of the everyday world, these artists use the possibilities offered by what is already at hand. In our day-to-day lives, we have come to depend on the very things we choose to ignore, discard and overlook within an excess of choice and quantity. The descriptive terms real, man-made, natural, organic, synthetic, useful and useless are less stable in this realm. Their association with shared cultural values becomes clearer if we acknowledge the common value of time, or time-saving devices. Reality in this instance is lodged in the vast variety of material signifiers that collectively embody the provisional worlds we make and inhabit.

¹ Quoted by Roland Barthes in "That old Thing, Art." Steven Henry Madoff, ed., *Pop Art: A Critical History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997): 371. Originally published in Italian in *Pop Art: Evoluzione di una Generazione* (Milan: Edizione Electa and Venice: Palazzo Grassi, 1980).

² Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

³ Barthes: 373.

⁴ Nancy Tousley, "Slapstick and Zeitgeist" *Canadian Art Magazine* 14 (Summer) 1997: 38–41.

james carl

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