

# Out of the ordinary

**SARAH MILROY** sees everyday objects cast in a new light as objets d'art

There is a strange phenomenon that sometimes occurs, when a familiar word suddenly seems strange. Not just wacky words, such as rutabaga or flabbergasted or colonoscopy, but normal garden-variety words: book, ambulance, candle. Repeated often enough, lifted from their context and held up to the harsh light of reason, they can make no explanation for themselves. Why are words the way they are? The more you think about it, the weirder it gets.

I found myself musing on this last week while looking at a thought-provoking new exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Titled *Provisional Worlds* (and curated by the AGO curator of contemporary art, Jessica Bradley), the exhibition assembles a cast of seven characters from Canada and abroad who work with bits and pieces from the world around us — the castaway stuff that we use, like language, without even noticing. Refashioning these objects in sometimes flamboyant and sometimes painfully subtle ways (echoes of Marcel Duchamp and his immortal urinal), these artists play a game of chicken with aesthetics, winning the gamble more often than not. The exhibition provokes the question: What is the point at which a pile of garbage becomes art? And when is it just a pile of garbage?

One of the more daring exhibitors in this regard is Vancouver artist Damian Moppett, who has for some years been known for his resolutely antierotic, even abject photographs, sculptures and drawings. Among these, his photographic series titled *Impure Systems* (1999-2000), which documents a series of improvisational junk sculptures, is a particular favourite, and a number of works from this series are included in this show.

Moppett began making these works while killing time on a fashion shoot for a friend, and refers to them, variously, as "frustrated ADD (attention-deficit disorder) sculptures" and "monuments to bad habits and wasted time." Cobbling together strange sculptural assemblages out of ashtrays, cigarette butts, film canisters, commercial film packaging, blobs of insulation foam, Q-Tips, lipstick tubes and the like, he then photographed his fragile and ungainly results. The best of these are the vertical combos he describes as self-portraits, which have about them an awkward, stumbling in-



One of Christie Fields's bar codes unravels into a tangle of roots.

nocence that is endearing fit's no surprise that Philip Guston was one of Moppett's first heroes, offering precisely enough anthropomorphic reference to arouse a double-take in the viewer.

Other works from the same series, though, seem to fall apart, with the odds and ends strewn across the surface of the composition in an apparently haphazard fashion. Whatever mysterious gravitational pull human intent exerts over physical matter — and over our attention spans as ob-



Damian Moppett calls his junk-sculpture series 'monuments to bad habits and wasted time.'

servers — has apparently lapsed. The margin between aesthetic success and failure, here, is as slim as a razor width, and every viewer would call it differently.

London artist Sara MacKillop, too, rides close to this edge. "I try to limit myself to the smallest number of changes I can do," she said in her artist's talk last weekend, describing her subtle play with found objects. "I think it adds to the strength of the work to be quite economical."

In some cases, the effect is exquisitely elegant, such as her simple installation of a black and red typewriter-ribbon cartridge mounted on the wall (how long has it been since we've seen one of those?), its contents spilling down the wall to pool simultaneously on the floor. With the tiniest of interventions, she has set in motion a witty repartee to the grand tradition of abstraction, while also subliminally making reference to the human body — the brain and the gut. It gets you thinking. But another little composition by MacKillop, comprising two jigsaw-puzzle pieces placed back to back along their respective flat edges, failed to meet the mark.

Christie Fields, from Los Angeles, is another borrower, but her results are more even. Downloading bar codes from the Internet, she transforms them into objects of aesthetic contemplation and anthropological puzzlement. Some are reproduced in prints,

tilted on angles and cropped or notched. (The title of one of these in the current show — *oil of clove, arch of bramble* — refers to the ingredients of a witch's potion to bring wealth.)

In another ink on paper work, the bar code is reproduced, but instead of a neat border along the bottom edge, it appears to unravel into a quasi-organic tangle of roots, streaming down the surface of the white paper. Fields refers to the bar code as "a global flag," a universally recognized symbol that makes possible the economically efficient circulation of goods traded around the world.

"We all know that the bar code doesn't relate to anything real in the world," Fields says. "It is based on a binary code; it is only decipherable by a computer. Yet we all defer to it."

"Capital is very fluid," she adds. "It doesn't have a stable core." Her sculptural work in this exhibition expands on this idea. A gangling concoction of white plastic PCV tubes (the type that carry water as well as fibre-optic cable and telephone wires), it mimics the growth pattern of bamboo roots, which sprawl underground with phenomenal tensile strength, breaking the surface only when opportuni-

ties for light, water and sustenance are available.

Capital, Fields says, is characterized by the same "opportunistic and voracious behaviour." Her sculpture, titled *all that is solid between rainbow avenue and karma street* (2002), features dense clusters of tubing linked together by soaring arcs. "I like the idea," she says, "that underneath the asphalt there is this cage, holding it all together."

Shirley Tse, also from California, has a similar knack for making the familiar seem strange. Tse's passion is the Styrofoam packing materials found in the shipping crates of any number of consumer goods. Liberating these white and nearly weightless objects from their utilitarian roles, she combines them in sculptures that suggest futuristic cities, or circuit boards, or the architecture of some imaginary laboratory complex or space station, or the topography of a high desert plateau incised with prehistoric earthworks — landing strips for itinerant Martians.

In *Polyworks* (2000), her large-scale sculpture at the AGO, we discover a complex agglomeration of shapes — some found (such as the radial Styrofoam bedding for Christmas-tree lights) and some created by the artist with the use of her router. Tse, a consummate crafts-person, creates forms that defy our ability to categorize them. Were these shapes made by the artist, or by some anonymous industrial designer before the fact, intent on creating an efficient, low-budget, stackable form in which to ferry some indefinable commodity to the marketplace? Like the bar code in Fields's imagining, the lightweight packing material is a byproduct of the global economy, held up for closer scrutiny — "a symbol of disposability," as she put it, "and an emblem of contemporary culture."

Looking at Tse's sculpture, you'll find yourself wondering how it was you never noticed these things before — all around us and yet strangely invisible. The recycling bin may never look the same again.

*Provisional Worlds* includes work by James Carl, Tony Feher, Christie Fields, Sara MacKillop, Damian Moppett, Kelly Richardson and Shirley Tse. The exhibition continues at Toronto's Art Gallery of Ontario until March 2. For information, call 416-979-6660.