

**SARAH MILROY** visits an engaging exhibition in which artists exploring the possibilities of prefab objects infuse them with new life

# Thoroughly modern art

For people who thrive on emerging trends in contemporary art, the Blackwood Gallery in the University of Toronto's Erindale Campus has, for some time now, been a regular pilgrimage site. There, in the Kameff Centre, under the prescient eye of curator Barbara Fischer, a regular parade of small but focused exhibitions has drawn a steady stream of devotees to the westernmost reaches of the realm.

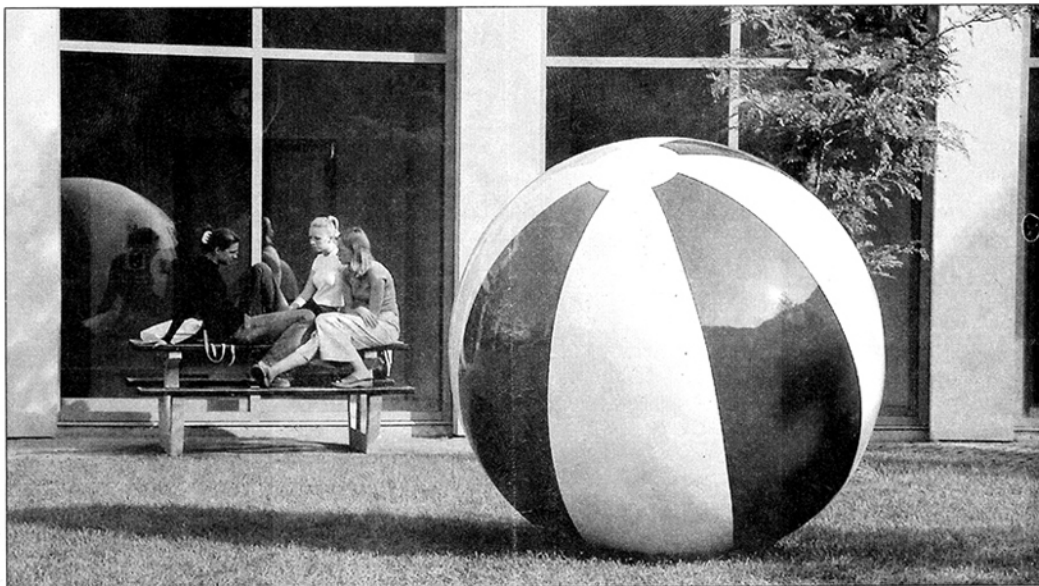
Fischer's current exhibition, *Newmodulr* (the title, Fischer says, evoking the compression of language you encounter in, say, novelty licence plates or computer-file names), is a classic example of why Blackwood is worth the schlep. Bringing together a group of artists working in Toronto and Vancouver, the exhibition both puts its finger on an emerging theme in contemporary art — our relationship to the prefab and to the promise of modernism that stands behind it — while also providing a forum for emerging art from both sides of the country in a simultaneous curatorial venture, an astonishingly rare event.

The artists approach their theme from a variety of vantage points, with the two sculptural installations in the centre of the gallery drawing the visitor's initial attention. The first of these, by Vancouver's Brian Jungen, once again reveals an artist reimagining found consumer objects drawn from the hardware store to express his relationship to the material world.

In earlier works, Jungen has re-fashioned Nike sneakers into Haida-style masks, often achieving ingenious transformations that hint at the transcendent aura the logo can confer. His later re-fashioning of plastic stacking outdoor chairs into a gigantic whale skeleton (exhibited at the Power Plant in Toronto this summer) was another tour de force. In both of these works, the banal is re-fashioned as the sublime through the artist's extraordinary ability to manipulate the formal qualities latent in everyday objects.

The work in this exhibition, titled *Isolated Depiction of a Passage of Time*, is about a different kind of visual surprise. Originally made for an exhibition two summers ago in the museum of Kingston Penitentiary (which is devoted to escape memorabilia such as jury-rigged weapons and cobbled-together decoy prison dummies), the installation consists of stacks of plastic lunch trays arranged in a square configuration but concealing, at their core, a TV set that emits a random hum of broadcast news. The piece commemorates the devious plot of an inmate who created a hollow in just such a palette of trays, hoping to conceal himself and escape.

The piece suffers from not being in its original context. In addition, its organizing principles are hard to figure out. The lunch trays, we



COURTESY CATRIONA JEFFRIES GALLERY, VANCOUVER  
**Brian Jungen's Isolated Depiction of a Passage of Time: stacks of plastic lunch trays concealing, at their core, a TV set that emits a random hum of broadcast news.**

**James Carl's outdoor sculpture in the Newmodulr show: Marvellously attuned to the scale of the space and the architectural surroundings.**

are told, refer to the number of first nations inmates incarcerated in this country for varying lengths of time, with the different colours signifying the duration of their sentences.

Although the schema of the work is almost perversely obscure, Jungen's overall point is hard to miss. The modular trays seem to embody the principle of conformity and regulation, a repressive sameness that Jungen overturns with more flamboyant gaiety in his work. And perhaps the work's evasiveness is the point: The artist conceals his organizing system from the viewer as the inmate hid himself from the authorities who sought to incarcerate him.

The other indoor installation in the show, by An Te Liu, emits a literal and figurative chill. The artist, who now teaches in the faculty of landscape and architecture at the University of Toronto, trained first as an architect, but has for several years been fashioning strangely sterile, miniaturized plazas in white plastic, punctuated by modernist buildings.

At first glance, his works look like architects' models, but a second look reveals that the buildings are in fact air conditioners and ionizers, all plugged in and running at full throttle, exhaling their cool breath into the gallery.

Another saddle-shaped element, which the artist acquired at a medical-supply store, suggests a kind of modernist pergola. Liu elegantly points to the legacy of design from the 1960s and 70s, which still provides the template for contemporary industrial production, permeating the built environment

at all levels, from the hardware store to the grand municipal plaza.

Architecture is also the theme of Damian Moppett's large-scale black and white photographs of homely architectural models. These depict classic-seeming modernist buildings — the Babich Arena with Ehrlich Amphitheatre, the Feinern Building, the Hendrick Kubel Monument, Century City and so on — but all of them exist only in the artist's fancy.

Like the other artists here, Moppett seems set on demystifying the austere modernism of the 20th century, asserting instead a funky subjectivity. These are decidedly, and intentionally, slovenly efforts, with the artist staging his crude cardboard towers and parkades against the gritty background of scruffy studio countertops, propped amid paint jars and buckets. Under one countertop, we see an overflowing garbage can, and in it the white plastic lid of a takeout latte, another prefab piece of contemporary modular flotsam.

Moppett is all about grunge, but Toronto's James Carl is just the opposite. With his now-classic series of sleek and painstakingly polished stone carvings from the mid-nineties, including a pink marble microphone, a polished obsidian video cassette and a jade CD disk, he plays with making slow objects for a fast world, honouring these slightly abstracted quotidian shapes with artisanal precision. The results are witty and tricky for the senses — plastic equals light; stone equals heavy.

If you're intrigued by this artist's sly simulations, be advised: This fall is something of a James Carl moment in Toronto. In addition to the work in the Blackwood Gallery show, his white marble incarnations of the classic white styrofoam take-out container is on show at Art Metropole. Mercer Union is also showcasing a range of newer works, including a suite of immaculately fabricated rice cookers made out of cut-up and reassembled corrugated plastic, and a new software font for the computer that renders the alphabet and various punctuation marks and numerical signs into idiosyncratic hieroglyphics, based on the shapes of common cleaning-product bottles and caps.

Carl's imagination probes every aspect of consumer culture, holding the things we make up for our closer inspection. The shiny black video cassette, for example, is presented as a sort of mini-monument, glossy and sleek as a mausoleum tablet. But while these smaller pieces have a funereal air, his large outdoor sculpture for this show — a giant beach ball made out of shiny painted fibreglass resting on the lawn in a nearby outdoor courtyard — strikes a more comic note.

The piece is beautifully set off by Nestor Kruger's red and black vinyl stripe appliques to the courtyard windows, which call to mind the boogie-woogie geometries of Mondrian or the classic compositions of de Stijl. Marvellously attuned to the scale of the space and the material of the architectural surroundings, it rests there in all its multicoloured splendour, evoking Constructivist utopias at the same time as it suggests some unseeable *Beach Blanket Bingo* of the gods, under way just out of sight.

Carl shares a sense of comic possibility with the other artists here. As Fischer says, "These artists are interested in taking account of the modern in a way that is different than postmodernism," adding, "Postmodernism was more of a reaction against modernism. But these artists are working inside it, finding out how one can live inside of the generic."

*Newmodulr continues at the Blackwood Gallery in Mississauga, Ont., until Oct. 20. For information call: 905-828-3789.*