

DAMAGE CONTROL

July 17 - August 23, 2003

Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art

Reviewed by Leela Viswanathan

Water and art were brought together this summer in Damage Control, a mini-exhibition of works by Paul Butler and Michel de Broin at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA) in Toronto. Displayed together, the works by Butler and de Broin reveal notions of water, waste, and whimsy. Curated by Camilla Singh, Damage Control is part of an Ontario-wide exhibition of water-related works of art.

Included in the show is a selection of Paul Butler's work from his Positive Mental Attitude series. The Winnipeg-based Butler's scenic landscapes are cut out of magazines and some are printed to sizes of nearly 24 by 36 inches. The images are collaged with mismatched paper, and some sections in each of the images are either masked by or patched up with duct tape. This is what curator Singh describes as the artist's rendering of "a Band-aid solution to larger, global, environmental water issues." The images consist of gorgeous and powerful crashing waves, rose-coloured sunsets beyond golden beaches, and river paths that could be taken by canoe. Each of the ten images in Butler's show is plastered with a different feel-good slogan that could easily be found in a popular song, advertisement, business headline, or tourism poster. For example, You Can Do Anything (2001) features the slogan of the image's title on a vista of what looks like Lake Louise in Alberta's Banff National Park.



Photos courtesy: Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art

COLLAPSING DIFFERENCE

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Reviewed by Carmen Victor

Live goldfish are suspended in plastic wrap along two walls, a box of lettuce trudges across the floor propelled by an elaborate system of pulleys, while a traveling speaker suspended above transmits artificial sounds of nature. Meanwhile, coloured gels gently illuminate a wall, and clear sheets of strategically perforated plastic indicate the entrance and exit of the installation. Upon closer examination, familiar objects such as paperclips and tape are used to hold things together, while ink casually marks the edges of the polyethylene plastic suspended above. This is a sculptural interpretation of Marx's lumpen-proletariat: a box of lettuce wanders diagonally across the floor and goldfish are added as an afterthought. United, these elements form Noel Harding's 'scenic events on a path of upheaval'.

Harding's lettuce functions as a parasitic entity that exists only because of the structure erected

around it. It shuttles back and forth across the gallery floor with seeming purpose, serenaded by sound from the speaker above. Yet the viewer is left with a lingering sense of futility that oscillates between two poles. The lettuce is reminiscent of Sisyphus, forever bearing its load up and back. As one of Harding's unusual recruits in this installation, lettuce becomes both a focal point and an absurd novelty in a serene tableau.

The presence of goldfish suggests meaningful historical, mythological and geographical references, but they are also cold-blooded, passionless and seemingly emotionless beings. They present the viewer with contradiction; they are zen-like to look upon, yet when the details of their maintenance are investigated, their dirtiness is exposed. In 'scenic events', goldfish function as both mute decoration and enablers of brief visual pleasure.

Harding has produced a monument of abstraction, whose components incite the problem of explanation. Though there are elements in this installation that incorporate architecture and elements of sculpture, as a whole it defies both. A clue lies in the title, which suggests both the

Butler's images could easily translate into patched-up vacation posters beckoning consumers to steal themselves away to places where the sun, sea, and sky intersect. With the slogans advocating positive thinking (like crude parodies of motivational posters found in corporate offices), these are images of places where visual therapies meet political platitudes and promises of solutions. If only we think positively, Butler sardonically suggests, our concerns about dying landscapes, declining natural resources, water shortages, and toxic drinking water might go away; so, let us address our collective depression caused by environmental degradation with peppy, pretty pictures. As noted in the exhibition's press release, Butler describes this work as "basically a visual prozac."

With these palliative notions in mind, the viewer is also presented with Blue Monochrome (2003), Montreal-based Michel de Broin's work which juxtaposes the waste of 'hyperclean' water with garbage disposal. This sculptural work is essentially a Jacuzzi installed in a mid-sized, beaten-up, rusty garbage dumpster that is pumped with industrial-strength chlorinated water. The work provokes thoughts about societal attitudes regarding the disposability, cleanliness, and recreational use of water. Accompanying this installation piece is de Broin's 'A Study in Blue Monochrome', eight Ink Jet prints (each approx. 9 by 12 inches) of dumpsters and boxes. The artist uses white oil paint to mask certain parts of dumpsters in these images. While these prints have a less powerful impact than de Broin's sculptural installation, the stamped ownership titles evident on some of the dumpsters also reinforce both private and public responsibility for garbage disposal and public waste.

actual journey undertaken by the lettuce traversing the gallery and the metaphoric trajectory of the history of post-industrialised western culture. Some critics have claimed that this installation has contemporary political overtones, offering an ambiguous commentary on the condition of 'war'. However, in the absence of direct reference to such a calamitous situation it is a troubling assumption, as time frame alone should not be the sole common thread through which the work is interpreted.

This installation can be interpreted as a structured mechanical exercise in technical manipulation. In addition to lettuce and goldfish, the simulated sounds of birds and the unobscured use of theatrical apparatus reveal a plan, wherein the mechanics are on full display. While the alchemy of the situation is laid bare, no one except Harding can know definitively what meaning these combined elements will produce. Harding thus reveals the means, but gracefully disguises the meaning of the set of problems to be solved. In 'scenic events', the eclectic combination of these common elements work together to collapse difference within the constellation of sculpture.