

Ryan Barrett

Virginia MacDonnell Eichhorn

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VIRGINIA MACDONNELL EICHHORN

Ryan Barrett (aka ryanbarrett, aka "The Mousetrap Guy") has found fame and infamy in the last two years as Toronto's notorious guerrilla artist. His signature motif — the humble mousetrap — has found its way onto canvases, baby carriages, television sets, and even one of Mel Lastman's beloved moose. While Barrett's work is primarily sculptural, the artist considers his method painterly and cites surrealist Cy Twombly and conceptualist Yves Klein as two of his most important influences.

Barrett began using the mousetraps in his sculptures five years ago while living in Montana. He was intrigued by their shape and design, yet didn't quite know how he would incorporate them into his art. Additionally, he liked the multiplicity of ideas and metaphors that mousetraps could embody. His early explorations of the mousetrap were small paintings, with the traps affixed to the canvas and then covered with tar. He would work with the traps set and periodically they would go off on their own, thereby changing the composition. Barrett decided to build upon the tension that was inherent in these works, eventually creating large paintings with hundreds of the traps.

His 1998 exhibition at the Zinc Gallery (Toronto) was his first "mousetrap" show. The works on view included several of the paintings and a mattress covered with mousetraps painted white. Here the trap-covered mattress reveals myriad symbolic readings, as mattresses are traditionally the place for sex, love, birth, death, and sleep. It can be a place of violence or passion, a site for tenderness or terror, a vehicle for new beginnings or a place of confinement. As with

Rachel Whiteread's bed, this place offers no comfort. The viewer is deliberately made to feel uncomfortable and is warned away. There is no safe place to rest. Further, the random "snap" of the traps as they went off was startling, adding to the tense feel of the work. Barrett subverts the viewer's traditional associations by deliberately transforming the mattress into something unusable and dangerous.

Barrett also became very interested in creating work outside the gallery context. He wanted feedback and responses from the general public and, in 1999, began his independent public art projects. The first was Teaching the Public New Tricks. Here the artist created "sandwich boards" which he then placed at various locations throughout downtown Toronto. His boards were interspersed among "legitimate" advertisements that offered everything from condominium promotions to fabric sales. Barrett's boards contained excerpts from a booklet that described tricks "sea monkeys" could do. These "sea monkeys"

were of the kind offered for sale in the back of comic books that most of us read as kids or teens. There was nothing else on the board, save for a telephone number that connected to an answering machine that gave more information on these sea monkeys and the tricks they could do.

Public response to Barrett's interventions was very positive. People found it funny, intriguing, and very entertaining. Despite this success, however, he hesitated to do a second "street" project. Barrett received a great deal of negative reaction from people within the visual arts community. Other artists confronted him at openings; one even called the city to complain and ask them to remove the sandwich boards. Barrett feels that some artists misinterpreted the project as a blatant and distasteful act of self-promotion, missing the fact that he had oriented it entirely toward the non-gallery-going public, not to other members of the arts community.

Barrett's Media Trap project evolved out of his public art pro-

jects. It consisted of a two-week gallery exhibition followed by an outdoor installation. The artist got a tremendous satisfaction from producing art for the public domain and decided that it was time to take it a step further. In particular, he was interested in exploring the workings of the media, its effects on artists and on the works they make. To get media coverage, he deliberately promoted Media Trap as provocative work. And the media responded; Barrett garnered reviews in five of the eight Toronto papers — a real achievement for an independent artist. The works in the gallery exhibition consisted of three distinct but related components: newspaper boxes, radios and television sets, and bibles covered with the mousetraps and then painted. While each worked well and was complete on its own, a significant relationship existed between these diverse elements, which allowed the artist to fully develop his theme.

The TVs and radios were functional, in that one could turn them on. However, one could not



RYAN BARRETT, Media Trap—Queen West. Toronto Public Installation, 2001. Set mouse-traps, construction adhesive, acrylic, plaster of Paris, polyurethane on a newspaper box. Variable dimensions. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

change the station, nor change the volume level. One's experience of the device was dictated a priori by the artist; he transformed these devices into subtle metaphors, reminding us that the news we receive is mediated by someone else, whether by corporate or editorial mandate. In no way is the information constantly disseminated to the public ever entirely objective. Ergo, one arrives at one's perception of events and occurrences through the mediation of other viewpoints.

The bibles form a particularly subtle and effective work. The fact that they are bibles — not just books — is significant. Here, Barrett goes furthest away from a purely formalistic treatment of objects, really working with them on affective, aesthetic, and intellectual levels. For while the TVs and radios could still be turned on and the newspaper boxes still functioned, the bibles remained completely inaccessible. Tantalizingly, some of them were placed such that their pages opened slightly, yet the heavy paint and plaster covering utterly obscured the writing. There was no way to open the books further, nor to close them. The tension of attraction and repulsion, evident in many of Barrett's other works, seemed to be exceptionally developed here, perhaps due to the greater elusiveness of this piece. The bibles were painted in bright, shiny candy colours. Rough edges of the mousetraps were almost fully hidden by the thick application of the paint and plaster, resulting in enticing bumps and ridges, masking the potential dangers hidden beneath. Appearing less threatening than most of the mousetrap-covered works, the resulting small sculptures demanded to be picked up, held, and leafed through. They invariably frustrate the viewer, however, as one simply cannot get to the contents of the jewel-coated, candy-coloured objects. In these pieces, perhaps due to their small hand-held size, rather than merely commenting on how society can be trapped by religious orthodoxy or dogma, Barrett is offering a reminder that rigid states of mind and morality can affect people on

individual levels. We often embrace and espouse these personal prejudices without being aware that we are doing so.

The newspaper boxes that made up the third element of *Media Trap* were incredibly time-consuming to create. First, Barrett "liberated" newspaper boxes (one for each newspaper) and then covered them with mousetraps. He then repainted them to match their original colours and design. Barrett then went one further, going out each morning, buying a number of the newspapers to refill his boxes while they were in the gallery and as they were replaced on the streets. He didn't intend to sell these works; rather, he meant to give something back to the city — art instead of mere utilitarianism. However, some newspaper publishers did not see his interaction with their boxes as an improvement. The *Toronto Star* was going to take Barrett to court for theft and vandalism, but they dropped the charges when the works started getting reviews. Another morning, while stocking the boxes with papers, Barrett encountered a man claiming to be the editor of *The National Post*. The man lambasted Barrett for the defacement of the newspaper box, got on his cell phone and called to have the box picked up. Barrett tried to explain the project to him and even pointed out that *The Post* had written an article about him. But the man ignored Barrett, choosing instead to purchase and read a copy of *The Toronto Sun*. Several minutes later a truck arrived, uploaded *The National Post* newspaper box, then both the man and the truck went off. Over time, two other boxes were stolen and, sadly, the street installation is now incomplete. Finally, Barrett took the boxes back to his studio for safekeeping.

Yet all these interactions became part of the process of the *Media Trap* installation. It was the unscheduled and unforeseen responses to the works that intrigued and motivated Barrett. Everything about them was designed to provoke reactions and to get people talking and thinking about his



work. In this, he was incredibly successful. He designed the invites and posters to be deliberately provocative, playing off the idea of sensationalism, of sex selling something. They depicted photographically a certain part of the male anatomy caught in a mousetrap. Some were offended, some horrified, and others got the joke.

Barrett's *Media Trap* was a great example of cutting-edge and exciting public art. It was a refreshing antidote to the insipid

moose project foisted on the city by its (fortunately) inimitable mayor over the previous summer.

Young, soft-spoken, and thoughtful, Barrett's provocativeness enhances the complexity of his ideas and the rigorosity of his artmaking. While indisputably confrontational and intense, his works betray no gratuitousness — a fine and difficult line to walk as an artist, yet one that he has proven himself more than capable of handling successfully. ←

RYAN BARRETT, *Media Trap—The Toronto Star*, 2001. Set mousetraps, construction adhesive, acrylic, plaster of Paris, polyurethane on a newspaper box. 129 cm x 98 cm x 49 cm. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.