

Panya Clark Espinal *The Visitor*

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Number 65, Fall 2003

La conquête de l'espace
The Conquest of Space

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9102ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McElroy, G. (2003). Review of [Panya Clark Espinal: *The Visitor*]. *Espace Sculpture*, (65), 43–43.

Panya Clark Espinal

The Visitor

GIL McELROY

Collecting antiques is easily one of the more obvious and object-oriented means by which we ostensibly attempt to forge meaningful connections to the past.

Trouble is, these objects of days gone by — pieces of furniture, and those utilitarian things that have suffered obsolescence and so been reduced to the role of cute collectibles intended to accessorize a home decor — are typically so completely denuded of the grim and grimy realities of that past as to make them virtually unrecognizable. To risk mixing a few metaphors, we want the lovely patina of “simpler times,” but would really prefer to do without the baggage they bring along, laden as they are with all of the more distasteful truths of the past (institutionalized forms of racism, gross social and economic disparities and inequalities, etc.). We like our nostalgia to be of the pretend kind, where the real stuff of the world has been forbidden an historical foothold.

Enter Panya Clark Espinal, the Ontario-based sculptor whose exhibition *The Visitor* (organized and circulated by Oakville Galleries) has been touring about of late, offering, among other things, an alternative take on the meaning and place of nostalgia and sentiment for the past. Clark Espinal accomplishes this task through the use of period artifacts — pieces of furniture and those once-utilitarian things — into which she inserts intrusive and jarringly discordant sculptural elements of an entirely unrelated aesthetic period. In asking if our sentimental feelings for, say, pioneer butter churns also might encompass objects of, say, a twentieth century minimalist bent, Clark Espinal’s work gives a pertinent and poetic lesson in the construction of metaphor.

Paul Ricoeur has argued that metaphor is produced through a process of “deviant predication,” in which new meaning “emerges from the collapse of [...] the meaning which obtains if we rely only on the common or usual value of our words.” Ricoeur may have been talking about language, but his ideas have relevant application to the matter at hand. I give you, by

way of example, Clark Espinal’s *Diva* (1999-2000). Comprised of a fairly large, free-standing wooden cupboard, perhaps of nineteenth-century lineage, with two long doors that latch closed in the middle, it’s not a thing of elaborate design. Constructed of simple wooden boards now battered and nicked by usage and the passage of time, the only real aesthetic concession it makes is in the form of ornamentation found on the two metal latches that hold the doors shut, both mass-produced, off-the-shelf items stamped with a pattern design.

But it is the interior of this cupboard that really concerns us, for rather than encountering there a set of simple wooden shelves in keeping with the rest of the cupboard and the void of a storage area ready to receive clothing, dishes, dry goods or what-have-you, we instead meet up with Clark Espinal’s radical reworking of this plain and simple articulation of space. We meet up with modernism. We meet up with Donald Judd.

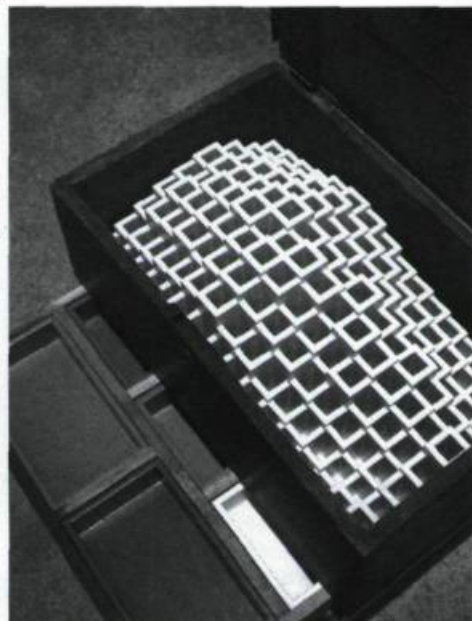
Not literally, of course. But as our critical context here concerns the making of metaphor, it is an apt evocation. What is established by Clark Espinal within the confines of the cupboard is an articulation of the modernist grid and a very distinct echo of the minimalist aesthetic that is perhaps best epitomized in the sculptural work of Judd. In literal terms, *Diva* is made up of a series of variously sized rectangular and square painted wood compartments — cubbyholes, of a kind — set into and arranged along the three-and-a-half shelves of the cupboard in a graceful concave arc. Indeed, at the most flattened and literal level possible, this grid of compartments might legitimately be regarded and employed as storage space, just as utilitarian in nature as the cupboard that contains them was originally intended to be. But the very newness and neatness of Clark Espinal’s painted sculptural inserts, in contrast to their scuffed-up container, and their very geometry and design, distinctly at odds with the meager simplicity of the cupboard’s shelves, ensures that a literalistic interpretation simply won’t hold up. A twentieth-century aesthetic has most assuredly intruded.

Clark Espinal’s agenda of sculptural metaphor-making encompasses artifacts that range from a wooden hat box (*Witness*, a work that consists of a box into whose round interior she has inserted two painted wooden rings, each divided, spoke-like, into individual compartments), to an old suitcase (*The Visitor*, the interior of which opens to reveal a flat wooden surface regularly pocked with a grid of tubular depressions that are themselves punctuated at the bottom by a symmetrical arrangement of smaller holes), to a baker’s trunk (*Hedonist*, the battered wooden interior of which contains a series of wooden, tray-like structures based on a repeated pattern of squares that slide laterally within the confines of the suitcase and which themselves incorporate miniature sliding drawings).

The work comprising the exhibition spans a period going back as far as 1998 (*Witness*, for example). Over the course of its tour, new pieces have been added, including *Facilitator* (2003), which, in its original incarnation, had been a butter bucket, an artifact with a narrowly circumscribed function of undoubted usefulness once, but that had long since been transformed into an antique, a conversation piece for someone’s home — until Clark Espinal chose it as the subject of an aesthetic incursion. So this metal pail, with its handle, separate lid, and useful interior void, has been transfigured within by sets of nested rings of painted wood rising conically in expanding bands from the bottom of the pail to its top. Something oddly, wonderfully, and accidentally architectural occurs here, a metaphor in miniature, an evocation, perhaps, of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum in New York City, or Dante’s vision of the circles of Hell in his poem *The Divine Comedy*.

From a butter bucket, it seems, very good things may come. Even if only unintentionally. ←

Panya Clark Espinal: *The Visitor*
Art Gallery of Peterborough,
Peterborough, Ontario
February 21–April 6, 2003



PANYA CLARK ESPINAL, *Thief*, 2003. Wooden chest, wood, latex paint. 26 x 28.6 x 47.6 cm. diameter. Photo: Isaac Applebaum.



PANYA CLARK ESPINAL, *The Facilitator*, 2003. Metal butter bucket, wood, latex paint. 19.3 x 17.2 cm. Diameter. Photo: Isaac Applebaum.