

Light Conditions

Rebecca Belmore, Michael Belmore and Brian Jungen

Gil McElroy

Numéro 67, printemps 2004

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9024ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (imprimé)

1923-2551 (numérique)

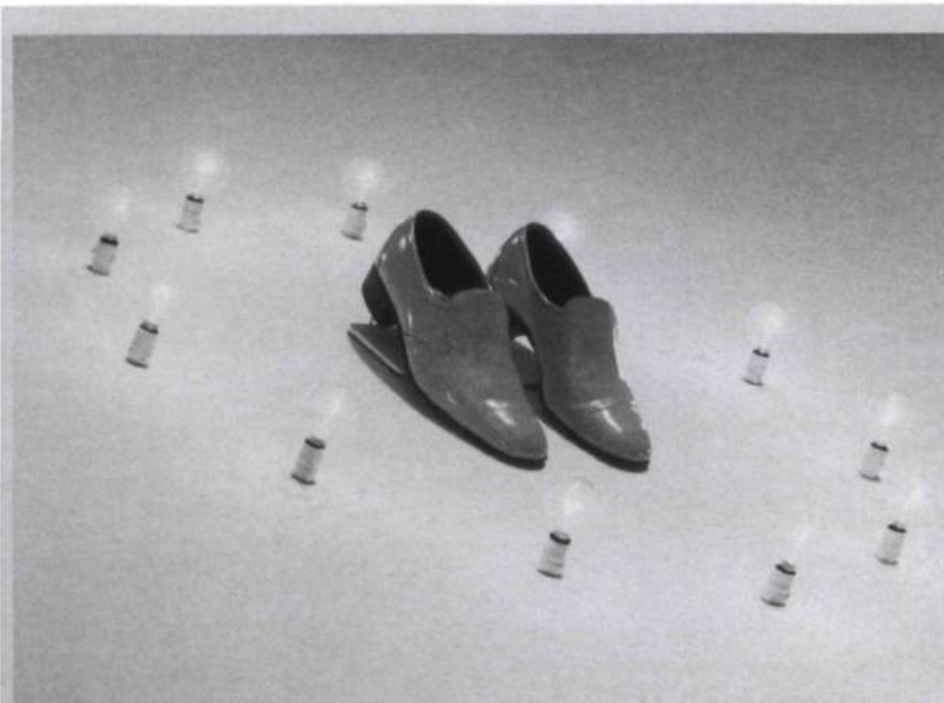
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Citer ce document

McElroy, G. (2004). Light Conditions: Rebecca Belmore, Michael Belmore and Brian Jungen. *Espace Sculpture*, (67), 41–41.

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GIL MCELROY



REBECCA BELMORE, *Mister Luna*, 2001. Vanity lights, shoes. 80.0 cm diameter. Photo: Michael Beynon.

This past fall, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre of Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, chose to highlight additions to its collection with a showing of recent acquisitions of contemporary work by First Nations artists. With the exhibition *Light Conditions*, Jan Allen curatorially gathered together four separate works by Rebecca Belmore, Michael Belmore, and Brian Jungen in which light factors as a primary component.

Rebecca Belmore's *Mister Luna* (2001) is a wall (and floor) mounted sculptural installation essentially comprised of a set of lights and lighting fixtures — basically bathroom or dressing room vanity lights one might typically find set around a mirror —, and a pair of shoes. In this particular incarnation of the piece, the wall-mounted lights were arranged in a graceful half-circle that arced beneath a similarly wall-mounted pair of garish yellow shoes — shiny leather men's slip-ons that, judging by the style, colour, and size of the heel, date from the 1970s. The cords for the lights dropped down onto the floor into an untidy pile of extension cords over

top of which were scattered four large feathers. According to the exhibition notes, *Mister Luna* is a homage to performance artist James Luna. Even without knowing the particulars of Belmore's intent, theatrical associations evoked by the choice of materials make a reading of the piece obviously point to the performative. But there is spacious aesthetic amplitude to the work, making possible a poetic transcendence of Belmore's intention.

Her second work here, however, is another matter entirely. *Black Cloud* (2001) consists of a short, twisted, corkscrew-like piece of wood that has been scorched almost to the point of charcoal and from which protrude nails of varying sizes arrayed in careful patterns along its length. No surface has been left unnailed, barring the ends with which the work is affixed to a framework and onto the wall. Salt apparently figures prominently in *Black Cloud*; a mound of the stuff sat on the floor, onto which the studded wood cast its shadow, contrasting with the reflective and refractive quality of the substance. However, as shown here, the salt was missing, and noted so with a label affixed to the gallery wall explaining that this wall-mounted version of Belmore's piece did not include the element. Possible readings of this version of the work were therefore deformed and even deflected by this official notation of absence and aesthetic incompleteness.

Michael Belmore's *Immune* (1996) was the oldest piece shown here. The work consists of a solid, roughly rectangular block of Lucite held in a steel framework and base by knurled screws at both ends. The word "IMMUNE" is etched into the flat top surface of the Lucite, but the work's antiseptic and cold remoteness is mitigated only

along the bottom of the block, where the surface has been unevenly eroded. It is almost topographic in its variability; seen in profile, it resembles the contour of a hilly landscape rising upward and making a negative indentation into the technologically clean and precise dimensions of the artefactual Lucite.

Geography indeed has a place in Belmore's aesthetic, for the eroded Lucite surface is mapped with the impressed pattern of a wampum bead-belt, an aboriginal artefact recording formal agreements, many having to do with land. Viewing the work from directly above binds the semantic weight of Belmore's titular text into an inescapably gravitational relationship with the politically and socially inscribed Lucite landscape below. Ironic, angry, matter of fact — there is room enough for all.

Brian Jungen made headlines in 2002 as the inaugural winner of the Sobey Art Award, but he had established himself well before that as an up-and-comer. His inspired use of common household materials gave voice to an aesthetic shaped in large part by his First Nations background. The problem here, however, is that the example of Jungen's work in the Agnes Etherington Collection — a piece entitled *Mise en scène* (2000) — is flat and devoid of the representational

MICHAEL BELMORE, *Immune*, 1996. Engraved Lucite. 7.5 x 32.8 x 7.4 cm. Photo: Bernard Clark.

