

## Ted Rettig, Voices and Spaces New Sculpture, Installations & Multiples

John K. Grande

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# Ted Rettig *Voices and Spaces*

New Sculpture,  
Installations & Multiples

John K. Grande

Wynick / Tuck Gallery, Toronto  
September 12–October 17



Ted Rettig, *Insatiable simultaneity in two parts*, 1991 (detail). Mixed media installation. Photo: Wynick Tuck Gallery, Toronto.

No human eye has ever seen the dark side of the moon, yet photographs of it have existed for over 35 years. While science examines the "purpose" of natural phenomena through objective criteria, the universe remains a profound mystery. *Voices and Spaces*, Ted Rettig's solo show at Wynick / Tuck Gallery in Toronto suggests human consciousness is also a mystery whose evolutionary quirks of character cannot be explained by technology alone.

Looking like a *fin-de-siècle* Zen campground littered with domestic artifacts from the modern age and fragments of nature, the installations and mixed media works in *Voices and Spaces* play with the object-assemblage idiom and sculpture technique with all the wit and revelatory candour of a Zen Master embarked on a two-fold mission: to relieve Western aesthetics of its materialistic bias based on our Judeo-Christian traditions of individualism, and to create a reflective state of beingness, an altered state of awareness in time and space. As such, Rettig's works represent epistemological breaks or gaps, moments of spiritual revelation when shifts in consciousness take place and life springs forward in a burst of freedom; intense introspection which can make ordinary reality seem not so ordinary.

A broad spiritual awareness is actually antithetical to the principles of causality that characterize our Western historical traditions in science and art. Götthold Lessing's *Laocoön*, written in 1766, set the standard for normative criticism which evolved into 20<sup>th</sup> century formalism by categorizing artistic expression and creating selective aesthetic criteria by which art could be judged. Lessing defined sculpture as a medium concerned with the deployment of bodies in space while the depiction of actions in time is natural to the medium of poetry.<sup>1</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Umberto Boccioni's bronze sculpture titled *Development of a Bottle in*

*Space* (1912) presented the simultaneous reality of time and space by showing visible and invisible views of a bottle from a frontal perspective. In Rettig's works, we feel both the stillness of space and the motion of time, two levels of human sensory perception, as though causality no longer existed, had de-condensed, expanded onto another plane of consciousness.

In *Cave* (1992), a mid-air mobile waves back and forth lugubriously, spurred on by the silent drafts of air that enter the gallery from a partially open window looking out on a rooftop view of the city. One of its appendages, a thermal space blanket (a human survival tool created by advanced technology) hangs like a post-industrial pennant, its reflective silver surfaces crinkling in the breeze... wavering light reflects off its sides. A Radio Shack style calculator, Rettig's ironic tribute to the 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematician and physicist Blaise Pascal, who invented a calculator before entering the convent of Port Royal in France, and a folksy carved wooden ladle, both in a state of airborne suspension, create unsolvable riddles: they are practical objects that represent the way we see nature, yet they are also mementoes to the feudal origins and the present-day legacy of the age of empiricism.

In *To Have or To Be?*, Erich Fromm states that having and being are fundamentally different modes of experience whose respective strengths determine the differences between the character of individuals and various types of social character.<sup>2</sup> The need to have is acquisitive: empirical by nature. The belief value system of modern-day consumer society suggests that if one has nothing, one is nothing. The world's great religious luminaries, Buddha and Jesus Christ included, believed that to arrive at the highest stage of human development, one must not crave possessions.

Rettig's *Canadian Tree* (1992), a recycled



Christmas tree whose branches and outer bark he has removed, leans against a gallery wall. The four gold-plated coat hangers inset around its sides at eye level are as much a comment on our materialist dilemma as the tree is on contemporary Christianity's absolute rift with humanity's relation to nature. *Adrift with a certain density of aspirations* (1991) occupies one side of the gallery. There is a foam mattress and a pillow case beneath which one can read the title of a book, "The Miracle of Mindfulness." A carved stone has a plant projecting out of it that turns out to be plastic. A rickety artist's easel is simply made of the limbs of a tree tied together. On a four-tier

metal shelf sit utilitarian objects: a mirror, a 50's style clock, a sponge, cups, two metal jugs whose openings turn into each other and an "Atlas of Facial Expressions" supported by 2 metal scoops that act as book ends. The architecture of material design supports the ethereal knowledge represented by the cover of this book-object. Placed in a state of disorder, these ordinary objects appear extraordinary because Rettig presents his empirical attitude to experience in an intuitive, altogether unconscious way. The state of spiritual awareness represented is one in which natural and man-made objects and materials have no logical or rational purpose. They become the Space



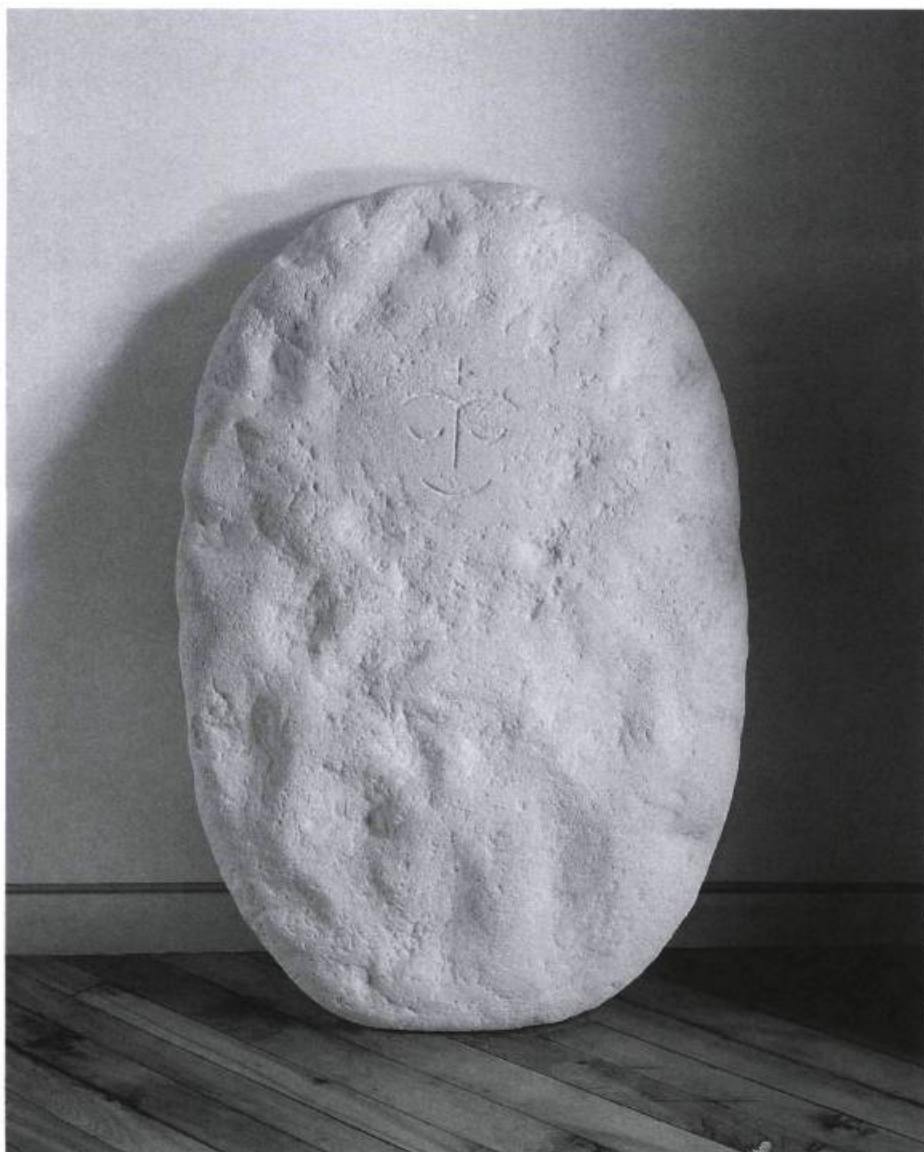
Age artifacts of an age of spiritual impoverishment connected by their metaphysical condition, the artist's creative unconscious.

In an earlier show of white stone works titled *New Sculpture and Drawings* in 1984, Rettig presented limestone carvings, whose incised design motifs were minimal in spirit, spiritual in their minimalism, a meeting place between Asian and Occidental traditions in art. In *Contemplative* (1984), a 3 foot high vertical floor piece, the linear motifs Rettig has incised into the rock form the image of a human face with a "+" sign above it. The imposing limestone and Rettig's minimalist intervention suggest a human presence within nature, as much a physical or biological energy as an idea governed by our experiential attitude to space and time. The cultural coding of perception is a conditioned state of mind. Coming from a land where Buddhism and other religious disciplines have militated against the individual act of art, India's artists now incorporate Western beliefs in the individual act of art. Artists who traditionally worked to reproduce exact copies of ancient Hindu motifs now merge their own timeless traditions with the acquisitive, Western attitude to materials and the material world. Tyeb Mehta, a member of the Bombay Progressives, speaking about the group's first conscious break with Asian traditions, states "It took courage, at that time, to pick up a brush, to make a mark on a canvas."<sup>3</sup>

In Rettig's own words, "It is through slow personal growth and effort that the symbolic dimension of a religious tradition becomes transparent. This practice is a mode of being, chosen over and over again, where one deals with reality in simple, direct awareness. Time is not compressed or accelerated, as is a media-formed perception of time. It is slow paced and open for reflective being. The ordinary is

Ted Rettig, *Adrift with a certain density of aspirations*, 1991. Mixed media installation. Photo: Wynick Tuck Gallery, Toronto.

Ted Rettig, *The Cave*, 1992. Mixed media. 236,22 x 132,08 x 114,3 cm. Photo: Wynick Tuck Gallery, Toronto.



not a source of overwhelming banality and boredom, though these qualities do arise, it is the place of real encounter with the self and other, nature and mystery."<sup>4</sup> ◆

- 1 Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), p. 3.
- 2 Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be ?*, (Harper & Row; San Francisco, 1976), pp. 16-17.
- 3 Thomas McEvilly, *Art & Otherness : Crisis in Cultural Identity*, (Kingston, N.Y.; McPherson & Co., 1992), p.117.
- 4 Ted Rettig, *The Symbolic Dimension and Awareness in Mass Media, Religious Experience and the Fine Arts*, a paper presented at the University Art Association of Canada Conference, Ottawa, Nov. 1985, p. 5.

Ted Rettig, *Contemplative*, 1984.  
Limestone. 93,98 x 60,96 x 22,86 cm.  
Photo: T.E. Moore for Wynick Tuck Gallery.

**Semblable à un habitat zen "fin de siècle", jonché d'artefacts de l'époque moderne, l'exposition *Voices and Spaces* de Ted Rettig est une tentative, en double volet, de libérer l'esthétique occidentale de ses préjugés matérialistes et d'engendrer un état existentiel réflexif. Depuis le *Laocoon* de Göttfried Lessing (1766), des modèles pour une critique normative ont défini des catégories pour les diverses disciplines artistiques.**

**L'exposition présente simultanément deux niveaux de perception sensorielle : la quiétude de l'espace et la mouvance du temps. L'auteur amène une distinction entre deux modes d'expérimentation : le besoin d'avoir et le besoin d'être. En analysant l'oeuvre, il compare l'art contemporain hindou du groupe Bombay Progressive qui englobe les traditions millénaires de l'Asie et l'attitude mercantile de l'occident face au monde matériel. Avec *Voices and Spaces* nous pouvons saisir l'approche d'un artiste occidental qui a recours à la notion de simultanéité. Il en ressort que la réalité n'est pas aussi simple qu'elle n'y paraît et qu'elle laisse entrevoir un autre niveau existentiel.**