

Adrienne Trent Chaos Controlled

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Adrienne Trent

Chaos Controlled

Bertolt Brecht's play, *The Life of Galileo*, was written as a metaphor for the responsibilities of the scientists who developed the atomic bomb. In this work, Galileo cannot understand why others are not as happy as he is to discover that the world orbits the sun, rather than the other way around. While it has far-reaching ramifications for the theology of the Catholic Church, it is a discussion with a young priest which has the most poignancy and memorability.

In it, the young priest explains to Galileo that with his discovery he has also taken away hope from people such as his parents — poor simple farmers — who are able to deal with their difficult daily existence with the promise that they have something to look forward to in their next life. Galileo's discovery has taken away that potential. Their suffering and difficulties now seem pointless. In revealing his "great" discovery, Galileo neglects to understand and be responsible for the full consequences of this new knowledge. Brecht asserts that the scientists who discovered how to split the atom should bear the responsibility for the subsequent creation of the atom bomb and the destruction that it creates. In short, one must be aware of the bad that can come from the good.

In the same way, in her artwork, Adrienne Trent has often explored concerns for responsibility and consequences of creation and knowledge. Rather than using a grandiose metaphor however, Trent develops her ideas by referencing what is ordinary and seemingly every-day. In developing this theme, she uses images of banal or commonplace scenes and items, which are then contrasted with other frightening images: cancer cells, aids virus, cyclones. She often synthesizes the imagery together into one, rather than separating them into two distinct images. By doing so, she encourages the viewer to be associative in



the reading of her work. Something that might seem innocuous in one respect, takes on a threatening and malevolent impact when placed within a new context. The consequence of familiar or conventional actions or behaviours can be seen to have potentially frightening or devastating ramifications. Individual actions can result in great tragedies. For Trent, the unknown and the potential for chaos and the destruction of "order" are never very far away.

Trent's compositions frequently include juxtapositions of imagery culled from disparate sources, including biology (cancer cells), the natural world (tornadoes, tidal waves), and scenes of domesticity (wedding dresses, dinner settings, bedrooms). In doing so, her work explores the relationship between personal/bodily disorder and technological innovations in the scientific world. In particular, Trent's work frequently questions and responds to the after-effects of mankind's ongoing quest to prolong and improve life. She posits that this quest frequently results in unforeseen and dangerous consequences. In the after effects of

these discoveries, who bears the responsibility for the outcomes? Essentially, while we might know how to do something — clone a sheep, grow "spare" body parts, slow down aging — we don't necessarily understand the full ramifications. These macrocosmic concerns are often presented in a familiar context, sometimes lending to commonplace items or environments a frightening, surreal aspect.

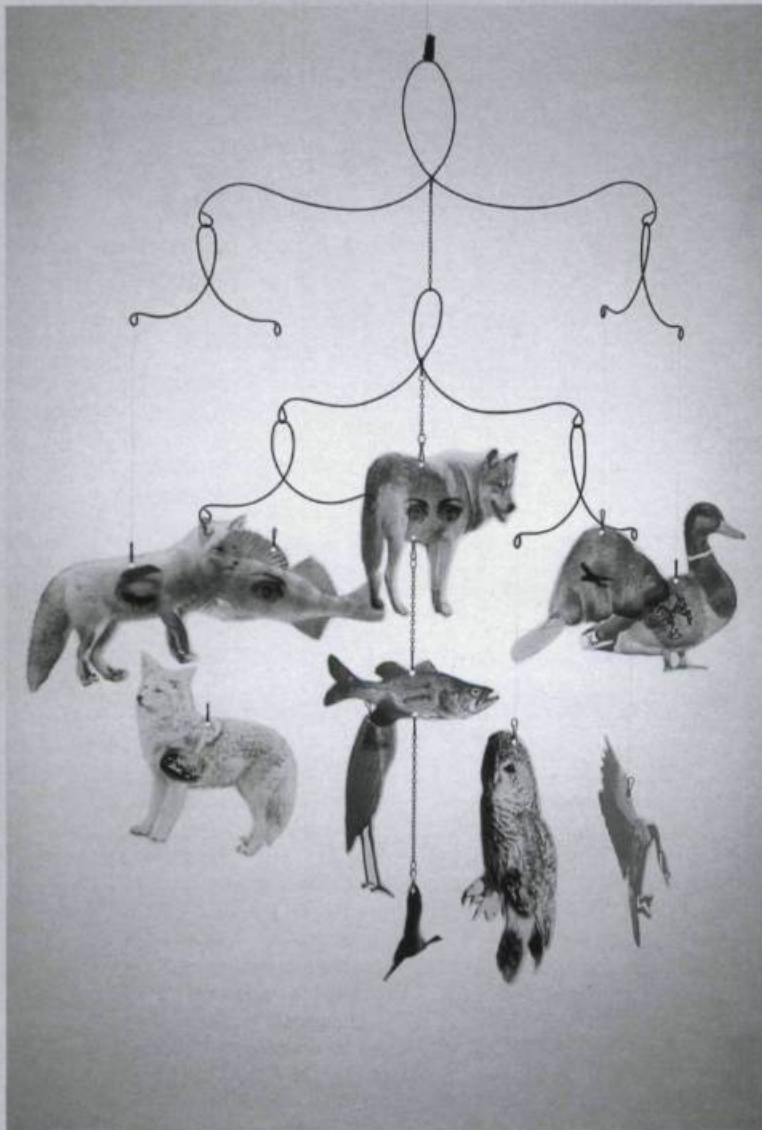
In *The Raw and The Risen* (1993), Trent created a kitchen scene fit for a 1950s horror movie. In this abandoned and soon-to-be-demolished house, Trent took over the kitchen. Pushing out from cupboard drawers, slipping through the cracks in the ceiling, bulbous organic shapes threaten to take over the entire site. "Home" is the place where one is supposed to be safe. The mutated kitchen, with its protruding virus/mold organisms, threatens to take over, thereby contaminating the entire house. What was once safe, no longer is. And these shapes cannot be pushed back, nor can one shut the drawers safely — once these viral contaminations are liberated there is no way of containing them. The house

has been abandoned to their slow and determined conquest. There is no turning back.

Re:Bound (1994) is a bizarre creation consisting of a wedding dress balanced precariously atop an amorphous and bulging cell-growth. The dress train is covered with the cell-pattern and is attached to a stretcher used to rescue people from hilly terrain. The absurdity of the sculpture makes it appear innocuous initially; it has a darker nature, however. The symbolism of the bridal gown references both innocence and new beginnings. It also represents the time when two people's lives are "joined together" and where "no one is to come between them." Underneath, however, the sinister growth and the bride's trailing of the stretcher behind her hints that all is not as it seems. In this work, Trent warns of the dangers of naive expectations. The "bride" is undoubtedly in a threatened position — precariously perched and ready to topple. The stretcher is ready to receive her — whether it will save her or not remains to be seen.

A 1997 installation by Trent was

ADRIENNE TRENT,
The Raw and the Risen, 1993. Mixed media installation. 619.7 x 619.7 x 335.2 cm. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



ADRIENNE TRENT, *Untitled*, 2002. Galvanized wire, colour laser on acetate. 121.9 x 76.2 x 76.2 cm. Photo: Dean Goodwin. XL The Lab, Toronto.

covered with another of her painted amorphous cell blotches. Titled *Diphtheria*, the work seems to be lunging, moving, as the two components seemingly struggle against one another. Years ago, diphtheria was a widespread and greatly feared disease. Through the 1920s it struck about 150,000 people a year, and killed about 15,000 of them. Caused by a germ that lives in the mouth, throat, and nose of an infected person, diphtheria is easily passed to others through coughing or sneezing and may produce a powerful poison that can spread throughout the body

causing serious complications such as heart failure or paralysis. Frequently, diphtheria would spread through and virtually decimate an entire family. Trent's valiant carpet, which is suffocating beneath the insidious sticky cloth, evokes the families who were choked and ravaged by the disease.

Spin Cycle (1999) is a part of a body of Trent's work known as the "Natural Disaster" series. This particular exploration of disorder combines images of natural phenomenon (tornadoes) contrasted with scenes of domestic life. The resulting installation pro-

vides an effective commentary on the parallels between meteorological phenomena and day-to-day events, particularly those aspects of domesticity traditionally associated with "women's work." In the daily cleaning, cooking and maintenance of a household, there is mimicry of the natural cycles of the environment. The work becomes a metaphor for the turbulence and emotional state of women who are frustrated and feel trapped in one role. Even the title seems to offer little chance of escape — one must continue "spinning" with no progression, no change.

In her earlier work, Trent often used scenes and elements of domesticity as her primary sources. In her latest body of work (which was on view at the DeLeon White Gallery, Toronto, from April 18 to May 25, 2002), she utilizes images ranging from frogs to fetuses to SUVs to freak medical images and storms. These images are combined and mounted in the form of mobiles. Trent uses mobiles to further her exploration of the havoc society's "progress" has generated within our surroundings. In pursuit of perfection, in the desire to avoid ennui, our culture is pushing our environment to the limits of its existence. Nothing is absolutely certain anymore. Historically, this has often been a given, but the very foundation of our existence — the skies, the oceans, the earth, the flora and fauna — surprise us with mystical and frightening twists on a daily basis. With scientific gene experiments, cloning, splicing, perfection is seemingly within our grasp, but complete chaos has never been so close. Ultimately, no matter how hard we try to control our environment and our lives, the potential for having those plans thwarted remains. Trent believes that mobiles best represent the images and paradoxes of our daily existence, in the air, all around us. Structurally, as the mobiles swing and move around, their compositions are continually changing. The constant mutation of shape and form as the mobile moves visually mimics the changes and alteration of cell structures. It provides a

subtle and effective reminder that, as much as humankind tries to control its destiny and the world around it, certain things remain beyond our control. Consequences are often unforeseen until it is too late.

Disease. Domestic disturbances. Environmental degradation. While the subject matter Trent tackles is frequently difficult, her work is not grim, didactic or without hope. In many of her works, one finds a certain amount of humour in her juxtaposition of images and materials. Also, when all is said and done, Trent's work is frequently quite beautiful. Her colours are usually strong and luminous, the imagery detailed and well-composed and not gratuitously violent or graphic. With conscious inclusion of items that everyone has some connection to — whether they be dishes, plants, or clouds — she provides the means for the viewer to access the more obscure or difficult aspects of the works. Strong, gentle and edgy, her work is often a synthesis of opposites, much like life itself. While there might be despair or fear, there is also hope and beauty. Life goes on. Adrienne Trent graduated from the Ontario College of Art in 1986. Since then, she has exhibited throughout Canada and is a co-founder of the Persona Volare and Republic collectives. The winner of numerous Arts Council awards, Trent's work can be found in the collections of the University of Toronto, the Wilfred Laurier University, and in many private collections. Trent was also the coordinator/curator of the Colour Reprography Gallery at Visual Arts Ontario from 1995-1998, where she developed and explored many of her experimental artistic techniques. She has had exhibitions at diverse public and commercial galleries, such as the Red Head, Mercer Union, Robert Birch, Koffler Centre for the Arts (Toronto), OO (Halifax), Robert McLaughlin Gallery (Oshawa), Powerhouse, and La Galerie Arts Technologiques (Montreal). ←