

Rebecca Bourgault *Fun Island*

Robin Peck

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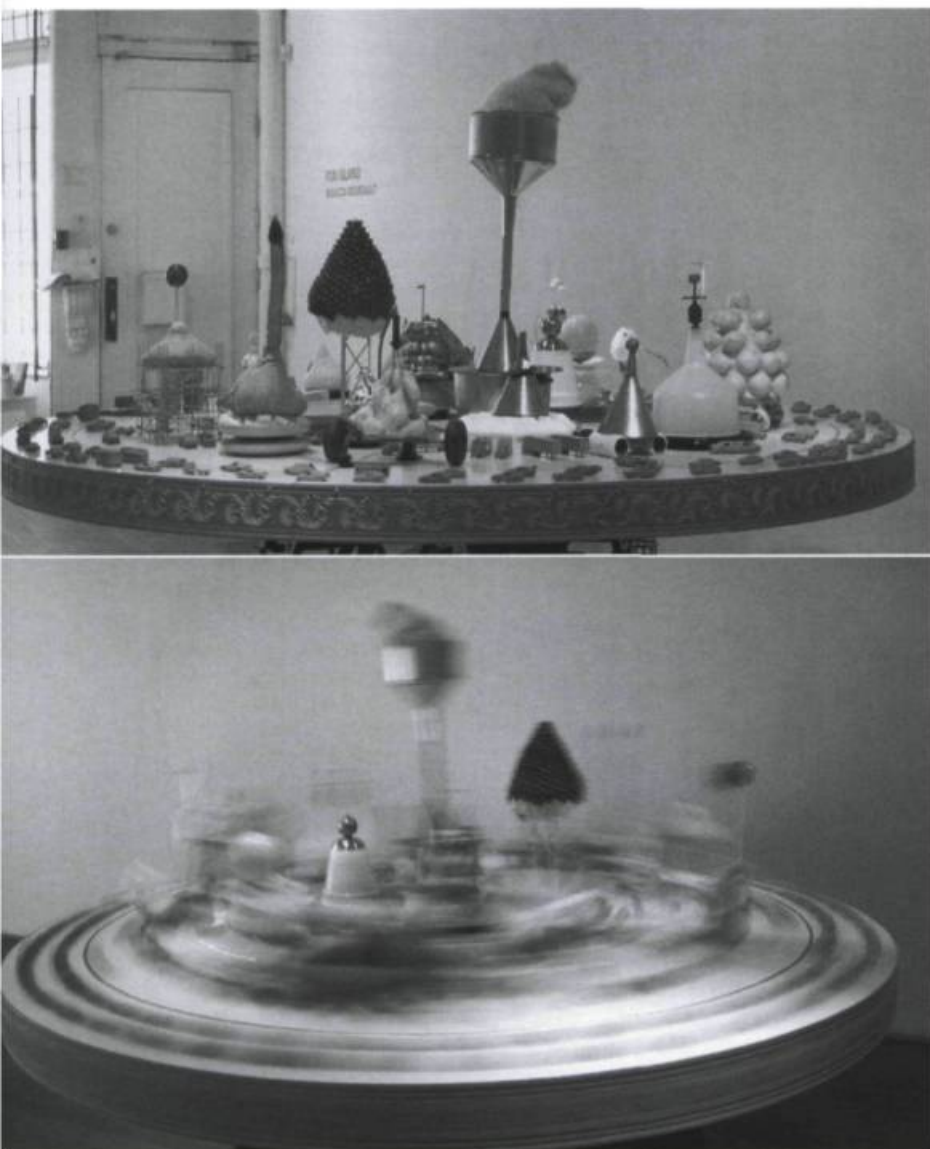
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REBECCA BOURGALT

FUN ISLAND

ROBIN PECK



REBECCA BOURGALT, *Fun Island*, 2004. Detail. Photo: M. N. Hutchinson for Stride gallery.

Stride is nearly fifty feet long and only 13 ft. wide, a gallery that is quite literally a hallway, encouraging transit. Into this narrow space Rebecca Bourgault has packed two circular spinning sculptures, one against each wall, but asymmetrical, so that one must squeeze sinuously between them. They function like gears, directing ambulation.

The largest element of Bourgault's *Fun Island* is an eight-foot-diameter round table. It slowly rotates clockwise, motorized by means of a hidden mechanism. It turns against the direction of spectator movement into the gallery.

From a distance, *Fun Island*

appears as an unmoving golden low cone-shaped mound, purified by distance. Closer, a sculptural landscape of obscure simulacra bubbles out from this cumulus cloudiness. The colour is a spectral range from white to yellow into brown.

Close up this pure landscape reveals itself as most impure detritus. It is not so much colour that is the material (as in the work of Anish Kapoor, for example) as it is the various materials that are themselves the colour, each a stain on a spectrum, each revealed as an object. This is colour understood as a condition of found materials, the impure coloration of real objects: *Fun Island*, as the matter of light understood by a sculptor.

An outer beltway of tiny

matchbox-scale (mouse-size) toy cars, painted uniformly grey-brown, encircle *Fun Island*. From this, an avenue of vehicles directs one to the centre, but there is no thing at the central axis. There is instead an abundance of subsidiary non-centres scattered across the surface of the table. These are vertical constructions, stacks that vary in size, shape and material. Some are only inches tall, others pile several wobbly feet above the surface of the table, as if un-centred clay on a potter's wheel. (A gallery brochure lists some of their titles; *The Prince, Bubble, Snake, Buddha, Queen*, but all sound like nicknames and other titles come easily to mind.) Each becomes a sculpture, becomes a discrete non-centre, not by virtue of title but because of its isolation, by each having its own eccentric vertical axis. Remarkably empty space separates each non-centre from the next.

Bourgault's materials are various and it is impossible to give a complete account. As example, there are any number of upended galvanized metal and plastic funnels and funnel-shaped objects, ceramic and glass plates and vessels, candles, beeswax, dripped chocolate, chocolate swirls pasted over a vessel as if in imitation of a Buddha's coif, a laminated wood bowl, fabrics of various types, including fish skin and deer leather, bamboo, wooden skewer sticks, and everywhere baked bread expanding out of moulds. There is a wooden triumphal arch, and a tiny bridge. And within all this material detritus, there are hints of ideational detritus as well: Modernism conflated with Surrealism, Catholicism mixed with Buddhism. It is materially anything, but not everything. It just barely (through adherence to its colour code), and therefore sharply, embodies discrimination and choice.

Bourgault conflates the role of artist with that of the collector. Artists and collectors, through the methodology of their collecting and/or a critique of the museum, reclassify our material culture. *Fun Island* is likewise a collection of maquettes, sketch models for monuments, a personal if not private museum.

The surrogate people, the mouse race of tiny grey-brown painted cars, sets an absurdly large

scale for the sculptures of *Fun Island*, as if each one of the stacks of materials is a great monument many hundreds of feet high. Recall Claes Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum* (1972, a collection of 389 pop culture artifacts, including objects altered by Oldenburg, housed in a structure shaped like a geometric mouse). And then consider *Fun Island*, with its mouse-like grey cars. There is humour in Oldenburg and Bourgault, but it is the grim humour that you also find in Art Spiegelman's holocaust comic book *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986).

Bourgault's most common material is bread. Bread has a ubiquity in the history of world cuisine equivalent to that exercised by plaster in that of sculpture. ("Bread is a... food that can be replaced by no other... suitable to every time of the day, every age of life, and every temperament... we turn our hearts to it almost as soon as we are born and never tire of it to the hour of our death" – Antoine Augustin Parmentier, 1772). As Bourgault's "plaster" is bread, so her most common form is the funnel cone. The upended spinning cone is notorious as the emblem of Vorticism, that most virulent form of early modernism, the paradigm of the anti-domestic, singular, heroic, transgressive male artist. But upended funnel cones are also wigwams and Christmas trees, happy party hats and dull dunce caps, the mystic hats of witches and whirling dervishes, and the hat of the Tin Man from the *Wizard of Oz*.

The cone as a cap sits on the head. But un-inverted, it is also a sign for the bottom of the human body. In traditional symbolism, the funnel is female, a V-shaped vessel, and sign for the vagina. To hermetists and alchemists the cup is a sign for the element water and the female principle, a sign of fertility and renewal. When inverted by Bourgault to function as a structural unit, the funnel becomes a bi-gendered sign for both the phallus and the fetishized (geometric) female breast.

"Sexual sublimation is a gift" – Louise Bourgeois, 1982

The work of the late American minimalist sculptor Eva Hesse, her discovery of the sexually subliminal in the repeated forms of relatively prosaic objects is still the locus for a female presence in sculpture.

Even the late-twentieth-century neo-surrealist sculptor Louise Bourgeois owes something to Hesse, and Bourgault is indebted to them both. The cones of *Fun Island* are the polymorphous-perverse forms of pre-sexual salivatory *jouis-sance*. They are the same bi-gendered forms familiar to us from the work of Louise Bourgeois.

Bourgault's work thankfully lacks the overtly autobiographical obfuscation of Bourgeois, but the influence is clear, though Bourgault's humour is closer to that of Hesse.

The Stride gallery exhibition literature (essay by Katherine Ylitalo) refers to Bourgault's stacks as "stupas." A stupa (Sanskrit *stupa*, "to heap," from the same Indo-European root as the Greek *stupos*, "stem, stump, block") is the ubiquitous cone-shaped aniconic monument of Buddhism. In its simplest form it is a wooden post, the *Yasti* (Sanskrit, "spine") around which a mound was heaped. In its fully

developed form, it is a stack of forms that consists of a square stepped pyramidal base aligned to the four directions, surmounted by a dome-like mound, the *Anda*, (Skt., "egg"). The Tibetan *Ch'Orten*, the *Dagoba* of Sri Lanka, the *Pagoda* of China and the *Tahoto* of Japan are all variations of the stupa, varying in appearance only as one or another of the same set of stacked formal elements is emphasized. Bourgault uses most of these formal stupa components. The *Yasti* and the *Anda* are most prominent — Bourgault includes an actual ostrich egg.

It is necessary to move in order to view sculpture. Even kinetic sculpture must be walked around, if only to avoid it. *Fun Island* is a mechanized wheel. One can remain still, and have the sculpture turn and present itself. Yet it encourages circumambulation. The non-centred table sculptures function like the cogs on a gear engaging the spectator's attention. The clockwise

rotation of the table turns one's attention back toward the door, and back to a reconsideration of the other sculpture with which *Fun Island* proper shares the gallery.

This *other sculpture* is the missing centerpiece to the table of *Fun Island*, pushed up tight against the opposite wall, nearer the exit, but centred all the same. Twenty-four inches in diameter, it is a polished, stainless steel restaurant-kitchen-size mixing bowl, spinning upright, atop a vertical steel pipe that is the same diameter as the foot of the bowl. The steel is painted black and conceals a motor. The entire structure is about four feet high, the bowl at stomach level. It is a standing figure. If it didn't wobble just slightly, you couldn't tell it was moving. It is actually more a vibration or a shimmer than a movement and it recalls even as it contradicts Naum Gabo's seminal *Kinetic Construction (Standing Wave)*

(1920), two blurred forms produced by vibrating a single shaft of metal.

Viewing (and writing about) *Fun Island* is like travelling in a series of circumferences around an unseen or unfound centre. The other significances and helps define the subject. The *other sculpture* signifies and defines *Fun Island*. Whereas *Fun Island* is expansive and inclusive, the *other sculpture* is comparatively simple, a pared down yet full-size ("public-restaurant-kitchen-scale") version of the domestic table sculptures, giving the lie to their fantasy of monumentality. At first nearly disregarded as a secondary work, the *other sculpture* loses this disguise and is revealed as the wandering centre of *Fun Island*, an orbiting sign of the circumambulatory spectator. ←

Rebecca Bourgault
Fun Island
January 9 – February 7, 2004
Stride Gallery
Calgary, Alberta

FRANÇOISE BELU et DIANE BRODEUR SYMBOLIQUES DU DESTIN

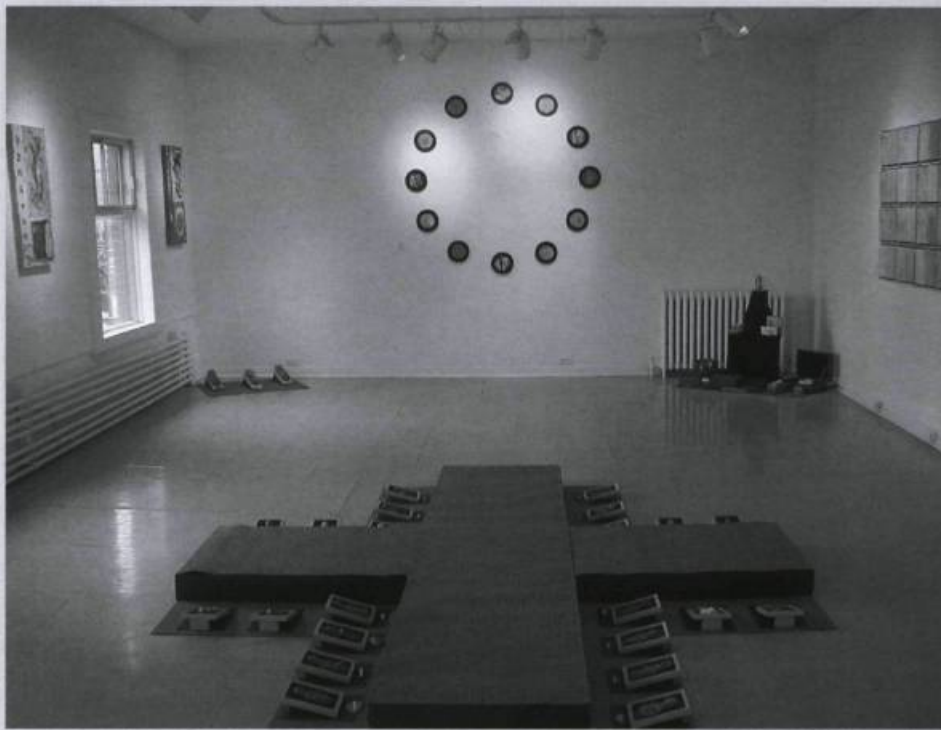
CHRISTIANE BAILLARGEON

L'exposition *La Parque et la momie* propose deux directions de lecture, deux représentations du destin, l'une verticale, celle de Françoise Belu, qui juxtapose des références mythologiques sur les murs, l'autre horizontale, à défaut d'être souterraine, disposée au sol par Diane Brodeur. C'est une mise en place de tons neutres, sauf pour quelques accents colorés sur les momies, l'épuration visible au premier regard invoquant une lointaine influence minimaliste actualisée par de subtiles mises en récit symboliques et expressives.

La Parque, la responsable du destin des mortels dans la mythologie gréco-romaine, est une figure énigmatique puisqu'elle se révèle en trois entités : ses trois âges. Par des compositions symboliques, Belu représente séparément Clotho, Lachésis et Atropos, les trois visages de la Parque. Toutefois, les similitudes formelles et le lien thématique créent une ambiguïté si bien que le spectateur hésite entre la lecture du triptyque et celle de l'organisation autonome de chacune des sections, donc de trois œuvres. Chaque section découvre un assemblage ludique et symbo-

lique. L'élément tableau, lui-même organisé d'éléments distincts, comme un collage, juxtapose, par exemple, la représentation de la déesse, celle d'un de ses attributs, le dessin d'une feuille controversée, celle de la marijuana, l'empreinte de la main de l'artiste qui rappelle celle de Pollock particulièrement à cause des éléments graphiques gestuels et du travail de la matière-peinture qui l'entourent. L'hybridité de l'œuvre tient aussi du fait que chaque « tableau », espace bidimensionnel, comporte un « autel », élément tridimensionnel, placé directement en-dessous, sur lequel s'alignent des attributs de la déesse, des objets trouvés, d'autres retouchés ou fabriqués, tous judicieusement sélectionnés pour leur valeur symbolique : un œuf, un cône de fil à tisser, des ciseaux, etc. L'organisation en noir et blanc, bien que fragmentée, évoque celle d'un relief même si la représentation s'inscrit dans des préoccupations formelles actuelles. L'image juxtapose des éléments évocateurs de l'éphémère, de l'interdit, de la résistance, et laisse au spectateur le privilège d'en extraire du sens en suivant les indices des mythes anciens.

Les thèmes antiques inscrits dans ces images actuelles créent une tension qui fait voyager le



spectateur entre l'imaginaire et le réel. La relation dynamique se retrouve dans la structure des autres œuvres de même que dans celle de l'exposition elle-même apparentant les démarches aux « médias variables ». L'utilisation libre de l'espace entretient un dialogue entre la présentation et la représentation. Ce contraste per-

siste entre la simplicité formelle des *Heures*, douze cercles sombres posés directement sur le mur marquant les heures d'une énorme horloge, et la densité organisationnelle et significative de chaque élément, chaque heure représentant un mythe. Ils se suivent selon l'ordre significatif que leur confère l'artiste. À une heure, elle a placé

FRANÇOISE BELU et
DIANE BRODEUR,
*La Parque et la
momie*, 2003.
Vue d'ensemble
de l'installation.
Photo : Robert
Cloutier.