

## *Shayne Dark. Bodies of Evidence*

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# Shayne Dark Bodies of Evidence

GIL McELROY

Sculptor Shayne Dark, of Kingston, Ontario, has long made work that engages in a critique of the aesthetic forms that societal anxieties might assume. Though his sculpture generally tends toward the abstract and geometrical end of the aesthetic spectrum, it concomitantly articulates a response to pervasive social phenomena – no mean feat.

Originally hailing from Moose Jaw, Dark has been exhibiting since the mid-1980s, showing in group and solo exhibitions in Canada, the United States, and Europe. In 2002, he exhibited at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and in the summer of 2004 was one of three artists from Canada chosen to be part of an international exhibition in Athens, held in conjunction with the Summer Olympic Games.

Much of his work of the past ten years – particularly a series of pieces based on simple geometric forms comprised of interleaved pieces of wood – subtly grapples with the reactionary cultural and social unease exemplified all-too-often today by the rise of gated or closed communities, burgeoning homo- and xenophobia, and even the generalized societal fear of rampant, out-of-control criminality – often nourished by those with cultural axes to grind and socially conservative political agendas in mind.

By way of specific examples I would proffer the body of work that comprises Dark's *Habitat* series. The pieces in this series, which he describes as "a direct response to nature," are based upon the elemental employment of wooden sticks arranged in simple geometric configurations and the use of bright, primary pigments to colour the work. *Donna's Room* (2000), for

example, is a site-specific work comprising a mass of sticks – tree branches, really – that Dark painted a bright primary red and then stuffed into a stone building's ground-level window, completely filling it, so that only their pointed ends stuck out – seeming to ward off some potential threat, or evoking the "keep away" tension indicative of a defensive, self-protective posture. In the gallery-installed *Resurrection* (1999), similar sticks (here painted a primary yellow) are arranged on the floor so as to collectively emanate from a central primary focus, creating a half-hemisphere of bristling pieces of wood with more than slight resemblance to the marine creature that employs a similar configuration as its primary survival strategy – the sea urchin. *Angel* (2000) moves the work's centre of gravity from the gallery floor to an elevated position just above it, so that the defensive

mass of sticks (painted white) protrude outward equally above and below the central core of the piece (some doing double duty as the legs that keep the work elevated), and so defensively encapsulating the piece in the round.

With *Paradise Gate* (2000), Dark weaves a low, floor-mounted circle from small white sticks in a simple ring shape strongly evocative of the classic (albeit, stereotypical) image of settlers in the American west, "circling the wagons" to protect themselves from those whose land they sought to usurp. And in this instance at least, Dark reveals that the defensive posture of his works in fact protect nothing, for within the bristling wall of sticks (which in truth one could easily step over), within the clean, spare geometry of the torus shape this work assumes, there is empty space. The proverbial emperor, it seems, has no clothes.

In yet other bodies of work, Dark's sculptural exploration of anxiety is articulated within a contextualizing framework of enquiries into other conceptual and social phenomena. In *Spire* (2003), a series of twenty elongated spires, or enormous stylized spikes – four-sided wooden shapes clad in lead sheet rising to a point over two meters high – the aesthetics of unease and edgy defensiveness is sublimated beneath the work's powerful foreground references and allusions to geometry, architecture, and, of course, religion. But make no mistake: it lurks just beneath the surface, camouflaged by the clean geometric lines and angularity of the sculpture's rigid metallic carapace.

With his newest body of work currently in the process of production, Dark goes right to the heart of the matter, to the inevitable consequences and outcome of all the anxiety modelled in his work – to the aftereffects of it all. Here, we are given to see a final aesthetic of violent crime, of gun culture – of murder, pure and simple. With the aid of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant, Dark has spent considerable time visiting police forensic laborato-

Shayne DARK, *Spire*, 2003. Lead, wood and pigment. Twenty elements, each 244 x 40.6 x 40.6 cm. Photo: courtesy the artist.



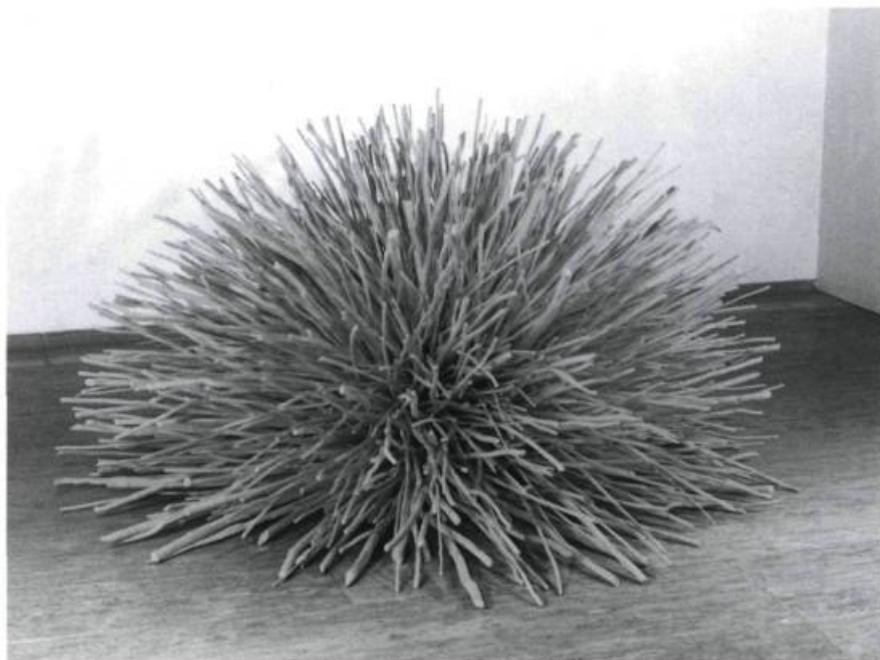
ries in Toronto and Ottawa researching a series of murders that occurred in the city of Ottawa, going so far as to interview the police officers involved in the pertinent cases. Dark was even able to obtain permission to photograph the very artefacts of homicide: the bullets themselves, those spent objects the clean aerodynamics of which have been torn asunder by the force of murderous impact; metallic forms bent, split, and distorted into virtually unrecognizable objects.

The intention throughout was to explore a grisly societal sub-culture few of us are ever privy to know unless we have the great misfortune to experience its horrors firsthand. Dark was initially fascinated by the artefacts retrieved from crime scenes. "What struck me when I viewed these discharged bullets," he wrote, "was the fact that they actually exploded into incredibly beautiful and lustrous shapes upon impact with human flesh and bone."

And so *Body of Evidence*, as this new body of work is called, begins with a sculptural manifestation assuming the form of a series of six freestanding works—all made of cast aluminum and each just shy of 100 centimetres in height—that are exact replicas of the distorted

remnants of the spent bullets used in the commission of six separate homicides. One piece actually has a passing resemblance to a bullet as we typically imagine it, the original artefact having survived impact in a relatively unscathed way and retained some resemblance to the original thing. But the others all teeter perilously close to an abstract reading, the only vestige of possible representation being a vaguely botanical resemblance to flowers in which jagged metal petals open to expose a circular core that is itself the only remnant of the original artefactual shape, of the bullet's pre-murderous form.

These forms are contextualized by accompanying wall-mounted images and text. The former comprise large-scale black and white photographs of the original bullets held by small chunks of clay alongside small rulers that highlight their diminutive size—out of all proportion with their massive societal impact. The latter element of handwritten text—graffiti, really—is scrawled across the images and spills onto the walls, spelling out some of the narratives that swirled about the events that lent significance to these artefacts in the first place.



The material ranges from the indifferently factual ("bullets travel 3000 to 5000 feet per second") to the more narrowly specific ("inquest into the murder of the children by their father recommended that the Department of Justice's firearms registry be implemented without delay").

With *Body of Evidence*, Shayne Dark doesn't abandon us to a cloistered artistic consideration of homi-

cide; we are not left alone in some uninvolved aesthetic isolation to merely consider the beauty of a sequence of abstract three-dimensional shapes. Instead, he makes larger contexts—social, political, cultural—overtly a part of the very shape of the sculptural. ←

Gil McELROY is a poet, independent curator, and critic. He is the author of *Gravity & Grace: Selected Writings on Contemporary Canadian Art*.

Shayne DARK, *Resurrection*, 1999. Wood, pigment, and steel. 86.4 x 152.4 cm. Photo: courtesy the artist.

## Chinese avant-garde exhibit, Scheveningen, the Netherlands

ALISON APPELBE



Being somewhat incongruously displayed in the Beelden aan Zee (Sculptures by the Sea) museum on the ocean near The Hague, in The Netherlands, an exhibit of Chinese avant-garde sculpture garners all the more power.

In this light-flooded modern building on top of sand-dunes overlooking the North Sea, three-dimensional pieces by 16 leading Chinese artists—all reflecting the change and repression in China in the past few decades—are shown at their best.

In the museum's main hall stands a phalanx of several dozen identical would-be soldiers by Yue Minjun, titled *Contemporary Terra-cotta Warriors*. The massive piece mimics the famous collection of more than 7,000 terra-cotta warriors, horses, and chariots from the Qin Dynasty (second century B.C.) at Xian, China. This piece juxtaposes issues of individuality

and collectivism in current communist and ancient Chinese eras. It also suggests conformity, fear, coercion and hypocrisy.

Fear and alienation come through in another assembly of figures titled *Urban Peasants*. Here, in a loose cluster of life-size men, artist Liang Shuo allows us to look into the eyes of poor, rural Chinese who have come to the city looking for work. What we see is reactions such as bewilderment, humiliation, and indifference—and resolve that ranges from swagger to defiance to hopeless resignation.

Other pieces cast light on the treatment of women and a sexual revolution that has accompanied an evolution from puritanical communism to state-controlled capitalism. Among them is a fibre-glass piece titled *Fucking Well*, by Li Zhanyang. It features a man—a husband—trapped in a contraption down in a deep well. At the top of the well, his wife is trying to turn the handle on the winch to

Liang SHUO, *The Urban Peasants*. Photo: Alison Appelbe.