

Ed Pien: *In a Realm of Others*

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Margaret RODGERS

The careful choice and organization of components focused attention not only on the character of the space, but also on its context and history. The placement of various sources of light revealed how we come to understand our surroundings. It illuminates the surfaces, to which shadows lend depth and offer clues of a suggested space, while light, in the form of a truncated beam, exists as a volume. Like the tool-marks animating the surfaces of more traditional sculptures, light revealed the wood-grain texture of planks used to mould the concrete elements, along with evidence of other manufacturing processes. Both parts of the installation reference the physical properties of the materials. Salt's propensity to dissolve in water enables it to travel through brick and across other surfaces. Re-crystallization resulting from the solvent's evaporation leaves visual disfigurement and frost-like effects, features present on both the gallery's walls and the material studies. The building's location – the site was hollowed out from a rock outcropping –, its proximity to the sea, and its former use underscore salt's mineral and maritime sources and its role as a preservative.

Superficially, the luminosity of waxed fabric and the sparkle of a Zen-like garden of sodium chloride suggested an altogether different, somewhat magical, world. Encouraging the viewer to look and keep looking, the colours, textures, and structure of Salmi and Hanada's work demonstrated how the eye responds to the unique qualities of quite ordinary materials. The sense of magic accompanying the experience derived from the exhibition's intelligent execution. ←

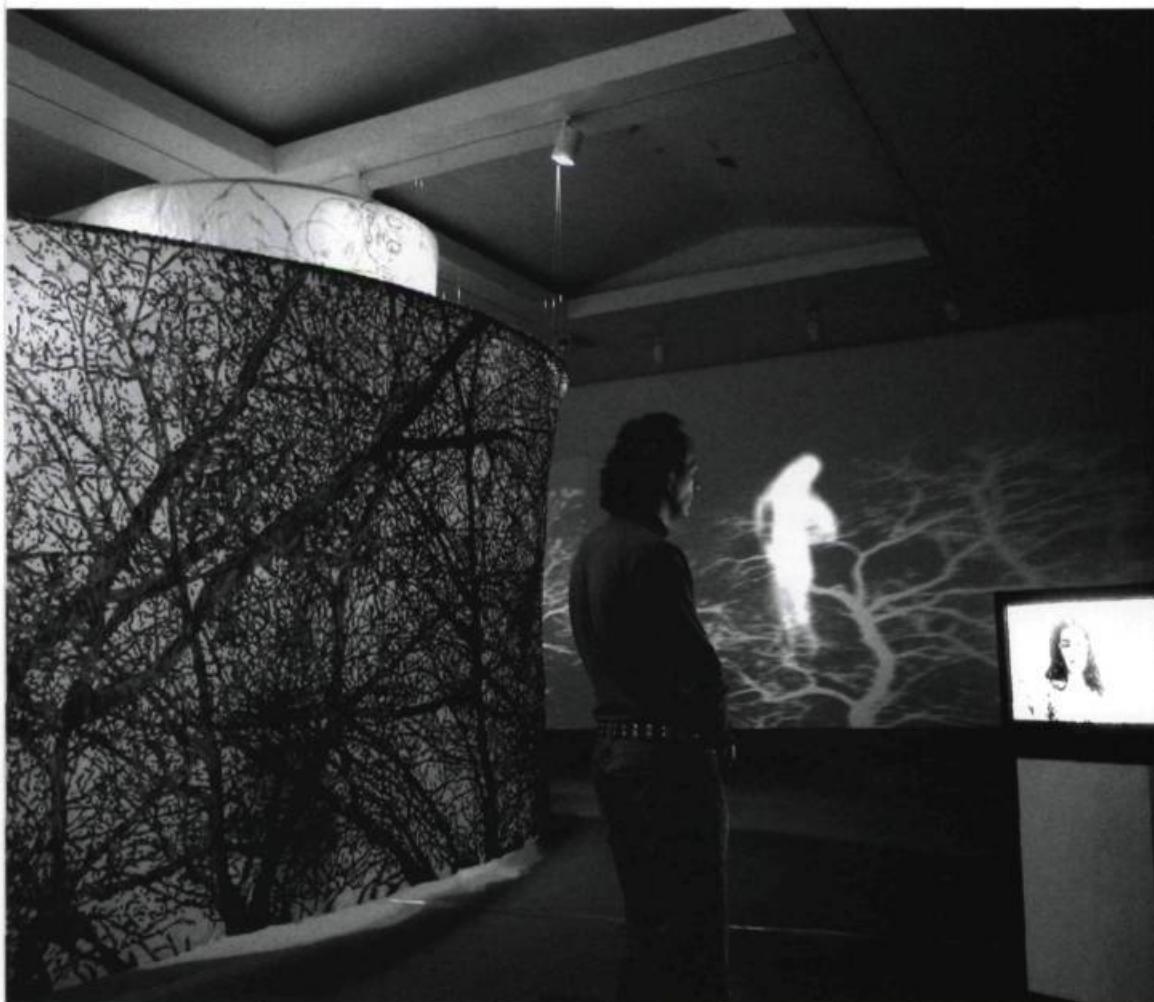
Piia Salmi, Heike Hanada
Forum Box, Helsinki
May 27 – June 19, 2005

John GAYER splits his time between restoring paintings, being an artist, and writing about art. He is researching the phenomenon of monochromaticism in paintings, sculpture, and other artistic disciplines.

A cast of misshapen anthropomorphic figures ingests and extrudes bodily matter, stares hauntingly, often in overlapping and variously arranged configurations, upon an undefined space. Misplaced and misshapen genitalia, sores and mutilations on desecrated bodies float on a crushed background as if the drawings were balled up, discarded, then retrieved on second thought to haunt again.

the psyche, evoking multiple histories and visceral experience.

Playing against the grotesque, Pien uses colour and delicacy of construction to inform and integrate aspects of eastern and western culture. A recent visit to China has intensified this exploration, connecting it to Asian practices of ancestor worship and to the ancient art of paper cutting. The context remains as a manifestation of the artist's inner story, heritage and position within contemporary artistic practice; the range of ideas and images that the exhibition



Ed PIEN, *In a Realm of Others*, 2005. Detail. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Both creepy and gorgeous, Ed Pien's travelling exhibition *In a Realm of Others*, recently at Oshawa Ontario's Robert McLaughlin Gallery, is an aesthetic *tour de force*. Well known for his constructed spaces and Dubuffet-like drawing on distressed, crinkly ground, Pien fashions a conduit into

evokes is a fertile repository for feeling and thought.

While previous Pien installations have sometimes employed a wealth of colour, it has often come in aggressively vibrant hues. Conversely, here he employs a lush green that transforms the gallery into a verdant and magical forest.

Projections of trees and white on white paper-cut silhouettes surround a passageway that essentially washes this leafy tone across the entire space. There is breathtaking beauty, its aesthetic punch mediated not only by the artist's signature drawing but also by sounds of children playing ghost, and a video of adults delivering supernatural chronicles. Ghostly figures hang from the trees in Pien's white paper cuttings and visitors who cross the projection path are also silhouetted against the forest.

The exhibition is both playful and psychologically intense. One must enter a corridor of tissue-like fabric, which is actually quite sturdy glassine. Seemingly fragile, it parts merely by the air currents generated as one's body moves through the space. This diaphanous, wafting tunnel is suggestive of the underworld, or an intestinal passage, or perhaps even a funhouse. The accompanying groans and shrieks turn out to be the sounds of children videotaped while making spooky noises. Above one's head is a disk projecting the image of merging and diverging treetops, a kaleidoscopic mimesis of deep forest. At the end of the corridor is an outer and inner chamber, and positioned in the final cavity is a monitor broadcasting a series of individual children making menacing faces. Some are adorable, huggable and cute, while the odd one has been photographed at such an angle that

eyes and mouth are darkened and thereby invested with a demonic dimension. Terror and the innocuous are embodied in this most prosaic of technologies, the TV screen, recalling the inherent contrast in children between innocence and menace that moviemakers frequently use. One can think of the little girls in *The Shining*, or more recently the "I see dead people" line from the film *The Sixth Sense*. At one level it is scary fun; at another it resonates with serious ideas about the manner in which a culture deals emotionally and philosophically with its dead.

The paper cuts are a direct result of Pien's recent travels in China, where he furthered an ongoing investigation into folklore and legend. The craft has been

practiced for centuries, usually by women, and usually on much smaller scale. The detail and precision requires hours of meticulous work, contemplative in nature and part of a traditional way of life, much as quilting, tatting and needlepoint were before feminist artists such as Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago or, in Canada, Joyce Wieland, brought them into the art world. Like those artists, who wanted to break barriers between craft and art, Pien has worked in deliberately large format, intensifying the impact through scale and incorporating an aspect of Asian art that is imbued with eastern philosophy and a belief system where ancestors are honoured and ghosts a part of everyday life. He has chosen to work with white on white

because this non-colour, actually the combination of the whole spectrum, is a symbol for death in China. In western symbolism it can signify purity and sanctity; therefore, through his art, Pien embodies and harmonizes seemingly oppositional ideas.

There is a delicate beauty in this exhibition. Children's voices, the use of a luscious, organic, vegetative green, the very idea of trees swaying in a breeze, and the intricacy of white paper cuts against pristine white walls are in marked contrast to Pien's use of Bosch-like grotesquery. The artist's stated intention to avoid sentimentality and preciousness is achieved within the interstice between beauty and terror. Pien's synthesis of eastern and western traditions, his personal voice, and the creative strength to deliver such an evocative and transcendent body of work are fabulously evinced in this exhibition.¹ ←

Ed Pien, *In a Realm of Others*
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery,
Oshawa, Ontario
22 April – 19 June 2005

NOTE

1. In collaboration with Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge Alberta, and the Cambridge Art Gallery, Cambridge Ontario (December 3, 2005 to January 15, 2006).

Margaret RODGERS is the author of *Locating Alexandra*, a book about artist Alexandra Luke, and has had writings published in *Canadian Art*, *Artfocus*, and the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, among others. Also, as Director/Curator for VAC Clarington from 1989 to 2004, she contributed essays for numerous exhibitions.

Ed PIEN, *In a Realm of Others*, 2005. Detail.
Photo: courtesy of the artist.



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