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ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

TORONTO

Carolyn White & David Clarkson. S. L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto, August 1991

Embellishing the post-modernist notion of the exploitation of an image, and demonstrating its power as opposed to delineating its meaning, both Carolyn White and David Clarkson have created serial works for a recent exhibition, reduced in scale, to be seen as either eloquent punctuations to earlier efforts or the modest offerings of a new moment. The works of both artists encourage a level of intimacy for the viewer. The appropriation of images and materials from everyday circumstances are tools common to both Clarkson and White, though the parallels in their work extend beyond the known machinations of urban culture. Implicit is the relationship between viewer and object, as both artists impose visual restrictions, defining the view before the gaze. If the viewer's contribution to meaning and interpretation is directed, the result is an awareness of the object as a work of art, accompanied by prescribed methods of viewing.

Prior to the appearance of the bourgeoisie, art was isolated from "low culture" by the controlled supply and demand of images. In an age of accelerated consumerism, everything can be expressed as "product" and given a numerical significance – the record auction prices for art, billions of burgers sold and box office returns, to name a few. By its serial nature, the work of White and Clarkson suggests mass production and the emergence of art as a commodity. They explore the meaning of these developments, their relative value in the contemporary culture glut and the viewer/object condition.



Carolyn White, *La nature morte #4*, 1991. B/W photography and commercial glass ; 30,5 cm x 45,75 cm.

Carolyn White

The appropriation of images has been an ongoing concern for Carolyn White. (The Dadaists, with the advent of industrialism, created work using appropriated images and text from mass culture to signify a critical response to the new age). White reacts to "progress" by incorporating images and text from the realm of advertising and print media. Modern life, replete with its constant bombardment of images and

catchwords, has prompted her to investigate the influence of the mnemonic and repetition in a forum that still cherishes the notion of the *original*. An examination of traditional subject matter in art history, however, reveals an obvious need for classification. The landscape required a representation of nature, the portrait a human subject, and the still life an inert object. It is conceivable then that originality concerns the handling or imprint (commonly referred to as “genius”), and not strictly the imagery. White’s more recent work has incorporated these traditional subjects within the context of contemporary media.

In her most recent body of work, entitled *La nature morte*, White has collected black and white photographic images of 17th-century French still lifes and set them behind panes of industrial safety glass. The resulting intervention restricts the reading of the image and limits its contrast. Though this effect can be produced through photo-mechanical means, White prefers to demonstrate the optical manipulation through this framing mechanism, perhaps alluding to the controlled viewing of masterworks. *La nature morte*, the French term for still life painting, translates literally as *dead nature*. White’s selections feature depictions of such subjects as dead game. The evident theme is the “spectacle of death”, the elevation of a disturbing sight (the sanctification and protection of art, bordering on vandalism) to a trophy to be admired.

The proliferation of mass media photography has transcended the parameters of commonality to foster a culturally complex environment. White’s framing mechanism distorts the already-seen image, breaking it up into its components. Through it we can see a methodical dissection of painting and the metamorphic effect of transporting images and subjects back into the realm of art-curatorial practice.

The power of photography, as a universal documentary instrument, also suggests an immediate plausibility. White exploits this tendency in *Photopaintings* (1990), a series of ten large portraits, utilizing the scanning technology employed in billboard production. In each work, the subject is weeping. Her “portraits” do not serve to enhance the subject, but rather the format and action render them farcical and grotesque, in parodies of the cheap dramas served up in the daily news. While the *posing* subject indicates the classification for portraiture, White implies another relationship between photography and traditional painting practice through

concept. This concept was also evident in her earlier *Vista* (1988) series – details of laundry soap boxes in which the marginally discernible fragments of their logos mimic the landscape’s horizon line. Here, White referenced the associative quality of the imagery through lamination and the use of saturated colour (washability; bold, bright colours). In this way, the image’s point of origin stems from its commercial nomenclature, not from fine art practice. White intentionally blurs the boundary between product identity and art object.

David Clarkson

Long concerned with the potency of symbols from urban culture, Clarkson has amassed a body of work dealing with the notion of representation – how its incorporation into art allows broader readings, and how we respond to systems of notation as universal symbols. Whereas his initial ideas about representation took the form of combined and juxtaposed codified images (maps, bar codes, test patterns), he later developed an interest in the manifestations and phenomena of light. A shift has taken place, from obvious representations of light sources, evidenced in earlier work, and the use of metallic paint (to represent reflective surfaces), to an almost pure light in reflection. In a previous series, the *Hi-Lite Paintings* (1990), Clarkson devised a perceived light source. The surface contours of these works, built up from auto body fill, became a generic industrial topography. The configured reflected areas varied slightly throughout the series, and were “identified” by a range of standard auto paint colours.

In his *Star Series* (1991), Clarkson employed both symbol and industrial materials to meld high and low cultural spheres. The star image was adopted from its recurrence on cleaning products, which promote the idealized state of purity, gleaming and clean. There is, as well, a symbolic association with value – the “sparkling” diamond, the “shiny” new automobile. Clarkson returns this reading to the art object, drawing a wry comparison between commodity fetish and art.

The reflective property of materials echoes another concern in Clarkson’s work. The viewer is drawn into the work, as into a mirror, but is stopped short of a “narcissistic experience”. Rather than depicting a discernible image, from which we can extrapolate some distant, transmitted meaning, Clarkson invokes self-examination, reflecting how we look at things – how we

see. He positions this work in the realm of abstraction, taking from its hermetic tradition the notion of the sublime and self-referential condition.

With the current *Mylar Paintings*, Clarkson grapples with the formlessness of light and its form-giving properties, while recognizing that refracted light determines our understanding of material properties. Clarkson has “trapped” light in these paintings by constructing its momentary silhouette, or sheen, as it meets a metallic surface. The result is a vulgar sign rather than an idealized ground zero. Ironically, Clarkson has not abandoned painting conventions altogether but, like Carolyn White, he proposes that such a manufactured “static” light, is also a still life – here without reference to nature. Clarkson has said that the reductivist endeavour, for him, exists at the very brink of meaning and no meaning.

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David Clarkson, *Highlight Painting # 5*, 1990. Lake and paint ; 91,45 cm x 61 cm.