

Things Unseen

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“Faced with the aggressions of everyday life and the passing of phenomena, memory needs objects – always manipulated through aesthetics, selective emphasis, or the mixing of genres. From the perspective of the future, what from the present should be saved?”¹

There are artifacts that many of us accumulate. At some point, these very objects act as symbols conjuring memories that otherwise fade. Time is concealed within such fragments, revealing thoughts of personal or cultural histories that shift in juxtaposition to each other. Things made in a particular era leave traces of that period's collected memory. Once an object becomes obsolete through technological change, it becomes part of a museum. Such an archive potentially becomes an active site. Each piece provides information with an ability to create informed insights. Rather than think of an archive as an accumulation of disparate materials to observe and record, we are challenged to engage with its present classifications.

Todd Tremeer is an artist interested in museums. In this exhibition, there is an opportunity to observe Tremeer's unique reading of The Clarington Museums and Archives, a part of his history within a local community. The work is presented in two separate shows, one in the galleries of the Visual Arts Centre and the other at the Museum. Time is spent in the basement archive with shelved pieces not yet categorized. The artist becomes a 'flaneur' wandering amongst things, imagining. Fragments are depicted in ink sketches or painted onto the surface of wooden panels. He creates a visceral act of remembering, transforming 'things unseen' by most visitors. In *Other Spaces*, mannequin figures, in coloured dresses, guard the rubble, not yet separated and displayed. Cinematic views are stitched together across a large vertical canvas allowing the viewer entry. We are caught like Tremeer at the juncture of sorting through layers of material. Each shelf or corner becomes a potential source for narrative associations.

Small oil sketches begin a self-reflexive process. Objects and the act of painting mirror a culture's shifting judgments of representation itself. Why not use photography to signify this act of viewing and recording? For Tremeer the very action of painting is closer to the plastic manipulation of what he is collecting and redefining. The space and juxtaposition of raw material allows for an immediate transformation of information into pictorial narratives. Strokes represent vision in the process of imagining new configurations. Former pieces of farming equipment, an old doll, and a typewriter or 19th century organ are transformed on the surface of canvas. The objects' physical appearance struggles between order and chaos. The raw materials of the archive change in relationship to each other.

¹ From: (Hainard and Kaehr 1986:33, also Hainard and Kaehr 1985) footnote in: Clifford, James. 1988. 'The Predicament of Culture.' Harvard University Press.

Creatures begin to form as these objects rouse, ready to move outside their present condition of stasis.

“ What historical a priori provided the starting-point from which it was possible to define the great checkerboard of distinct identities established against the confused, undefined, faceless, and, as it were, indifferent background of differences?”²

In *Fig. 340*, a fantastic readymade stands on a grid, independent from the rubble of the shelves. The actual archive of things disappears in an act of over-painting. In this work in particular, the artist reveals art history’s involvement with pentimento. The work begins a process of painting out rough sketches or previous versions. There is the need to paint over a too literal representation, allowing for a “middle region” to manifest, considering what Foucault speaks of as, “...a middle region which liberates order itself: it is here that it appears, according to the culture and the age in question, continuous and graduated or discontinuous and piecemeal, linked to space or constituted anew at each instant by the driving force of time...”³

The importance of painting these artifacts brings each object into the realm of the phantasmagoric. Humor and the presence of a Dada moment intervene in the visualization of a material culture. The whimsical nature of this raw archive is reflected in the layers of surface both erased and revealed. Space in these paintings becomes an active ground for the repositioning of vision, collected objects, and their relationship to history. There is a sense of duration existing in the work as each object combines with others to modify a too familiar reading of its presence within a particular time. Our vantage point, wandering in a museum, is multi-layered. No longer can we perceive each thing independently from other things. Awareness of culture in a postmodern condition, considers each history’s unique ideology and modification through knowledge of other cultures.

Single paintings contain a great deal of information even in the obscurity of their juxtapositions. In *Construction #5*, an old sewing machine recalls the history of objects for domestic use and a giant bellows suggests the forging techniques of a local tradesmen. Other less recognizable segments cantilever over these dominant pieces creating an emergent creature delicately balanced in a field of paint. It is here that Tremeer’s paintings loosen from the notion of representing the archive and move towards the nature of painting and its relationship to representation and pictorial space. The objects float over a fluid surface. Illustration, narrative gestures and pure paint collide into an almost theatrical field, animated through the act of painting itself. This painting is a definite breakthrough from a critical and formal perspective.

Returning to some of the smaller on-site painting sketches, we can perceive Tremeer’s physical closeness to the objects, as well as, his method of exposing

² Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*. Vintage Books. 1973

³ Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*. Vintage Books 1973

the storage site. One is reminded of Joseph Cornell returning to his basement archive of boxes, creating imaginary worlds, reminiscent of old curiosity cabinets. For Tremeer, shelves of material are concealed beneath cardboard lids *Museum Studies: Boxes*, revealing a community's past, thrust into a state of entropy. As each item is carefully lifted out and isolated, a red tag is attached in *Museum Studies: Little Things*. Taxonomy, as an act of order, presents itself to us in the red label fastened to an item. However, these sketches obfuscate a clear image of what we see as a close up. The painting act lays claim to the pictorial surface. The revelation of paint itself gives each piece a kinetic and inventive form without a set name. An image could be part of a motor, an old lens or ceramic pot. Vision acts out numerous possible meanings while feasting on a beautifully painted surface. Still life and painting have a history in modernism's discourse with a two dimensional surface; a language explored by Matisse, Cézanne and Picasso. A small sketch, like the one with the red label, clearly shows the imaginary investment involved in animating 'things unseen'.

Reporting and pure representation are left behind in this practice. The artist's studio and the archival site, shape two ideal spaces that bear witness to the past through an almost fluid transformation of found material. The dichotomy of, informed objects, and painting, could appear to undermine or weaken each other; alternatively, the dialogue between represented objects and the loosening of these objects from their recognized classification is very much a part of Tremeer's engagement with the history of painting. The backdrop of the museum provides the means for such experimental work. In fact, some of the cartoon like images that begin to confront the viewer are not unlike the painter Philip Guston's comic book animations of figures, cigarettes and shoes etc. Guston's history moves from narrative representation, to beautiful abstract surfaces and back towards representation via very animated cartoon like figures.

In the piece *Construction #3 (Walker)*, a long legged creature sees through an extended lens balanced on a crate like box. The legs seem to be fashioned from a set of attachable tripod like extensions. It almost wants to walk outside the surface of the background paint leaving a pure abstract field to its own affect. Objects leave the archive shelves as the artist gives them back, in the guise of a new form. Just as the lens creature begins to leave the painting, these artifacts leave behind a too easy reading of their use value in a changed world. The hidden script yet to be read is the displacement of such historical objects within a shifting culture. Sculptural work fashioned from the archive is exhibited with preliminary sketches and some of the larger paintings from the gallery. Every thing is in a state of flux.

These installations convey the sense of transition from Tremeer's history as a collector of artifacts, a printmaker, and representational painter. His artistic practice includes time spent in many museums both in Canada and in Europe. This inevitably leads us to question how much his perspective of such institutions has changed through his evolving artistic practice. Museums and art galleries consider how objects are framed. Tremeer manages to create a transparent, yet,

ambiguous transcription of found materials through an elaborate system, both expressive and didactic. By revealing hidden debris, (yet un-named) he places himself in an anthropological position. Each act of recording displaces the normal practice of the social and ideological placement of the collection. There is consideration of the phenomenon of each individual form before its categorization.

Some of the whimsy brought into play, recalls an early childhood spent in a dinosaur gallery or looking inside glass cabinets of taxidermic specimens. There is a compulsion to create fantastical toys rather than display a too obvious reading of what is concealed in the basement. Just what kind of space is the artist creating in order to transform our experience of the museum? The work of art tries to make visible an imaginary space, receptive, yet willing to collapse the usual paradigms of focus. Some objects are so old that we have forgotten their use let alone their name. In the above dinosaur-like form *Construction on a Blue and Grey Field*, the most obvious image is the iron. This iron becomes a neck that joins vertebra-like objects to a harness-shaped head with teeth. The amorphous background thrusts this manufactured event at us. The collages and fanciful toys of Picasso allowed for such readings of found detritus. One can recall the bicycle seat and handle bars Picasso, transformed into a bull's head.

“The meaning of any unit in the archival mass lies, in short, in its relationship to another or others.”⁴

The viewer becomes both collector and voyeur, suddenly cognizant of an ability to step outside the institutional reading of things. There is room to consider the very nature of creative participation within the gallery/museum. Walls begin to collapse as hidden relationships emerge in such an “archival mass”. Tremeer erases parts of the canvas or opens up the space to consider relationships that are more abstract. Each object does not rest easily in its placement on any one of these surfaces. Even the paint colours contrast the more muted browns and grays of things beside an emerging bright palette that alludes to the history of abstract expressionism. Each of us shares a particular fascination for our history. This artist's collective memory encompasses time spent in war museums, deconstructing dioramas of battlefields, or remembering the dust filled archives of old armour etc. The decision to paint such things alongside the act of remembering turns the art of representation into a kind of “theatre of memory”. (See *The Art of Memory* by Francis Yates.)

This becomes an exhibition as much about the act of painting, object making, collecting and the transformation of memory itself. To distill an ever more complex set of relationships in such a mediated culture is not easily done. For our consumption of goods and sense of identity is constantly changing. As we wander through the museum, the shopping mall, an industrial wasteland or the wilderness, our human condition cannot escape the fantastic relationships or

⁴ Preziosi, Donald. *Rethinking Art History*. Yale University Press. 1989

surreal moments that arise. The conscious ordering and re-ordering of things reminds us of the precarious fluidity of our notions of representation. Todd Tremeer's museum project is ongoing and does not display or complete a set of relationships to 'things unseen'. Rather one is reminded of the fluctuating nature and meaning of the forms that surround us.