

Fly's Eye View

Jerry Pethick is an uncategorizable artist. His work waits for the descriptive terms that will at once misrepresent it while bringing it into the discursive fold of contemporary art history. One such term might be the 1960s non-starter "photo-sculpture." Although much, if not most, of Pethick's works have no direct photographic element they are almost always informed by thoughts about photography or, to be more specific, by thoughts about a photographic image floating in space (post-photographic sculpture, photo assemblage, concrete conceptual sculpture, neo-cubo-futurism). As Barbara Fischer astutely observed, Pethick's sculptural program turned to photographic issues at the very time Minimalism erected a barricade against photography.¹ He was on a determined and different path from the beginning. The science and optical engineering in Pethick's practice form a stumbling block for writers like myself who do not have the education or vocabulary to fully engage this critical aspect of his work.

Knowing how unusual his project was, Pethick constructed his own genealogies and his own histories from the history of photography and art. He valued what he imagined were coincidences and speculation. What if, for example, one of the propellers seen by Leger, Brancusi and Duchamp during their visit to the 1909 Paris Air Show had been designed by Ludwig Wittgenstein (who was designing propellers in Manchester in 1908) For Pethick this encounter was emblematic of the meeting of science, art and philosophy. And if Leger reports that Duchamp

said (to Brancusi): "Painting is dead. What artist can make anything better than these propellers?" then isn't it possible that they provided the moment of recognition for Duchamp's roto-reliefs, what Pethick calls "rotational dematerialization," to name an important element in his own sculpture?

The idea of sculpture that approached transparency while also projecting an illusionary or virtual space became Pethick's utopian project. He invested this idea with many holistic notions that implied rethinking how we are as individuals and how society works. The tantalizing proximation to this impossible space he wished to create marked also the distance between our world and a better one. His sculptures were in the future tense. One genealogy for sculpture went: "the Egyptians, perhaps Bernini, Medardo Rosso, Giacometti and Malcolm Lowry."² Pethick liked to eclipse Greco-Roman naturalism and the search for ideal form, naming as aberrant what Western Art History regards as the main story. The inclusion of Lowry and Rosso show his literary bent and his sense of humour. Other genealogies include Umberto Boccioni, surely among the most important artists for Pethick. Boccioni's Cubo-Futurist literalness and his attempts to impale an object on its surrounding space are usually regarded as deviations from the true course of modern sculpture. Pethick regarded them as important signposts.

Pethick's search for a dematerialized form that interpenetrated with its surrounding space began in the 1960s. His earliest

sculptures employed the then-new plastics and the technique of vacuum-forming. None of the sixties pieces survive but from pictures one can see that the compositional principles and uses of materials that would be developed in his mature works were already being formulated. He used a variety of incongruous found and fabricated, natural and synthetic materials to build unstable, teetering piles that seem held together by centrifugal force, a representation of their potential "rotational immateriality." While Pethick's mature work such as the *Colossus of Kindergarten* (1990/91) is in step with post Robert Morris installation art, the tipsy figuration still shows how important Boccioni's ideas were to him.

The first excursions into virtual space began in earnest in 1967 when Pethick made his first hologram (a picture of a prawn). For several years he helped pioneer and promote holography as a new medium for the projection of a disembodied image in space. Although he co-founded the School of Holography in San Francisco in 1971, he was already turning from holography proper (his use of spectrafoil is a remnant of holography) to an abiding interest in Gabriel Lippmann's postulated integral or fly's eye photography. The inventor of colour photography had speculated early in the twentieth century that stereoscopic photography could be advanced to produce virtual dimensional images in space. Working with Lippman's and subsequent research Pethick made his first integral photograph in 1972. He shot two hundred and fifty-six 2 inch photographs (with Charles Frizzel) through a large sheet of gridded glass so that each shot took in a slightly different angle. The idea was to multiply the effects of binocular vision to approach a multi-faceted "fly's eye" vision. (The picture is a nondescript landscape on Mt. Tamalpais.) When displayed in a

¹Barbara Fischer, "Jerry Pethick: Bias Arrays," in Saarbrücken: Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken, *Jerry Pethick: Notion of Nothing*, 1994, p. 32.

² Quoted in Judy Williams, "Jerry Pethick: Le Dot/Transition in Progress," New York: 49th Parallel Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art, *Jerry Pethick*, 1986, p. 1.

hexagonal grid behind a grid of corresponding lenses, seen from a certain range the two hundred and fifty-six images coalesce into one large dimensional image that hovers in an indeterminate space. This two hundred and fifty-six image array, split into three, is recycled for the triad, *Armchair Traverse* (1970-1987), *Typology of Space* (1972-1989) and *Whale Skirt and Sun* (1970-1994).

Pethick's utopianism, evidenced in his search for a "magical" virtual low-tech pictorial and sculptural space must be seen also from the perspective of his humour in which there is a kind of expressive autobiographical "self-portraiture." The sense of material and surface, even if the material is often found and recycled, is as unmistakable as a signature. The ballooning shapes of his forms and unsteady pose of his figures seem haunted by the history of twentieth century popular cartoons. The cubo-futurist dissonances are often absurdist and funny. The household appliances he recycled to such odd ends remind us at once of the distance Pethick wants his viewer to travel from the banality of consumerist culture to other dimensions and possible new worlds.

Scott Watson

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