



Jerry
Pethick

Drawing
room

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Peter Culley

A FOLDER

"In the illusory babble of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors, or voids of knowledge..."

Robert Smithson

The mind and works of Jerry Pethick are curiously resistant to conventional modes of analysis. To infer, for example, from one of the sketches that the artist includes in this show that "intersections" (corners, crossroads, interlacings, geometric confrontations, etc.) are "recurring motifs" in his work is to state the obvious without saying anything useful, to fall into a trap of explanation that his richly ambiguous and conflicted work would seem to be directed against. Not to mention that such motifs, such separable tendencies, are at best flags of convenience, handy semantic levelers, and supreme fictions. Nonetheless, Pethick's elusive relationships with themes of recurrence, repetition and reference lead one to leap gratefully upon such apparent gestures towards "enlightenment"; here at last a map, a clearing, a clue. And such conciliatory considerations, one would presume, must of professional necessity accompany a retrospective of several decades — surely an occasion when, however provisionally, motivic patterns might be revealed, banishing ambiguity. That such an outcome is unlikely will surprise no one who has followed Pethick's career, but neither will the desire — however faint and fleeting — that such patterns be made manifest.

And although the drawing would seem to imply at least a rapprochement with the forces of rationalisation, it quickly becomes clear that Pethick is less interested in the organising potential of a linguistically determined order than in the disruptive potential of a purely symbolic exchange, thing addressing thing. A corner, an intersection, a meeting place. His phrases "primitive pre-literate" and "a starting before the start"¹ remind us that one of the reasons that Pethick's work is so resistant to the knives and forks of critical analysis is its uncompromising materialism, a materialism that seems to reach beyond human culture to the physical basis of consciousness. It is a materialism anterior to, and suspicious of, written language. Writing can appear, but only when transformed into material, and rarely acts as

pivot or determinant. Even Pethick's own small but fascinating body of writing is concerned less with explanation and exegesis than the intensely factual recording of historical and material phenomena. It might even be said that the elaborate perceptual mechanics of his work are at least partially directed at physically delaying an "understanding" which for him is merely the reduction of a materially complex and ongoing encounter to a fixed and barren accounting. Better a "co-ordinate in process" than a bodiless cul-de-sac; better a slow drift toward contingency than an apprehension prematurely arrived at.

Although I had encountered Pethick's work before, in the spring of 1983 I was able to view some of the work that made up the *Traces of Discovery* show in memorably auspicious circumstances. The various works, in the long and arduous process of being packed for shipping, were laid out in a field on Pethick's Hornby Island property. The famously translucent "Mediterranean" light of Hornby lent the works — with their panoply of variously reflective surfaces — a gleaming sharpness of aspect impossible in a gallery space, a thrillingly retinal specificity that fixed them (in an almost photographic sense) in my memory and imagination. The oddly bifurcated reflexivity of the works — which combined an immediately pleasing and literal outwardness of effect with a dense privacy of reference — asserted their spatial presence with a charged and assertive ambiguity. And their emotionally alchemical constructedness indicated a relation to objecthood humming with psychohistorical overtones.

I think it is in every way fortunate that this crucial intersection with Pethick's work preceded (by some years) the acquisition of even such critical vocabularies as I now possess. If hardly a complete neophyte, I was nonetheless just ignorant enough to respond to the work's sensual demands without immediately reaching for the critical handrails I might have used subsequently. For to apply such superficially tempting terms as "assemblage" or "pastiche" to the work of Pethick is to misread his fundamentally uninflected and ecstatic relationship to his materials; even the term "collage" implies a distancing of effect, an emotional calculation absent from his practice. The aestheticised manipulation of objects and markings for the purposes of ironic commentary that define postmodern practice is as foreign to Pethick's methodology as would be an assumption of pseudo-shamanic mastery.

What I instinctively grasped that day, though I could hardly have expressed it, was that for Pethick the modernist project was neither a worked-out seam nor a static monument, but a process in some ways barely begun. For him, the two decades prior to the beginning of the first World War, which saw the development of film, sound

recording, flight, colour photography and theories of relativity and psychoanalysis, are less a fascinating, vexed period of historical achievement than a revolutionary epoch whose contemporary implications have been at best misunderstood, at worst ignored. And although the often directly related developments in art that occurred during this era are both inspirations to and components of Pethick's gestural vocabulary, it is the fearlessly experimental ethos of the era — in art as in almost all fields — that most intimately informs his battered utopianism. His work, with its unironised tensions and unapologetic good faith, stands less against the excesses of postmodern practice than in a different realm, perhaps marginal but defiantly autonomous.

But if this is a larger context in which to view Pethick's achievement it hardly accounts for its peculiarly variegated nature, the way in which, piece to piece, its narratives both unfold and self-destruct. And if the search for a linear succession of motifs has proved regressive, the persistence, through the time and space of his work, of certain unstable signs — provisionally those included in the artist's accompanying drawings — offer, if not the comfort of an overarching logic, a glimpse into mental habit and gestural tendency.

One of the 1990 *Vortex Drawings* offers insight into Pethick's method. It is an apparently modest sketch, almost self-effacingly gestural, with (perhaps) overtones of Twombly. But in Pethick's practice such casualness of means often serves to conceal ends of calibrated intensity, becoming part of a dialectic with the recording of physical effort that culminates in the massive *Straw Tower* he built in London, Ontario, last summer. The shape erased into the vortex of smoke (though it seems projected onto it, too) — the vortex represents, I think, the undifferentiated static of mental activity — is "the Kühne shape." This figure is named for Wilhelm Kühne, a 19th century scientist who somehow derived it photographically from the retina of a recently guillotined prisoner. A source of speculations both physiological and metaphysical, its ultimate meaning has remained unclear. It is one of numerous such anomalies scattered through the history of science, inviting speculation, but for Pethick it clearly represents a kind of optical ground zero, a fundamental model of apprehension. Imposed in this drawing between the viewer and the "cloud of unknowing" the shape both stands against the vortex and is subsumed within it. And through the endless alchemical calculations of sight it becomes engraved on the structure of which it is a template.

Such vortical juxtapositions recur throughout Pethick's work, an oeuvre shaped by a shifting balance between optical apprehension and models of an expenditure of

energies variously historical, emotional and mythic. And if such a practice, predicated on suggestiveness, on the shaping of information toward ends happily inconclusive, is to some degree a reply and reproach to the endless unsupported pronouncements and schemata of the artist's unavoidable historical circumstances, it is hardly defined by such opposition. Indeed, the most persistent quality in Pethick's project is the feeling of serenity and repletion that it can create within the most indeterminate and fluctuating of structures.

A drawing that exemplifies this searching, omnidirectional drift is the 1992 *Sixteen Apples: Electronic Arrays*. The term "arrays" — with its echoes of Argus, the hundred-eyed god — has many shades of meaning in Pethick's oeuvre, some technical, others strategic. The important set of works bearing that name consists of a series of almost identical small photographs, a small distance before each of which is placed a special lens. By standing a few feet back the viewer can see what appears to be an enormously enlarged single three-dimensional image. These image arrays are among Pethick's most effective and moving works, engendering a vividness of apprehension less akin to passive visual consumption than a kind of exalted optical witnessing, the image falling into focus with a rapturous inevitability. The entirely idiosyncratic sense of "array" that these works embody — and which the drawing extends — is not only a formal methodology but also a call for perceptual renewal. It is a model for not only a refracted and contingent modernist space, "a patterning that alters on three axes and questions the symmetry of like images and objects," but also an equivalent of Keats' negative capability in which the mind blithely inhabits doubt and contradiction.

The central lines of force reach toward Cézanne's apples in the corner, while a heart burns in the foreground. The central bank of lenses seems to pivot toward us, shadowing the blue background which seems to converge in the grey evening space between mountains. On the left, a bundle of tubing and the sled or harp beneath begin to move...

Peter Culley

End notes

1. These and all subsequent quoted phrases are from conversations with the artist.