



Jerry
Pethick

Drawing
room



Hurtig, Annette. "Curiously Confounding: An Introduction."

Essay for exhibition catalogue *Jerry Pethick: Drawing room*. Kamloops, BC: Kamloops Art Gallery, 1999.

Annette Hurtig

CURIOSLY CONFOUNDING: AN INTRODUCTION

Jerry Pethick began making art in the late 1950s. His early work was sculptural, and he is often still referred to as a sculptor. But Pethick's interests and pursuits extend well beyond the confines of any single category or discipline. From the beginning he has pursued several related avenues of research, investigating optical physics, for example, and theories of visual perception. As well as making art he has contributed to the development of, and knowledge about, visual imaging technologies. Indeed, Jerry Pethick's scientific and epistemological inquiries are inseparable from his artistic activities. The artist's interest in sculptural space, for instance, has involved investigations of dimensional imaging systems. He participated in the advent of holographic laser systems in the late 1960s, and concurrently experimented with integral photography and replication of the visual capacities of a fly's multi-lensed eye. The latter two endeavours are evident in his art work throughout the past three decades. More recently, in the 1990s, he has employed real time video and digital imaging techniques. Jerry Pethick explores, develops and uses these innovative imaging systems to critique conventional visuality and propose alternate modes of visual perception and representation. Having pursued such interests and exhibited nationally and internationally since the 1960s, in 1998 he was awarded the National Gallery of Canada's Claudia De Hueck Fellowship in Art and Science.

In addition to his sculptural work and visual imaging research, the artist has maintained a little known drawing practice that likewise is related to his interests in dimensionality and visuality. Rarely conventional line renderings, Jerry Pethick's drawings include two- and three-dimensional pieces, and those that are executed in unusual (often light reflective) materials. Using the act of drawing to explore alternative visual modes, Pethick's drawing plays with questions of perception and spatial categories. Usually executed in series, and in intense bursts that signal experimental moments, these works constitute a sort of periodic vein, a fragmentary but recurring trail which is evidence of the course of the pursuits that impel his artistic production. Brought together in the *Drawing/room* exhibition, they amount to an illuminating trace of the artist's theoretical and technological investigations.

Jerry Pethick's innovations in aesthetics and visual imaging systems are important because they effect paradigm shifts that disrupt the visual status quo. Avoiding recourse to spectacle by using materials that are at hand, recycled, or readily and inexpensively available, he intentionally maintains a modest economy of production. His work acknowledges and responds to, but also critiques, the spectacular and spectral world of commodity culture and consumerism. Favouring an enlivened, unmediated visual and cognitive experience that privileges and at the same time challenges the embodied viewer, Jerry Pethick makes art that provides (an unusual) visceral pleasure derived from visual effects that invite meandering, non-linear perception. Rather than relying on polemics or directives, the potential meaning of his work operates through an explosive *mindfield* of slyly humorous visual enigmas. While its appearance

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diverges from the crisp high resolution of advertising imagery and art's currently dominant forms, his work nonetheless engages in current cultural discourses by suggesting that there is value in alternative approaches to today's urgent questions. At once transparent and opaque in meaning, playing at the intersection of minimized image resolution and recognition, Pethick's work invites reverie and speculation. His processes are meandering and playful. Intrigued by paradox, dismayed by mindless faith in governance, expertise or the purported absolute benefits of technology, Pethick pursues a maverick's singular path. These characteristics and his interest in strategies for greater freedom — freedom to see, think and be, freedom to play and experience — have shaped the *Drawing/room* project. Adopting the artist's expanded notion of drawing, and following his use of drawing as an exploratory mode, the project establishes an overview of the artist's work. It reviews his explorations of integral photography and other dimensional imaging systems. And it shows how this artist's work responds to the local availability of materials and resources, the particulars of each stopping place in his travels. The project includes several components, and involves a lot of collaboration. Jerry Pethick conceived of the project and began formulating it in the early 1990s. He and I began working together to realize it in 1995. In 1996 Kamloops Art Gallery agreed to be the organizing venue, to find funding for the project and tour the exhibition. In 1998, collaborating with the late Peter Van Riper, the artist produced a digital poetic archive, the CD-Rom *Marking Time*. A booklet, cards and signage designed by Jack Scrivener accompany the CD-Rom and the exhibition. The *Drawing/room* booklet contains an essay by guest writer Peter Culley. Each of the individuals mentioned above has known the artist for many years; our contributions to the project come out of extended engagement with him and his work.

The exhibition itself includes works and studies that span more than thirty years of production. They are autonomous art works; however, in the context of this exhibition they become elements of a new work, namely the *Drawing/room* exhibition, which is, in fact, an artist's project. A projection from *Marking Time* provides a focal element within the exhibition. *Marking Time* contains images documenting the artist's places of residence, studios and exhibitions, and hundreds of works. These, in turn, delineate Jerry Pethick's research arenas and his investigative avenues, and they suggest relationships between these things and his artistic production. The CD-Rom returns repeatedly to a map of sorts, a visual autobiography. Each of the project's elements — including the CD-Rom *Marking Time*, the booklet, and the exhibition — are shaped by the artist's visual poetics.

Annette Hurtig,
Guest Curator

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