



Jerry Pethick's last work, *Time Top* (2003–2006), emerges from the waters off British Columbia, the bronze airship's surface covered in sea life and silica particles.

PHOTO: MARGARET PETHICK

JERRY PETHICK (1935–2003): The Underwater Airship Lifts Off

BY JOHN DRURY

Last April, after nearly two years underneath the chilly waters off Canada's western shores, *Time Top*, a posthumous project of sculptor Jerry Pethick (1935–2003) was raised off Gibson's Landing in British Columbia. The 12-and-a-half-foot-tall structure of $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch-thick marine-grade bronze had been submerged on August 16, 2004, as per Pethick's instructions. Resembling the glass airships that Jim Mongrain and his assistant Blaise Campbell had blown for Pethick during his last session at Pilchuk in 2001, this much larger piece was wired so that a constant flow of electricity ran through its bronze surface. The magnetic effect attracted particles suspended in the sea water, as well as sea life, to form a silica-based glass of sorts on its surface—a thick skin of dark, vitriolic material. This primordial craft is now installed as a public sculpture in Vancouver.

In *Time Top*, Pethick found a new way to approach the relationship of time and space, a theme which has interested so many artists in the past, including Duchamp, Brancusi, and Leger. This trio made a joint trip to visit the 1909 air show in Paris. It was a moment when the technological breakthrough of flight had changed perceptions of what was possible, which motivated them to pursue the new and unknown in their work, to give expression to the unseeable. This interest in the immateriality of illusory matter crosses the boundaries of art,

science, philosophy, and religion. Without limit, time and space merge. It is this same territory that fascinated Pethick, and informed his varied projects.

Pethick was not prone to frivolous conversation. It is fitting that this unique sculptor and a co-founder of San Francisco's School of Holography (with physicist Lloyd Cross in 1971) was preoccupied with visual perception and cerebral cognition. Pethick used temporal building blocks and visionary play to deconstruct the tension between the real and the unreal, the past and the future, time and place. In his poetry, Pethick wrote of his wish to paint with washes of light and to construct something out of thin air.

In 2001, during the last of several stints as a visiting artist at Pilchuk, Pethick realized his desire to create a crystal airship. Much like Duchamp's *Air De Paris* (1919), the bulbous form seems capable of undulation as if powered by a jellyfish-like method of propulsion. Atop three thin legs, with balled feet, the hollowed form appears to be lighter than air. This airship, once full of the artist's breath, seems just a puff away from flight.

Through his exploration of absence and presence, Pethick aimed to give three-dimensionality to Albrecht Durer's famous picture, voice to his instructional print from 1538. Pethick is best known for his "Arrays" series, in which he investigated visual space by way



A low voltage flow of electricity ran consistently through *Time Top* while it was submerged for nearly two years. This electrified structure, modeled after Pethick's blown-glass airships, is now installed as a public sculpture, in Vancouver.

PHOTO: MARGARET PETHICK, ERIC VANDERZEE

of the materials of yesterday's technology (Fresnel lenses applied to an upright pane of glass). Building on the work of scientist and Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Lippman's work with stereo vision and the fly's-eye lens, Mr. Pethick meticulously placed serial photographs of a single scene in a grid. An equal number of Fresnel lenses are arranged on a glass plane, in a corresponding arrangement to the photographs, at roughly the inherent focal distance of the lenses. Focus and repetition combine, creating a dream space or faux terrain as the eye combines the minutely differing photographs to present one enlarged and unified image: a poor man's hologram.

Jerry Pethick's interest in creating works of art beyond the physical led him to the transparency of glass. *Time Top* shatters our preconceptions and expands our expectations of the material. Though, at first glance, this enlarged version does not appear to be equally aerodynamic and sleek, this metal form of the airship appears to be sleeping, or simply at rest, in preparation of potential take-off and journey. With his eyes on both the past and the future, Pethick has succeeded in patenting his own history and raising the bar for our prospects in glass. May Jerry be aboard *Time Top*'s maiden flight!

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