Worlds to behold through a sculptor's eyes

By MIKE YOUDS
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Grant Arnold, curator, leads a tour of Jerry Pethick: Shooting the Sun/Splitting the Pie at KAG.

ARTS  Often constructed from seemingly random, discarded or recycled objects, Jerry Pethick’s sculptural creations assume a life of their own, probing ideas about science, technology, consciousness and perception.

These artworks are experimental and multidimensional; simple in form yet complex in design, resembling in some respects Pethick’s unique trajectory as an artist of international pursuits who came to reside for the latter half of his life on a quieter shore off the B.C. coast.

Jerry Pethick: Shooting the Sun/Splitting the Pie occupies Kamloops Art Gallery through the summer months, holding a lens to his work that wasn’t available until this year when Vancouver Art Gallery first featured the career retrospective.

Though well known in the art world, Pethick wasn’t an artist familiar to the mainstream public, so this show is a revelation of sorts, particularly for those who have ever had occasion to visit Hornby Island.
“It’s kind of like a return for us,” said VAG curator Grant Arnold, leading a tour of the new show in Kamloops, where only elements of Pethick’s work have been shown in the past.

Trying to sum up the diversity of Pethick’s practice, Arnold said it’s “very important and somewhat unique,” understatement to be sure.

“It’s very difficult to categorize,” he said. “His work doesn’t look like any other artist I can think of.”

One work, for example, Out of the Corner of an Eye (1990) presents two pieces in tandem, one a wall-mounted array of lenses fronting 305 photos of a railway snow plow, the other a free-standing pile of felt loosely resembling an elephant.

“It harkens back to Jerry’s critique of modernity,” Arnold explained. The sculpture depicts Jumbo, the 19th-century circus elephant tragically killed by a train while bolting for freedom.

Much of Pethick’s artwork contains similar veiled references and playful motifs, ideas that can be better understood through his eclectic background in the contemporary art world of his day.

Originally from London, Ont., he studied at the Royal College of Art in London, England in the 1950s. His approach to sculpture can be appreciated in relation to the work of contemporaries such as Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. New materials such as plastics inspired his work. He liked to step outside conventional boundaries of perception and ponder parallels within science and art.

A watershed moment came in 1967, when the artist recalled seeing on colour TV, the first available in the U.K., an interview with Dennis Gabor, inventor of the hologram. In later conversation with Gabor, Pethick described the impact as “the end of sculpture.” He went on to work with the new medium in the U.S., opening the first large-scale holographic exhibition in New York City and the first holograph school in San Francisco.

In 1975, Pethick ventured north and settled on Hornby, which by then had attracted a community of artists with its bucolic setting just slightly removed from the mainstream. He found common ground with his DIY ethic, not to mention a limitless supply of materials cast up by the island recycling centre and the ocean currents, some of which have found their way into this exhibition.

Jerry Pethick: Shooting the Sun/Splitting the Pie runs until Sept. 10. Plan to make more than one visit since there is much to explore.