

## **Jerry Pethick, "Shooting the Sun / Splitting the Pie", Vancouver Art Gallery, Oct. 24, 2015 to Jan. 10, 2016**

by Portia Priegert



*Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver Art Gallery Acquisition Fund Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Art Gallery*

Jerry Pethick "The Replica of Willendorf: Post Prehistoric", 1981–82 light bulbs, silicone, aluminum, glass, mirror 287 x 241.7 x 275 cm

This exhibition reflects the idiosyncratic investigations of West Coast artist Jerry Pethick, who used rough-hewn ingenuity to explore his fascination with science and technology, particularly as they relate to visual perception and representation. Pethick's sculptural pieces are often made with rustic junkyard finds – carpet underlay, old car tires, burned-out light bulbs and the like – that belie the sophistication of his thinking about the histories of both art and science.



Jerry Pethick  
"Lenticular  
Registrar", 1973



Jerry Pethick  
"Outskirts", 1987–88



Jerry Pethick "Gobi  
Clone", 1996–97

The contrast with the sleeker, more minimalistic approaches often taken by artists interested in such themes is one curious aspect of a show that defies easy categorization. Pethick engages many aspects of contemporary art – not only by using found objects, often from the recycling depot on Hornby Island, where he lived from 1975 until his death in 2003, but also by displaying an intense interest in thinkers as diverse as physicist Gabriel Lippmann and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Curated by Grant Arnold and spread across an entire floor of the Vancouver Art Gallery, the show is not primarily visual, nor entirely conceptual. It hovers somewhere in between. There's sensitivity to formal concerns, particularly relating to colour, shape and various material properties. A striking example here is the pairing of clear glass cylinders and a tidy stack of firewood in *Wheelbarrow / Cabin*. But the work requires lengthy didactic panels to orient viewers.



Jerry Pethick "Out of the Corner of an Eye", 1990



Jerry Pethick "Kolossus of Kindergarten", 1987–89

At its core, Pethick's work is about how we see and how we understand what we see. One of his interests is destabilizing the binary constructions that help us interpret the world – things like big versus little. Or as the introductory panel helpfully quotes Pethick as saying: "We learn to make choices between, we don't perceive among." But as essayist Monika Szewczyk notes in the exhibition catalogue, Pethick's work makes logical leaps. "It tends to irritate those who lack the will to tolerate the coexistence of disparate aesthetic constructs, spatial and temporal dimensions, or competing ideologies."

Challenging ingrained perceptual assumptions with objects that warp usual modes of visual understanding – including lenses and other optical devices – asks a great deal of viewers. This is particularly true when sculptural components are so widely spaced that it's not immediately clear where one work begins and another ends. Viewers must peer at these pieces as well as through them, around them and into them, often finding their own pensive reflections cast back at them.



Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries, VancouverPhoto: Scott Massey

Jerry Pethick "Volklingen Scarab," 1995 aluminum, stainless steel, plywood, 79 photographs, 56 Fresnel lenses, glass, fluorescent light fixture, silver diffraction foil, silicone, acrylic paint, dimensions variable

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The work is undeniably clever, yet at times feels laboured in its efforts to communicate. It becomes almost autistic, tantalizing with the promise of a profound insight from some other mode of comprehension, while remaining frustratingly at bay. Again and again, it points a finger to some larger idea, yet misses the felt intuitive synapse. One of the most accessible works is *My Grandfather's Barn*, which evokes rural life in the linear perspective of fences and farm buildings. Executed in clear vinyl with Fresnel lenses and silicone, it is flat and transparent, yet breaks apart and shatters the surrounding gallery environment while creating transient illusions of internal 3-D space. It offers a clear metaphor for the vagaries of perception. But, like a funhouse mirror, it engages through its clear invitation to play.