

Vancouver Art Gallery show gives Hornby Island artist Jerry Pethick his due

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Jerry Pethick often repurposed unlikely and homely things into works such as 1990's *Out of the Corner of an Eye*.

Jerry Pethick: Shooting the Sun/Splitting the Pie

At the Vancouver Art Gallery until January 10, 2016

Gabriel Lippmann, the Nobel Prize–winning physicist who invented an early process of colour photography; Ludwig Wittgenstein, the renowned philosopher who also designed an aviation propeller; Peter Pitseolak, an Inuit historian and documentary photographer—these individuals, and a seemingly eclectic range of others, make metaphoric appearances in the work of the late Hornby Island artist Jerry Pethick. Also evident is a wonderfully eccentric range of forms and materials, from a runaway elephant fashioned from rolls of carpet underlay to a Stone Age fertility figure composed of used light bulbs to a stack of old tires stuck with small mirrors and topped with a precariously balanced limb made out of a tree branch and aluminum disks. Spectra foil, Styrofoam, sulphur, hay bales, wine bottles, a wasp nest—Pethick was adept at repurposing the homely, the unlikely, and the inexpensive into sculptures, pictures, and installations. By these means, he explored the vagaries of representation and the histories of art, optics, and photography.

Born in London, Ontario, in 1935, Pethick studied and practised art in London, England; researched holography in Ann Arbor, Michigan; and cofounded a holography school in San Francisco before settling on Hornby Island with his wife and son in 1975. His creative achievements are celebrated in a large retrospective exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Curated by Grant Arnold, it traces the distinctive path of Pethick’s career and the eccentric nature of his practice—part intellectual rigour, part optical experiment, and part goofy humour. Pethick’s overarching interest in visual perception, in the scientific, cultural, and linguistic systems that structure the way we see the world, led him to produce a body of work much admired by curators and fellow artists but, until now, little known to a wider public.

The show includes the artist’s early experiments with assemblages, thermoplastics, holographic art, and “integral” or “fly’s eye” photography inspired by Lippmann’s earlier research. Although Pethick gave up holography because it was too cumbersome a way of making images, he continued to pursue and expand ideas relating to integral photography, creating the “photo arrays” for which he is best known and of which four are present in this show. Consisting of carefully calibrated rows of serial photographs viewed through corresponding rows of Fresnel lenses (cheap plastic lenses with concentric grooves), stuck together with dots of silicone, the arrays create, from a certain viewing distance, a large, unified image floating in space—a three-dimensional photograph. Because of the low resolution of the lenses, the image has a slightly blurry or unfocused quality, which Pethick observed was a metaphor for the way memory affects perception.

Most of the photo arrays have corresponding sculptural elements. In *Wheelbarrow/Cabin*, for instance, the photographic image of an old wooden building is complemented by a sculpture made out of stacked firewood and large glass cylinders. The transparent cylinders are organized in a way that represents an oversized wheelbarrow, while the “space” around this form is defined by the solid and opaque wood. Here, as elsewhere in the show, Pethick amuses us with the homeliness of his materials while challenging our understanding of our ingrained perceptual systems. Again, this is the characteristic paradox of his practice: conspicuously low-tech means at the service of highly sophisticated ideas.