

## Jerry Pethick: Out of the Corner of an Eye

by Matthew Kangas

Except for a 1986 exhibition at 49th Parallel in New York, a 1972 show at Nova 1 in Berkeley, and two small shows in Seattle, the art of Canadian sculptor Jerry Pethick is not nearly as well known in the U.S. as it should be. Born in London, Ontario, in 1935, educated at the Royal College of Art in London, England, and present at the birth of hologram art in New York and San Francisco, Pethick is known to a tiny handful of critics, curators, and fellow artists as a radically innovative polymath placed at an interface between art and science.

Part of the blame for Pethick's obscurity may be his own. His prolific writings, frequently accompanying exhibitions in Japan, Germany, France, and Canada, have mounted a rhetorical

smokescreen of poetic reverie and important-sounding, but usually incoherent, language that has either been swallowed whole, undigested, by foreign art critics or dismissed out of hand.

Yet when we examine contemporary sculpture of the past two or three decades, many of the major breakthroughs (technology, ecology, video and digital art) and important younger artists (Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow, Buster Simpson, Irene Whittome, Liz Magor) appear indebted to Pethick. Once called the "father of the Canadian avant-garde," Pethick may be more discussed and analyzed than seen. If anything, despite his revolutionary refigurings of the nature of disembodied perception, Pethick is responsible for contributing to the persistence of objecthood in sculpture at a time of conceptualism.

True, his multiple-part sculptures of recycled materials are divided, dispersed, and interdependent, but Pethick has restored and insisted on the significance of both object and idea. While

his early works involved attempts through lasers and other equipment such as holograms to render sculpture "obsolete," as he told British scientist Dennis Gabor, his myriad undertakings have reconstituted sculpture as a medium tied to corporeal experience. Backing up from one of his photographic arrays seen through hundreds of lenses, one sees out of the corner of an eye a related sculptural object, thus experiencing both purely retinal perception and the simultaneous bodily context of a three-dimensional thing. Figure and ground become one in the viewer's eye.

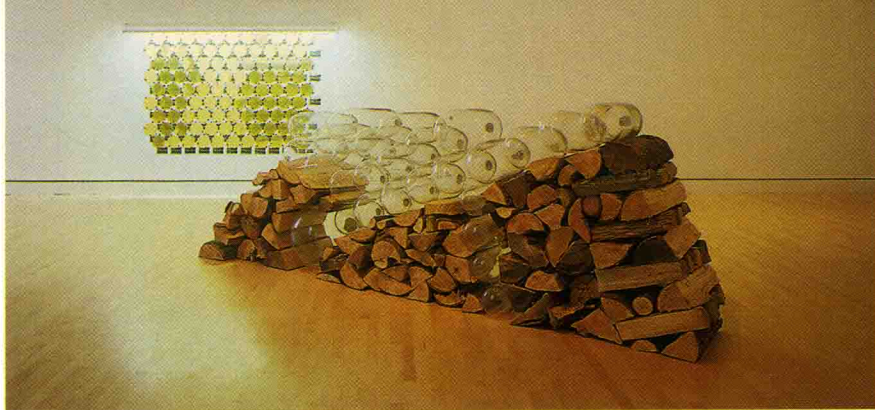
The ideas are more difficult or even impossible to articulate. They hinge on the viewer's willingness to participate in installations that involve dozens of grid-set photographs, rows of plastic fish-eye lenses, and attendant objects set at a short distance from the wall-mounted photo stacks. These arrays, as he calls them, are just one aspect of his art, but they identify him crucially as an original artist going where only a

**Below left: (foreground) *First and Second Growth*, 1985, (background) *Home Ship*, 1987-91, installation view. Right: *Altered Space*, *Niece Reconstruction*, 1990-91. Glass, cloth, found objects, and mixed media, 58 x 92 x 36 in.**



LEFT: JOHN C. TAYLOR, COURTESY OF CATRIONA JEFFRIES GALLERY / RIGHT: CHRISTIAN BAHIER





Left: *Wheelbarrow/Cabin*, 1989. Wood, glass, and plastic, dimensions variable.

Below: *Red Tongues*, *Blue Toboggans*, *Flat Land*, 1994/99. Found objects, plastic, and mixed media, dimensions variable.

few, like Cézanne, have tried to go: the phenomenological act of seeing, an encounter prior to thinking or analyzing meaning in art.

Sources for such pursuits involve not only the history of telescopes, cameras, and early photography (*Altered Space*, *Niepce Reconstruction*, 1990–91), but also the use of recycled materials (glass bottles, logs, refrigerators, washing machines, felt, plastic sheets—the list is endless) put to the service of Pethick's studio experiments. Closer perhaps to *arte povera* than to the work of '90s Young British Artists, Pethick's sculpture is a rejection of costly materials like bronze, a material he learned all about at the Royal College of Art studying with Dame Elisabeth Frink.

Instead, he has managed to create mysterious large-scale sculptures out of transformed found objects. Assemblages, to be sure, but such constructions are employed as signposts of consumption, startling viewers

who recognize the source material (steel rowboats, cast-off clothing, plastic crates, office furniture) and then further disorienting them with the initial unfamiliarity of the resultant conglomeration (*Wheelbarrow/Cabin*, 1989).

As recent works such as *Red Tongues*, *Blue Toboggans*, *Flat Land* (1999) attest, Pethick is making art that seems fresher than ever. However dispersed in sculpture's "expanded field," the artist's sense of composition is impeccable, drawing parts together into a satisfying but not entirely cohesive whole.

A 1999 exhibition at Open Space in Victoria, British Columbia, brought together 10 works dating from 1986 to the present, with several of them altered or "refined" over the years. Art is very open-ended for Pethick, with pieces occasionally redone, so there is never an attainable monumentality or conventional sense of finish and unity. Instead, we cave in to (or

reject) the calculated informality reinforced by the recycled materials, little realizing that such apparently effortless positioning and composition are crucial optical determinants in apprehending each work.

On the one hand, viewers wish to perceive, unravel, and understand the complex aspects of each piece. At the same time, as the Japanese critic Takeshi Kanazawa puts it, "Naturally, it is hard for everybody to understand all that he wishes to say through his works, but it is easy for viewers to find the artist's pleasure and passion."

Perhaps some of the less enthusiastic Canadian critics ("salad of memory," "just a pile of objects,") need to adopt Kanazawa's simpler approach to the delights of "the artist's pleasure and passion." If Pethick's approach to sculpture does involve such primal levels of perception, beginning at so simple and unintellectual a level as seeing may lead to further, more penetrating observations. Toying with how objects are perceived in space also toys with how we think about them and, in turn, how we think about art. Few artists raise such challenges, ones that resist what another Canadian critic, Billy Little, called the "très raffiné Apollonians, the theorists, the semioticians" somehow attracted to writing about Pethick.

No single retrospective has ever done justice to the breadth of Pethick's work. Related to international developments, but 10 to 20 years ahead of the curve, he remains a loner, an original visionary intent on continuing his explorations and "scientific" research into exactly what sculpture is and how we experience it.

*Matthew Kangas, a frequent contributor to Sculpture, also writes for Art in America and The Seattle Times. His latest book, Jim Leedy: Artist Across Boundaries, is available this winter from University of Washington Press.*

