

Sculpture that defies expectations

It's not easy pinning
down B.C. artist
Jerry Pethick.
His career is about
defying any
categorization

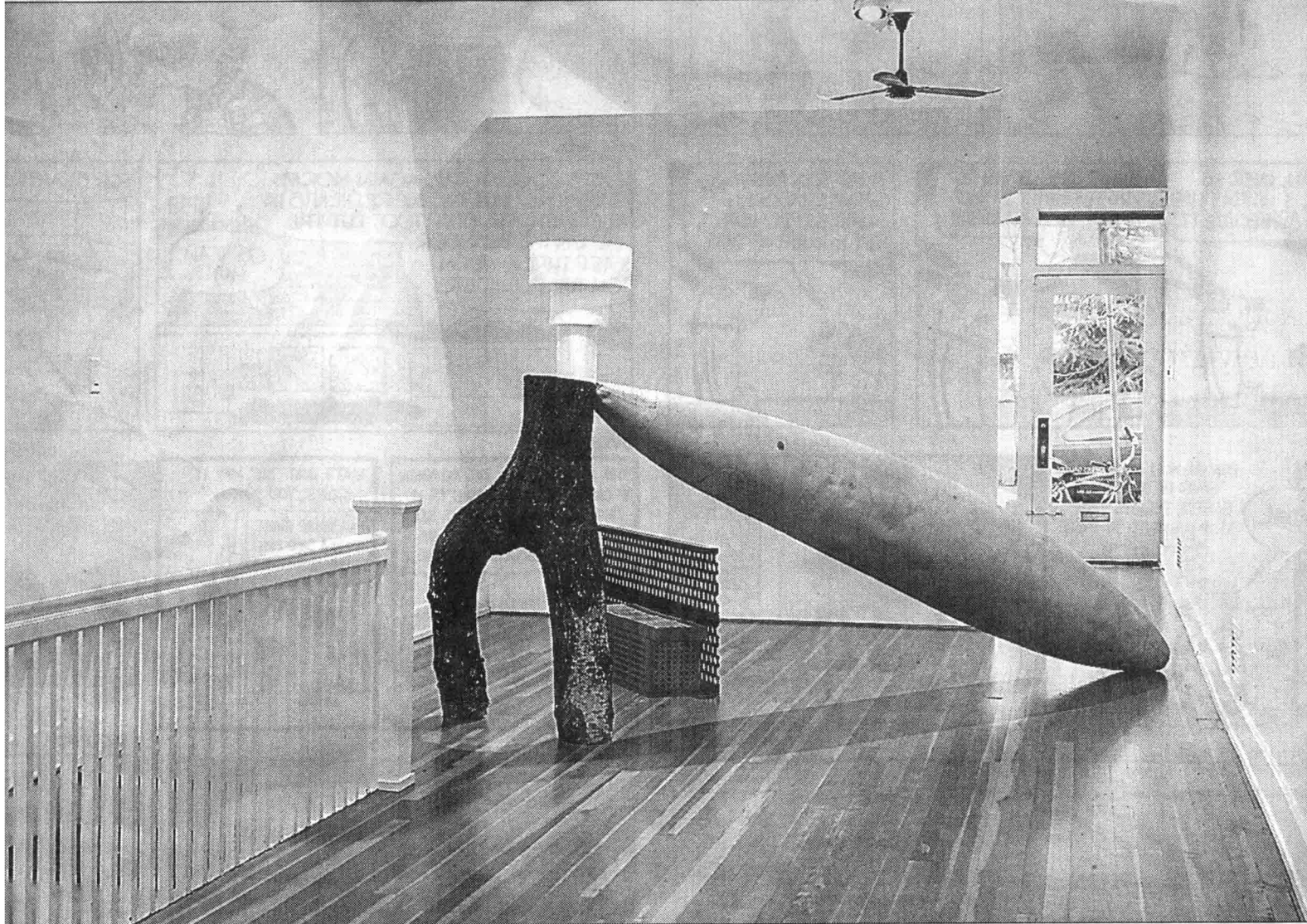
BY ROBIN LAURENCE, VANCOUVER

Born in London, Ont., and educated in London, England, Jerry Pethick has become the quintessential West Coast artist. His West Coastness has less to do with the fact that he's lived on British Columbia's Hornby Island for 25 years than with his on-the-edge sensibilities — the far, far, western edge. Part Beat assemblagist, part photo-conceptualist, and part folk formalist, Pethick defies categorization. He melds science, history and art with postmodern erudition and Dadaist provocation. He throws humour into the mix, too.

Although he was trained in traditional sculpting and casting techniques, Pethick early on experimented with the use of lasers and holograms. Many viewers in this city, however, associate him with an amusing and somehow definitive work in the collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, a kind of Venus of Willendorf figure he composed in 1981-82 almost entirely of lightbulbs.

Pethick has a gift for subverting traditions of heroic sculpture with combinations of banal materials such as hay, duct tape, cardboard cylinders, plastic and sections of discarded kitchen appliances — although subversion is not necessarily his aim. His interest in materials is expansive and egalitarian.

Just when you think you've grasped what Pethick is doing — investigating the history of optics, for instance, through grids or "arrays" of photographs and plastic Fresnel lenses, in complex combination with found objects — he turns a sharp corner, away from your expectation. *Trough*, the mixed-media work that is the centrepiece



Pethick's mixed-media sculpture, *Trough*: Paradoxically, its charm is assured by the charmless elements of which it is composed.

of his current exhibition at Vancouver's Catriona Jeffries Gallery, represents just such a turn — and a return to pure sculpture. Unlike Pethick's earlier work, it deals entirely with solid objects rather than optical effects and commands a relationship with real rather than illusory space.

The work's charm is paradoxically assured by the charmless elements of which it is composed: three rolls of white, polyethylene insulating material; a sawed-off section of tree trunk; a corroded aluminum pontoon; a piece of bril-

liant blue anodized aluminum (of the kind used for industrial stairways, its rows of circular perforations evoke Pethick's previous arrays of plastic lenses), and a stack of clay vent blocks. The challenge Pethick issued himself was to make these disparate forms and materials "work together" in space, and they do work. They also make you smile.

The log is emphatically anthropomorphic, its form suggestive of a lower body, one leg at a jaunty angle and complemented by a felicitous configuration of natural bulges and creases, and clusters of

moss. To Pethick, however, the log evokes a flying buttress, one that he has cantilevered against the pontoon and stacked with the rolls of polyethylene, thus creating an odd, Duchampian kind of architecture, a rational/non-rational claim on space further enhanced by the low "fence" of perforated aluminum and vent blocks situated nearby.

In some ways, *Trough* is a serious engagement with the challenges of found forms and materials; in other ways, it is witty and playful. The same might be said of Pethick's six drawings here, each of which combines a single gesture in graphite with alternative gestures composed of — or perhaps deconstructed by — the kind of glittery stickers of flowers, bugs, frogs and fruit that you might find at the local dollar store and associate with child's play.

Another line of invention is taken by a series of photographs, *Dream Sequence I-V*, which alludes to an obscure passage of 18th-century fantasy literature. Written by Charles-François Tiphaigne de La

Roche (1729-1774), this passage imagines a window-like work of art that magically captures and preserves a real-life view of sea, shore and sky. Pethick proposes to find a way to create this fantastical artwork, perhaps using virtual-imaging techniques and including sound and movement.

In the meantime, he has produced a series of working photographs of waves splashing around immense boulders, backed by greasy, grey sea and sky. As a way of "stepping between the photograph and the observer," he has mounted each image behind etched Spectrafoil. It's the Spectrafoil (along with the cheesy mountings — black silicon sealant on white enamel panels) that makes these works particularly Pethickian. And particularly engaging.

Jerry Pethick continues at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver until March 3; 604-736-1554.

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