

A pioneer of holographic art

Eccentric artist's assemblages and installations expressed his passion for optics and his curiosity about visual perception

BY ROBIN LAURENCE, VANCOUVER

In 1975, when Jerry Pethick moved from San Francisco to a British Columbian Island with his wife, Margaret, and young son, Yana, pessimists might have predicted his career, as a pioneer of holographic art, would collapse into obscurity.

Located off the east coast of Vancouver Island, three ferry rides distant from the mainland, Hornby Island was hardly the hub of avant-garde art activity. Nor was it an easy place in which to develop the three-dimensional imaging techniques with which he had been identified. "You had to be pretty self-sufficient to live here," Margaret Pethick says. The first two summers there, the Pethicks lived in a cave in the side of a cliff. By all accounts, life in the cave was cozy and comfortable.

"Jerry built decks and things," Ms. Pethick says. "It was beautiful — right above the water [with the tide] coming in and out.

"At high tide, we had to climb down a cliff, but at low tide you could go around on the rocks. Yana became a little goat."

Later, the family moved to a more conventional home.

Mr. Pethick, who was born in London, Ont., in 1935 and educated as a sculptor in London, England, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, appreciated his island surroundings and the opportunity to work uninterrupted.

On a small, chevron-shaped parcel of land in the Strait of Georgia, he was able to focus completely on his art, grateful for his remove from the distractions of urban life. Still, he balanced his island existence with extended absences from it, travelling widely and exhibiting frequently. He took sabbaticals in Paris, London and Montreal, and showed his work, to much acclaim, from Seattle to Amsterdam and from New York to Cologne. Obscurity didn't happen.

Mr. Pethick has been described not simply as an artist, but also as an inventor, a philosopher, an archaeologist, a historian of optics and a bricoleur — someone who could fashion wondrous objects out of unremarkable pieces of junk. Certainly, his art challenges critics with its refusal to conform to any known school, movement or trend.

"He was, in the best sense, an eccentric," says Grant Arnold, curator of the Vancouver Art Gallery. "His work was pretty hard to categorize in terms of what was happening in the art world. At the same time, it didn't look out of date. It was very current — but it didn't look like anything else."

Mr. Pethick created assemblages and installations through which he expressed his passion for optics, his curiosity about visual perception and his desire to use illusory space as a new sculptural material.

He often explored sophisticated optical theories and ideas using unsophisticated materials and devices, such as etched mirrors, diffraction grating tape and grids of plastic Fresnel lenses. (A Fresnel lens reduces the weight of a large, magnifying lens by flattening a number of smaller, concentric lenses within it.) These he combined with photographic components and the most



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unexpected of found objects, including bicycle tires, washing machine parts, hay bales, licence plates, ventilation bricks and rolls of polyethylene insulation.

"Part of what was interesting about his work was this play between very unassuming and crude sorts of materials that would be found lying around, and this incredible knowledge of science, as well as art history," Mr. Arnold says.

Examples of Mr. Pethick's art include a smoky cloud of photos and lenses above a "fireplace" composed of Spectra foil flames, enameled steel, a small log and a rotating plastic cylinder; a monumental Stone Age Venus made entirely of used light bulbs; and a striding figure (an homage to Francois Millet's 1850 painting, *The Sower*) constructed from wine bottles.

"He was a completely idiosyncratic and unique thinker," says Annette Hurtig, an independent curator and long-time friend of the Pethicks. "His practice is a reflection of how he thought — and he thought in a way that was different than anybody else."

Professionally, that meant his work "critiqued conventional visibility," she says. Personally, it meant that his friends turned to him for his unusual readings of issues and ideas.

Irrespective of his creative and

intellectual individuality, however, Mr. Pethick worked very closely with his wife. "Margaret was involved in just about every aspect of what Jerry did," Ms. Hurtig stresses.

Gordon Payne, a fellow Hornby Island artist, philosopher and friend, first encountered Mr. Pethick's art in 1967, at an exhibition in London, England, where Mr. Pethick lived from 1957 until 1969. At the time, Mr. Pethick was creating small, vacuum-formed plastic objects, completely different in scale and intention from the prevailing sculptural fashion.

"What I was struck with was, this was somebody who really knew what he was doing. This was no amateur, this wasn't somebody who was groping, this was a mature artist."

Thirty years later, Mr. Payne encountered the plastic sculptures again, in a retrospective exhibition of Mr. Pethick's. "I was gratified to see how contemporary they looked. They looked as though they were made yesterday."

After working with plastic, Mr. Pethick began experimenting with lasers and holography; invented and patented a sand-based stabilization system for the production of holograms (his London studio was close to an Underground train line, his wife recalls); took part in early hologram exhibitions; and, in 1971,

after living briefly in Ann Arbor and New York City, co-founded the School of Holography in San Francisco, the first of its kind in the world.

In 1973, however, he gave up holography because, Margaret Pethick says, it proved to be "too cumbersome." Ultimately, the technology inhibited rather than enlarged Mr. Pethick's creative practice.

But he never relinquished his fascination with visual perception, illusory space and 3-D imaging technologies. A keen historian of both optics and photography, he was especially drawn to the work of Gabriel Lippmann, the French physicist who won a Nobel Prize in 1908 for his discoveries in full-colour photographic processes.

Mr. Pethick's art investigated some of Professor Lippmann's theories, with arrays of sequential photographs mounted behind grids of Fresnel lenses. These elements created (depending on the position of the viewer) a unified image that appeared to float in space, occupying three dimensions.

He also worked with British scientist George Jull to create a fly's-eye lens camera, the patent for which was approved shortly before Mr. Pethick died.

Despite Mr. Pethick's immense learning, his friends and colleagues remember him as intellectually

democratic and socially accessible. "He was incredibly personable," Mr. Arnold says. "Really easy to talk to, really unassuming, but really knowledgeable."

Mr. Payne adds, "Jerry was a person who had very strong ideas about how life should be lived. You couldn't be around him and be a snob, for example. You couldn't be arrogant, you couldn't be pretentious." You could, however, have a good time.

"I travelled quite a bit with the Pethicks," Ms. Hurtig says, "and this kind of anecdote happened over and over again in different places in different ways." Mr. Pethick, she says, would study the restaurant guides for a city such as Paris, choose a restaurant, examine a street map, then set out on foot with a group of friends, family and co-workers. "Sometimes it would take an hour to reach our destination," Ms. Hurtig recalls. "But they were invariably excellent places. And this was always an important part of the day, the wonderful meal at the end of the work day, reached by this adventure through the city."

She pauses, then adds, "And then there was the walk home."

Jerry Pethick, who died of cancer at his home on Hornby Island on July 7, leaves his wife and son.

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