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VISUAL ART

Brian Groombridge

by E C Woodley

Toronto's O'Born Contemporary (the first was a group show with like-minded colleague Robert Canali), included some of his smartest and most stylish pictures. What he means by the "stupid image" is not kitsch—or not exactly, anyway. It's more like everyday occurrences of the spectacular. Think, for instance, of a sunset, or a waterfall shot with a dramatic lens flare, perhaps encountered on a calendar or a postcard. These are photographic tricks, essentially, easily recognizable and utterly familiar. And yet they don't cease to work on us. As theorist Boris Groys has observed, "In terms of aesthetic experience, no work of art can stand comparison to even an average beautiful sunset." In Rodo-Vankeulen's past work, he has been particularly good at isolating these kinds of subject matter and effects and deploying them with subtle quotation marks. "Eyes Without a Face" included a piece entitled *Sunset* that may even be above-average in terms of beautiful sunsets. Without any horizon line or foreground objects to judge, however, it may take the viewer a few moments to realize that the particularly otherworldly quality of this sunset derives from it being upside down. These kinds of sly displacements—simple, obvious but effective—are typical of Rodo-Vankeulen's work, though sometimes the distancing operation lies between pictures rather than within them. *Goldfinch (Summer Plumage)*, a softly lit, black-and-white photo of a bird regarding its reflection in an ornate mirror, would court kitsch if it weren't hung next to an abstract triptych titled *Tungsten Movement*, in which spectral shadows (including Rodo-Vankeulen's hand) cast against his studio wall are captured in vivid orange hues.

In this, as in a number of works in "Eyes Without a Face," Rodo-Vankeulen takes photographic effects as his principal subject matter to produce striking abstractions. The simply-titled *Light* captures a glare pouring in from a slash in a flat surface, while *Green Cutting Board, Twin* and the four images in his "Clock Tile" series explore various digital manipulations: colour shifts, the clone stamp and tiling effects. Each exudes a particular aura of mystery: we both do and do not know what we are looking at. What Rodo-Vankeulen wants to highlight is what he calls the "visible invisible," the condition of being aware of manipulated images without always being able to identify how and where they've been altered, and the combination of distrust and allure that arises there. In an economy of vision defined by glut and flux, we are always suspicious but still susceptible. Like Rodo-Vankeulen's goldfinch, we might not know what we're looking at, even though it moves us. ■

"Eyes Without a Face" was exhibited at O'Born Contemporary in Toronto from November 17 to December 22, 2012.

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The three small rooms of Brian Groombridge's retrospective at YYZ were unique and spacious precincts populated by words and numbers, signals and signs. Printed onto objects or positioned as titles, words in themselves seemed to take on the qualities of things, giving the term "printed matter" a new turn. Paradoxically, Groombridge's few objects without texts or titles possessed something of the transitory or provisional qualities of words. The forms of two untitled painted aluminum sculptures from 2008 suggest "chair" and "radio" respectively, as if thought has retained its status as thought while having become precisely haptic, something you want to hold in your hand. The "radio" is composed of two small rectangles screwed together at a right angle. A circle is cut into the vertical. Its geometry and palette link it to De Stijl but it cannot be said to represent any precisely historical style. The "chair" is flat, about one inch thick. It looks like a criss-crossed, possibly modernist, diagrammatic cut-out. Projecting out from its blueness are three small square and rectangular plates: white, yellow and grey complications of flatness and chair-ness. Neither mobile nor stabile (to use Calder's terms) it hangs still from the ceiling, by a wire. Its suspension is a matter of fact, and also a condition.

Produced between 1989 and 2012, the works at YYZ evoke familiar forms and formats. A list of these might include the diagram, the measuring device, the museum alcove, the commercial sign, the trade show display device, the child's game, the poem and the notebook. Here, the provisional and the quotidian, the props of something like daily life, open

up into the more vast (though often no less quotidian) spaces of mind, memory and history. The “between” is important in Groombridge. It is a length of interior space that must be travelled before arriving at the totality of the works themselves (a totality, however, that is prone to flux).

One of the works Groombridge produced in 2005 is a three-quarter-metre-high white box on a stand. The box sits about chest height to above head height. You approach it from a distance and are led around it until finding that the box is open on one side. On two interior sides is a list in white type against a wide blue band:

A CARTON OF BT CIGARETTES + A CIGARETTE-MAKING DEVICE + PAPERS + A HARD CASE FOR MY GLASSES + A 1980 POCKET CALENDAR + 5 LINED NOTEBOOKS + A BALL-POINT PEN + REFILLS + A BIBLE + A SMALL CZECH-GERMAN AND GERMAN-CZECH DICTIONARY + A GERMAN LAN-GAUGE TEXTBOOK + A LOT OF VITAMINS + TEA + A POCKETKNIFE + A CHEAP RAZOR + A LARGE QUANTITY OF GOOD RAZOR BLADES + 3 TUBES OF ORDINARY SHAVING CREAM + 3 TUBES OF TOOTHPASTE + A NEW (HARD-BRISTLED) TOOTHBRUSH + A SMALL BRUSH FOR WASHING + BROWN SUNTAN LOTION + 3 TUBES OF ALPA + NAIL SCISSORS + A POCKET MIRROR + A NAIL FILE + 2 PAIRS OF WARM SOCKS

This work is named $50^{\circ} 06' 0'' \text{ N}$, $14^{\circ} 15' 0'' \text{ E}$. These are the geographic coordinates of the Czech Republic prison where Václav Havel was imprisoned. The list is his, made so that these items, corresponding to his own dignity and survival, could be brought to him by his beloved wife Olga



Havlová. Groombridge lifted the exact list and its typeface from Havel's *Letters to Olga*, 1988 (Faber & Faber).

Groombridge's is a third-generation approach to the idea of “escaping the frame,” an idea that so obsessed early conceptual art. Not only has the frame been physically returned to (as it was, along with the object, in Groombridge's teacher, Ian Carr-Harris's work of the 1970s), but often it has become so integrated into the work that it ceases to call attention to itself. The largest room at YYZ was the most visually delicate of the retrospective, housing six works, including $50^{\circ} 06' 0'' \text{ N}$, $14^{\circ} 15' 0'' \text{ E}$, yet seeming close to holding nothing at all (Groombridge is, perhaps, the Richard Tuttle of conceptual art). Scattered at intervals and covering the long wall in this room was *Tati*, 2000, a work named after and mimicking the “animated gaze” of the French filmmaker Jacques Tati; a series of eight white, enamel-on-board, right-angled shapes framed in white—geometrical units as if representing rooms, where each unit is marked with a pale, yellow triangle, an arrow-like sign indicating the direction of the represented gaze. Seemingly puzzle-like, the units are



of different dimensions but take up playfully, precisely the same area. In Groombridge's work, as in Tati's, perception, in both of its primary senses, is key. Here, the white frames are borders between the known and the unknown, the empty space within the units, and emptier space between each unit. As in much of Groombridge's work, one escapes the frame in the space of one's perception and knowledge. These frames also have an anecdotal life. Tati's family were frame makers, and Tati, it might be said, as a composer of film frames, followed in their footsteps. His camera rarely seemed to move, so as to admit the viewer into his busy set pieces, an effect of internal movement and external stillness that Groombridge's work also encourages. ■

“Brian Groombridge: small telescopes” was exhibited at YYZ, Toronto, from September 8 to December 1, 2012.

E C Woodley is an artist, curator, composer and critic.

1. “Brian Groombridge: small telescopes,” installation view. $50^{\circ} 06' 0'' \text{ N}$, $14^{\circ} 15' 0'' \text{ E}$, 2005, (foreground), *Tati*, 2000, (background). Courtesy YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto. Photograph: Allan Kosmajac

2. Brian Groombridge, *Untitled*, 2008, painted aluminum and wood, $117 \times 40 \times 40 \text{ cm}$ with pedestal. Courtesy YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto. Photograph: Allan Kosmajac