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**DEBORAH KIRK** is an interdisciplinary artist and sometimes writer currently living and working in Toronto. She was awarded a Master of Visual Studies from the University of Toronto in 2011 and has been a member of the YYZ Board since 2012.

**MICHAEL A. ROBINSON** holds a BFA from Concordia University and an MFA from Université de Paris I/Panthéon-Sorbonne. He qualifies his own practice as the result of tangled ideas, thoughts and experiences which esteem transparency over rigor, practice over the final product, transformation and opening over conclusions and affirmations. His most recent group shows include *Art Histories*, VOX Centre de l'image, (2012), *Québec Gold*, Reims, France (2008), la *Biennale nationale de sculpture contemporaine*, Trois-Rivières (2006), and *Avancer dans le brouillard*, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (2004). He has had many solo exhibitions, most recently at gallery Antoine Ertaskiran, Montreal (2013), who represents him in Montréal. His works are part of numerous public and private collections, such as the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, and the Canada Council Art Bank. Robinson lives and works in Montréal where he teaches part-time at UQAM's Department of Visual and Media Arts.

C L O S E

E N C O U N T E R S

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**BY DEBORAH KIRK**

Arguments surrounding the nature of *Being* are perhaps the most urgent and enduring debates to line the records of documented history. Throughout time, we have struggled to gain insight into the human condition; to find meaning and purpose in our existence; to make sense of our relations to one another and to the world we inhabit. However tentative, these positions have revealed structures of knowing and becoming, casting light on the creative process itself and in turn on its formal, functional and dynamic possibilities. These preoccupations lie at the very heart of Michael A. Robinson's work, presented here in *The Origin of Ideas*.

By way of our human impulse to make connections between things, we often look first to narrative—for this body of work, that unifying account turns to the skies as the obvious point of reference. Explosive forms and figures, recording and viewing devices, combined with the symbolic weight of light itself, allude to a distinctly cosmic context. Of course, theories about the origins of the universe have much to contribute to any discussion about the basic formation of entities; observational and experimental modes of inquiry and relational concepts and categories such as 'the abyss' or 'the sublime', have evolved out of an attempt to reconcile our place and purpose within the universal scheme. However, this reference is perhaps best understood as an analogy for the very act of creation and of the broader metaphysical phenomena to shape expression and experience.

*Panoptic Illuminations* (2013) is one of two arresting installations to plumb the depths of such ontological inquiries. Suspended in the gallery space, this imposing spherical structure derives its form from the concentric organization of aluminium work lamps, now filled with light radiating from its centre. This energetic field is given substance and presence through the artist's act of confinement. In this respect the work reproduces the structure of that most basic philosophical stance: that being is contingent on the absence of being—what *IS* must by definition be limited by what *Is Not*. But the

question of contingency is further complicated here by an illusory effect; the radiant mass would appear to declare itself as a distinct and autonomous entity and thus rejects its derivative status as the product of its light infused structure. The contradiction implied with this shift in condition raises circular 'chicken or egg' type of arguments, which inevitably throw assumptions of ascendancy and causality to the wind—arguably, the presented aporia seems to undermine the very basis for *apriori* formulations. However, the proposition, while logically untenable, argues for the possibility of a theory of being that exists beyond the confines of traditional philosophical constructs; one that entertains the feasibility of a site within which creative innovativeness effectively defies strictly rational explanations.

Beyond questions of genesis and constitution, Robinson's installations reveal much about the functional and relational consequences of sight and visual perception as means to process information and consolidate knowledge. The 'panoptic' refers to a kind of privileged perspective that apprehends the 'whole' from a single point of view. The concept, as it was realized in architectural form, puts the locus of sight at the centre of a circular structure, thus permitting unobscured visual access to all points around its perimeter. Whereas the point of privilege is typically accorded to the viewer observing from an externalized position, here the objective viewing dynamic is reciprocated with the benefit of 'sight' residing equally from within the object itself.

In *Subject to Scrutiny* (2013) this expansive and reciprocal viewing dynamic is overturned in place of multiple perspectives which sharply converge at a single point. The dense cluster of cameras mounted with lenses trained to the wall, gives way to a profusion of tripod legs which pierce the space in an explosive radial configuration; with flashes engaged, their eruptions illuminate and reflect off the unyielding surface. Here again, the real and signifying potential of light can be viewed as a precondition to sight (and therefore to knowledge), but whether

the constructed object's close proximity to the 'subject' permits a microscopic or simply myopic range and depth of field, remains open to interpretation. And what of the indeterminate status of the cameras themselves? Do they stand in as proxies for the viewer, as surrogate entities to witness and record facts? Whatever the case, the riot of camera parts and limbs encloses the subject and positions the viewer at a distance from the site of creation. In spite of the claim, suggested by the title, of permitting close critical analysis, the formal configuration of the piece in practice works against this very premise. Turning its back to the viewer, the form brings about a kind of foreclosure and with it proscribes any real prospect for reciprocity.

In stark contrast to these sculptural works, whose striking scale and narrative dimensions assert relational and symbolic attributes bound up in notions of 'exteriority', a fundamental shift in the ways of seeing and knowing marks a gradual change in the wall works that surround the space. For this series of drawings and low-relief cast panels, the artist has eschewed representational content, illusionary and symbolic reference, in favour of a limited palette and vocabulary of marks, gestures and lines—an intuitive and restrained approach guides the choice and handling of materials. In the absence of extraneous materials or ideas, the works exist and function independently from the world as internally coherent documents. Here the Suprematist impulse, which has so profoundly influenced the artist's practice, takes hold in search of pure, boundless and unmediated expressive forms. More intimate in scale, these works invite close, nuanced study and moments of quiet contemplation. Their appeal is first and foremost to the senses, privileging phenomenological over intellectual insight, through a reflexive mapping of subtle shifts in awareness.

In the move away from the object towards greater subjective freedom, Robinson and his predecessors have looked for ways to reconcile one of humanity's most perplexing enigmas: the fundamental lapse between sight and knowledge, subject and object,

reality and experience. As casualties of distance and failed connections, it stands to reason (if not in practice) that through greater proximity, these breaches might yet be overcome; that through close encounters and shared experiences stands the greatest hope for a transcendence by which deep and meaningful exchanges would be made possible. If the formal structures of both creation and knowledge can be conceived as on-going processes of discovery, each existing along a single continuum, each intending toward the other, then perhaps the prospect of resolution is now a little less dim.