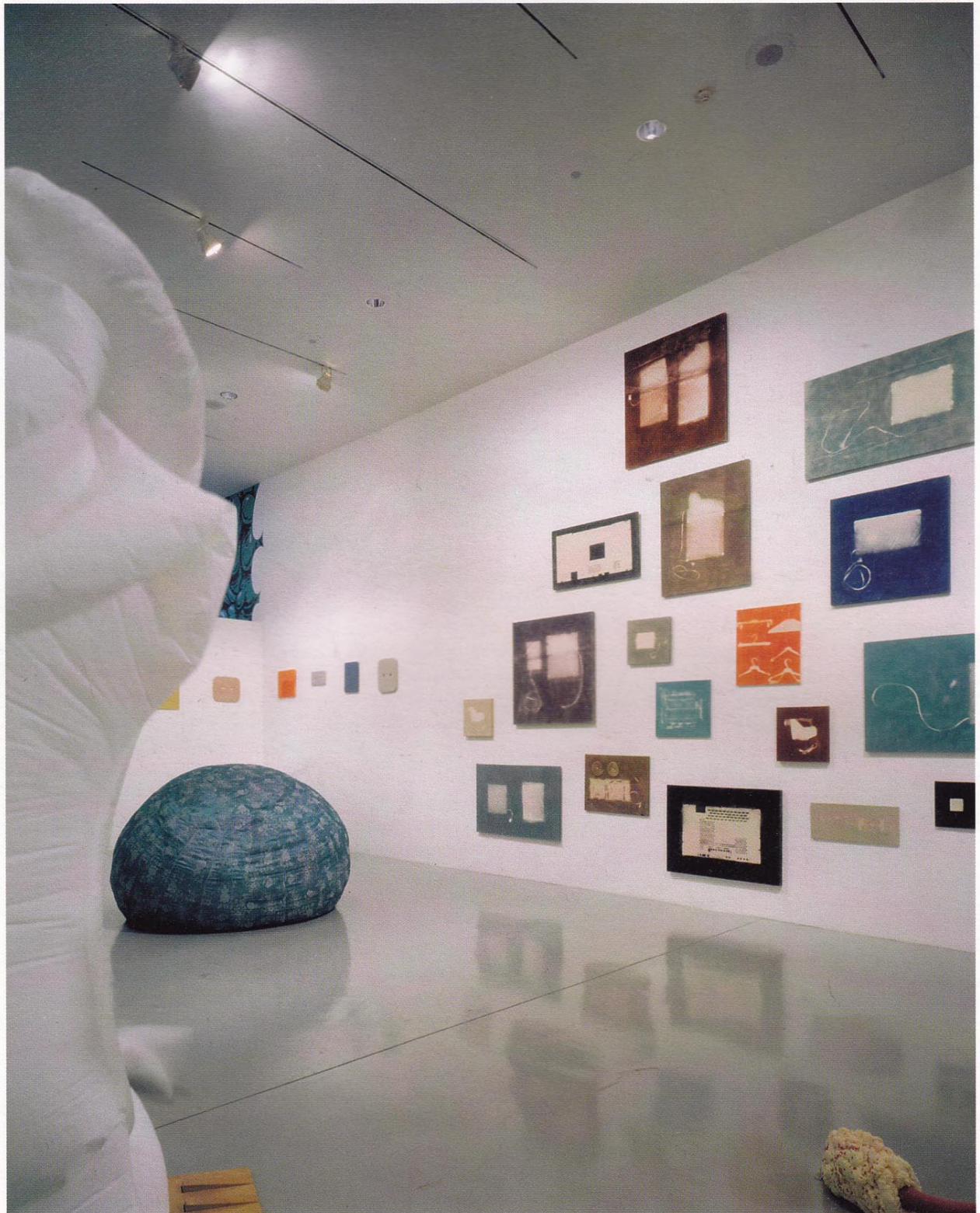


UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO ART GALLERY

RESEARCH CENTER IN ART + CULTURE



VERSION CITY

SEPTEMBER 25 - DECEMBER 20, 1998

VERSION CITY

BY JOHN MASSIER

An infinite number of monkeys working on an infinite number of typewriters will eventually define all that is Canada.

-television commercial for Molson Canadian beer, 1998

There is a train at Version City

Waiting for the rhythm mail

If you can jump then jump right now

She can pull you through to better days

-the Clash, "Version City," from the album *SANDINISTA!*, 1980

THE HEAVING FLUID MASS

In a 1946 anthology entitled *A Pocketful of Canada*, an attempt is made to "reflect the spirit of Canada" through selections of prose, poetry, essays, speeches and statistical information. Edited on behalf of The Canadian Council of Education for Citizenship, the collection is an earnest post-WW2 effort at national boosterism, describing a young nation comprised of numerous distinct regions and filled with promise and possibility. Still, a certain vagueness about Canadian identity — and the individual's place within it — is apparent from the outset. The first essay, Bruce Hutchinson's "Canada The Unknown," begins: "No one knows my country, neither the stranger nor its own sons...." Hutchinson describes the "heaving fluid stuff of Canada" as a hinge between the Old World of Europe and the New World of America, poised to realize some sort of greatness, if only we become attuned to our own potential. Hutchinson is imprecise about what greatness might be at hand, acknowledging that we have yet to grasp the full size and shape of Canada and have yet to feel "the full pulse of its heart, the flex of its muscles, the pattern of its mind." He merely

suggests that "upon us hangs more than we know."¹

Thirty years later, Marshall McLuhan addressed this unknown quality in an essay entitled "Canada: The Borderline Case." He noted that once the United States had established itself as a "world environment," Canada began functioning as an "anti-environment," an ambiguous locale that helped to "make the dominant environment intelligible through proximity and contrast." McLuhan points out that nations like England, France, Germany and the United States established their national goals and identities through the "rise of self-regulating markets...whose quantitative equilibrium has been obsolesced by the dominance of the new world of instant information." Canadians, he said, have had to learn to live without "the bold accents of the national ego-trippers of other lands," becoming in essence "national nobodies." McLuhan's remarks are not predicated in regret, but rather in the opinion that such ambiguity is, in fact, the preferred position.²

Version City is a survey exhibition of emerging Toronto art from the 1990s, not a comprehensive view but a slice of the Toronto scene from the past decade, a

version of a story from a variety of artistic practices and positions. Here, they are brought together in a neighborhood of ideas which incline more toward open-ended questions than stated positions; questions posed about place, identity, form and narrative.

PLACE

To question one's sense of place and identity with respect to the land is a Canadian historical and art-historical truism. In Stacey Lancaster's video *Western*, an unidentified countryside of hills and trees, raggedly shot through a car window, is accompanied by a stirring musical score. Like most of the work in the exhibition, it has nothing to do with Canada per se. The hills depicted were, in fact, photographed in California, and the score is the title music to *The Magnificent Seven*. But it is a familiar bucolic image and the heroic theme is familiar even if we can't place it. A humorous juxtaposition, looped repeatedly, it becomes less strange and more quixotic, a land of splendor and aspiration which can give rise to feelings of dislocation.

Nestor Kruger reflects similar dislocations in his paintings of landscapes and suburban houses,



whose appearances mimic the look of paint-by-number pictures. Kruger's works include those that draw upon the general landscape, such as *Snowy Village* or *Drift*. Others, like *Moon Deluxe* and *Belvedere*, belong to the broader North American landscape of suburbia. *Island*, which illustrates the mirrored image of a palm tree on an island, refers to the distant sense of a land made exotic through its elusiveness.

Eric Glavin moves indoors to depict a banal but exotic urban landscape. His *Exclusive Engagement* coalesces various quotidian features — carpet tiles, rubber and aluminum vents — into a sleek and stylized sculptural unit that appears both placid and mundane. In his untitled video loops, office hallways, a potted plant, institutional carpeting and flat concrete benches depict an Alphaville of Canada. Seemingly

cold and impersonal, Glavin adds a Muzak-like accompaniment that layers the cool functionality with a warmly exotic quality.

Without any representational images of landscape, Reid Diamond's text work *Glitch* still imparts a dislocated sense of place even though he uses real place names. While the town Brandon may be known to Canadians, Wasagaming and Minnesota are as real, but "unknown" places in the scheme of things. Diamond's tale is realized ephemerally in silver on blue glitter, more of a non-story, an incidental outtake, fading in and out without apparent purpose or resolution. A band of musicians load their instruments into a van, get some food and head north on Highway Ten, eventually curving west "where they turned into the path of a refracting sun" — a classic happy ending. But Diamond

inserts a portentous element as an approaching car flashes its lights to warn the van to turn its headlights on: "The driver responded by activating the cigarette lighter, causing the electrical system to malfunction. A second warning signal came from an approaching Ford Galaxy 500."

In Daniel Bowden's video loop *A2K*, we see a range of mountains behind which a star-filled sky continually rises. The scene is a composite of glacial topography

ABOVE: Stacey Lancaster, *Western*, video, 1996.

COVER: Installation view of *Version City*, October 1998. From left: Max Streicher, *Boiler*, 1991, spun-bonded olefin, fans, flexible duct, switches; Rocco Turino, *Bedrock*, 1997, quilted mattress material, synthetic wadding; Euan Macdonald, *Blockheads*, 1997-98, acrylic on vacuformed plastic; Luis Jacob, paintings, 1995-96, Krylon spray paint on unprimed canvas.

and computer-generated stars, the stars scrolling up in a manner reminiscent of a player piano. Its soundtrack, as constant as the stars, emits only the soft roar of crickets. The post-millennial reference of the title gives the work a sense that we are witnessing a landscape of the possible, locked in a holding pattern, as though waiting for the frontier to arrive and the action to begin. But the holding pattern is not filled with tension or trepidation. It's hypnotic and alluring, comfortable in its anticipation.

IDENTITY

Like Stacey Lancaster, Sally McKay utilizes an element from American popular culture as a mythic template. Her collection of found Ernie and Bert dolls — dirty, battered, some missing eyes, others missing limbs — appear less as educational puppets and more as icons of lostness. They are familiar forms, but now with a cumulative pathos illustrating an undefined anxiety. They begin to read as tragicomic heroes, waiting for Godot as

eagerly as Vladimir and Estragon or Beavis and Butthead.

Karma Clarke-Davis convolutes questions of identity in her videos *Master F* and *Super*. In the former, an unidentified female with disturbing growths on her calves moves her way along a dark street and through a corner convenience store. The viewer's potential distaste for Clarke-Davis's prosthetic effect is a jarring juxtaposition to the otherwise sexy appeal of the figure and her long legs stepping assuredly through a magnetic hip-hop soundtrack. The dominant image of *Super* is an alluringly slow shot of a couple leaning forward in perpetual anticipation of a kiss. The promised kiss is eventually interrupted by the sharing of an intimate placebo for affection, the woman's face then suddenly animated into a demonic image with glowing eyes and sharp, snarling teeth. Bracketing this action at the video's beginning and end are a series of slow dissolve images, details culled from early 1970s album cover designs, establishing an imaginary landscape in which questions of identity and desire are compounded.

Greg Hefford's *Speech Bubble* is constructed of steel and plexiglass and lit from within. The speech bubble remains entirely mute, containing no message but only its satisfied glow and a sense of its completeness. While mimicking commercial signage (the work is reconstructed from



TOP LEFT: Sally McKay, *Bert*, 1997, mixed media, 2.5' x 2.5'.

BOTTOM LEFT: Carl Skelton, *Canadiana: Unfinished Cherry ("Spanky")*, 1996 *Canadiana: #91 550 SX ("Twister")*, 1996. Both acrylic resin, urethane foam, aluminum, cherry wood.

RIGHT: Second floor installation view. Max Streicher's *Boiler* is on the left. Above: Greg Hefford, *Speech Bubble*, 1994, steel, plexiglass, fluorescent lights, aluminum, 73" x 54" x 7".

an old signage unit), there is nothing being sold. If there is nothing insistent except the work itself, this is the surest sign that absence of the specific does not mean "nothing is there." The work plays off its significant presence to suggest that absence need not be unsettled or anxious.

FORM

Ambiguity of form is present in works that appear both lyrical and pathetic in their depictions of form and formlessness. Roger Carter's *Phump!* and *Smoothie* collapse several influences into a pair of hapless-looking sculptures, slumping as if awaiting direction. Carter brings together his interest in popular culture, modernist sculpture, car culture and graffiti culture into sculptures that vibrate with color and form but resist their own vibrancy via a lethargy reminiscent of beanbag

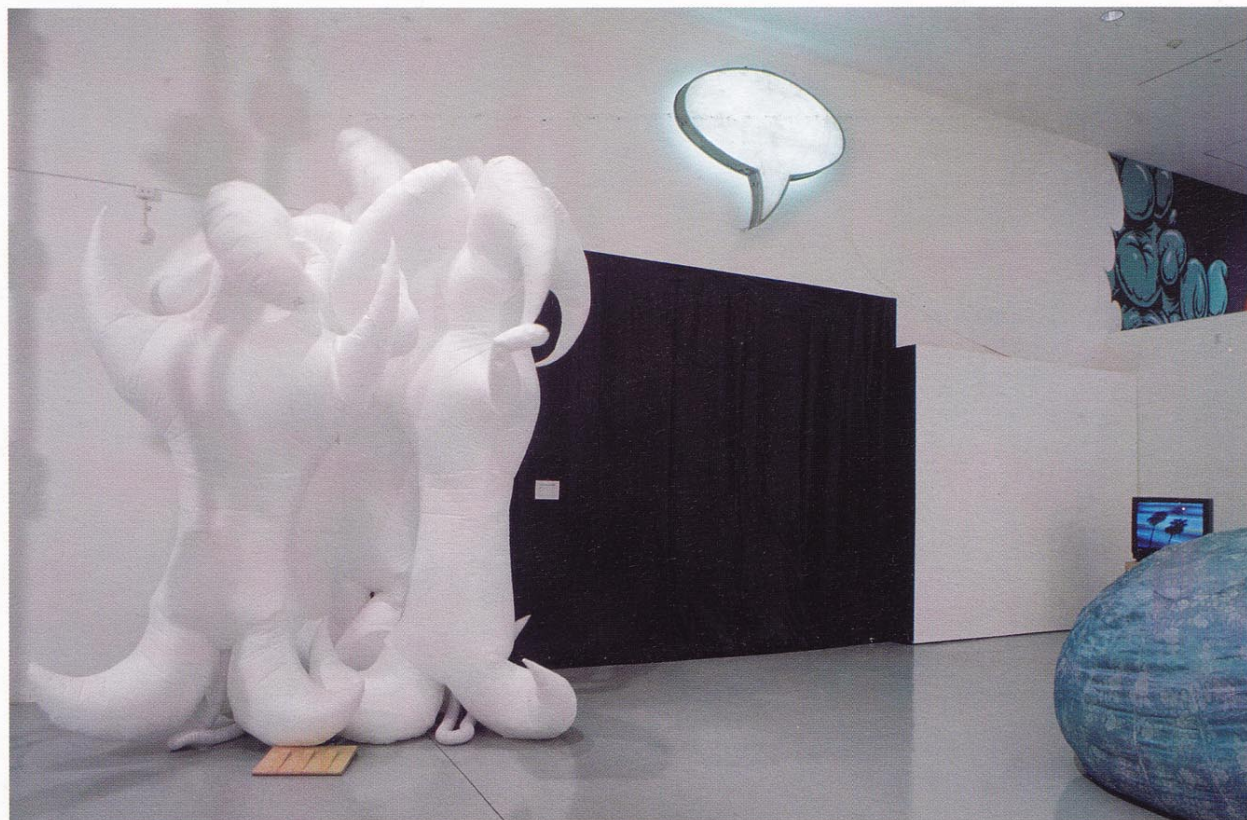
chairs. Their brightly colored "torsos" emit a sense of strength and motion while their "legs" slump with a lazy passivity.

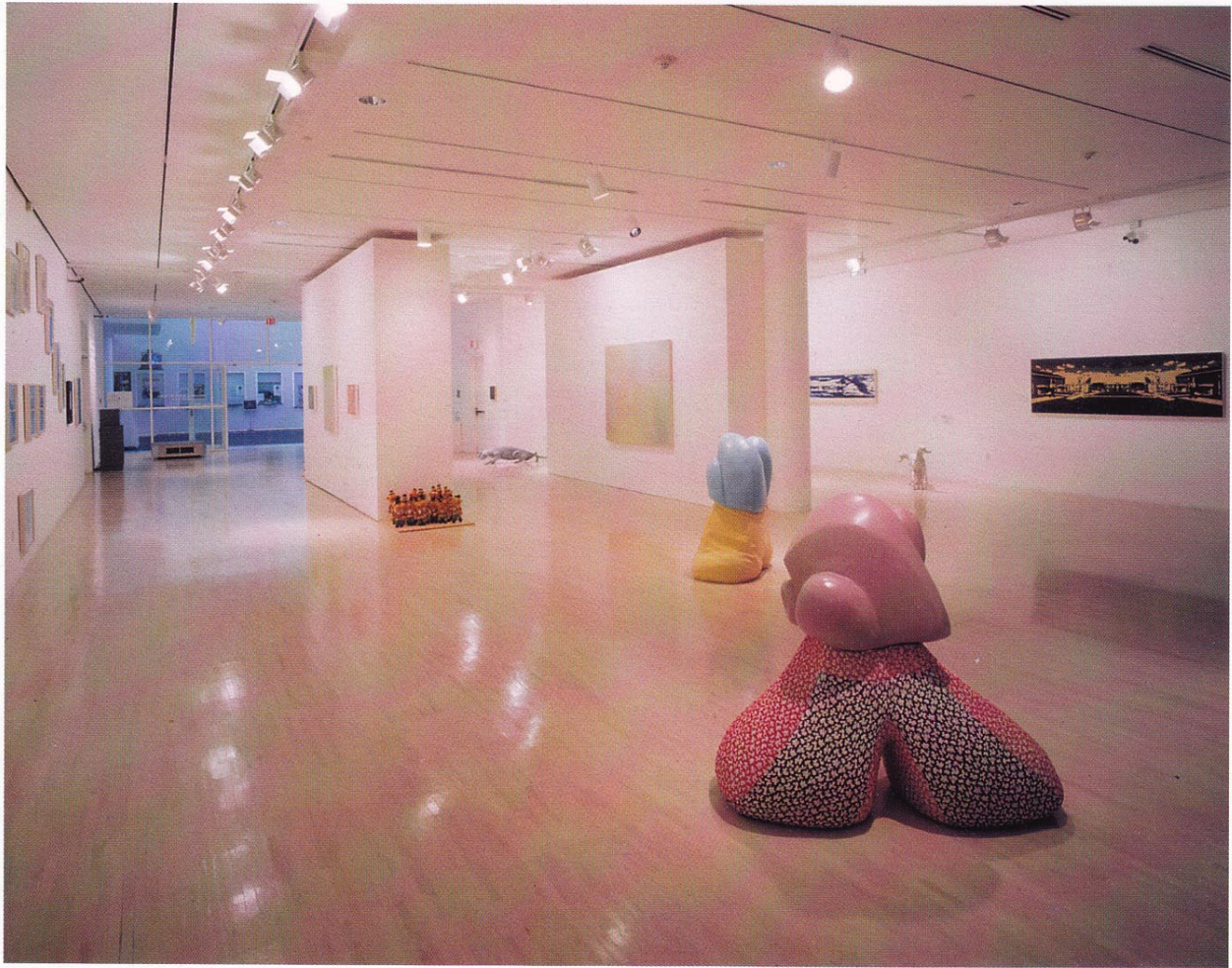
Carl Skelton's sculptural works are from a series appropriately titled *Canadiana*. Familiar wildlife creatures — cougar, beavers, coyotes — are reconfigured into new yet-to-be-categorized species. The cougar stalks forward with two heads while the beavers have adapted themselves with newfangled tails: one a canoe paddle, the other a propeller blade. In *Coyotes Passing By*, an elegant creature appears comprised of two heads and four front legs, ambiguous about form and its own sense of being. Fashioned from urethane foam, acrylic resin and aluminum, Skelton's sculptures hark back to the familiar populist forms of Inuit art while suggesting new hybrids of natural selection.

In many of Max Streicher's inflatable Tyvek sculptures,

human and animal forms are referenced, but in *Boiler* the artist uses three non-representational forms. Inflated by the viewer with foot pedals, Streicher's fabric fills out into three curlicued towers. Vaguely anthropomorphic, they remain nonspecific. Before inflation, they are sagging and pathetic, inflated, and thus completed, they elicit signs of life and humor as they bob contentedly, the curl in their "arms" accentuating a strange sense of posing or preening.

Rocco Turino's *Bedrock* originated in an exhibition called *Night Snap*, a quixotic collection of work that alluded to various somnambulistic sensations, the pull of the dream and the restlessness that prevents it. His *Geri dolls demonstrate... Cyclops, Sphinx, Box Out* is a series of three innocuous sculptures in acrylic cases that unnerve by the simple juxtaposition of an infant's place with an elderly man's form. Modeled in three positions of





rest/unrest, their diminutive quality does not diminish their unsettling qualities. In *Bedrock*, a slumped sphere of lustrous blue mattress fabric sits like an inviting, undiscovered planet. While exhibiting an inertia similar to Roger Carter's *Phump!* and *Smoothie*, the girth of *Bedrock* gives it the presence of an 800-pound gorilla who, though passive and friendly, sits wherever he wants.

In Luis Jacob's series of "appliance paintings," ambiguity of form is treated through absence. Jacob's methodology is almost pure slacker — household appliances are laid upon raw canvas and spray painted, then removed. The resulting canvases exhibit only the ghostly after-image of a

PC monitor and TV screen, a microwave oven, a videocassette player, and a remote control unit. Jacob leaves us with only a memory of these things that are disposable and replaceable but which remain oddly intrinsic to our lives. The thoroughness of Jacob's sampling is interesting for its inclusiveness — 21 appliance portraits appear here — as though he were gently collating examples from an actual community. If it is a strange gesture to comment on sentimentality toward these objects which share our house, Jacob's sprayed paintings, so immediately realized, possess an ethereal beauty. As the artist has written (after Richie Rich meets the Jungle Brothers): "House is food and you need it."

NARRATIVE

Some works utilize a snapshot perspective to bring up questions about narrative and to suggest that meaning can be peripheral as well as specific, found in equal measure between the lines. Susan Kealey's two series of color photographs, *Synopses* and *Epilogue*, distill objects — both recognizable and unfamiliar — into representations that are photographed with clinical care but often manage to rise above their mundane selves. In *Synopses*, objects are shot against a white background, their mundane qualities appearing more prominent. If these truncated emblems are the synopses, then the real story must be elsewhere. In *Epilogue*, Kealey's

placement of her subjects against dark and colored grounds emphasizes a formal allure and unexpected beauty, each its own strange happy ending.

"Elsewhere" is the locale for Anda Kubis's painting *Incident*. Nondescript rectangles waft across the middle of a pale green canvas, a drift which oscillates softly upon a muted ground. Kubis has referred to her interest in the potency of symbols to express sentiment; other works have featured isolated renderings of images such as butterflies, daisies, roses, lemons and figurines against an abstract ground. Admittedly interested in the images of popular culture, with *Incident* Kubis removes these recognizable icons of sentiment, yet the simple painterly effect is, itself, quite powerful and somehow imbued with sentiment. The incident of the

title is not depicted. Instead, the subtlety of Kubis's imagery offers the quality, or the sentiment, of "incident" — a soft depiction of action happening.

PLAY

In some way all the artists use a mechanism of "play," a measure of spontaneity either in execution or presentation, employing elements from the visual panoply of popular culture. Some even introduce elements from American popular culture — notably *Ernie and Bert* and *The Magnificent Seven*. In Jennifer McMackon's work, play is inherent in materials and presentation. With *Soul Mold*, McMackon attaches pink pool noodles with insulation foam (sprinkled with aquarium pebbles) into twenty-foot lengths. Five hang in a circle with colored plastic tassels sprouting from

their ends. It is a huge sculpture, garish and insane, preposterous and beautiful. The "mold" is evident at the base of the work, where there is room enough to walk within the separate strands. With an appeal far greater than a hyperbaric chamber, McMackon provides for a replenishment of the soul.

THE INTERVAL

Karen Henderson's *Melted Tin* documents the process of remelting, repouring and rephotographing a portion of tin through a series of twenty-three black-and-white photographs. A shifting formless-

BELOW: Euan Macdonald, *Interval*, 1998, 2.5 minute video.

LEFT: First floor installation view of Version City. Foreground: Roger Carter, *Phump!*, 1996 and *Smoothie*, 1996, styrofoam, fabric, enamel, paint.



ness and lack of narrative, despite a sequential presentation, reveals Henderson's treatment of time as a question of presentness. A succession of like and unlike moments are documented and reiterate an awareness of the fluidity of the moment. Although Henderson has selected a low value metal, the tin manages to glimmer and shine occasionally, to rise above itself. The interval wherein this is possible is always now.

In Euan Macdonald's video *Interval*, the shadows of two palm trees lean across two bands of pavement, traversed regularly with highway traffic. While short in duration, the video quickly lulls the viewer with its rhythm and simultaneity; the shadows move forward and backward in perspective as they are interrupted by passing cars. At some point, the traffic ceases for a moment as we are deposited in the interval referred to by the title. The shadows continue to move but time seems temporarily suspended. The interval, where literally nothing is happening, feels more real than the action it has replaced because it is not a place of resignation and monotony but a point from which everything is still possible. The brief interval is looped repeatedly until we begin to anticipate its appearance and await the moment.

McLuhan's allusion to Canada as a "borderline case" initially refers to a demographic reality, as the majority of the population resides in proximity to the country's southern border. But McLuhan extends the allusion figuratively as well, and the borderline is discussed as an interval or situation of "between-ness." He suggests that perhaps Canadians misconceive their role and "*feel the misguided urge to follow the trendy ways of those less fortunately*

placed." It is the "*world of the interval, the borderline, the interface of worlds and situations*" — a position of acknowledged ambiguity — that is the preferred position:

The interface is where the action is. No need to move or follow, but only to tune the perceptions on the spot.³

Tuned in: Toronto. 1989—1998.
One version.

John Massier

NOTES

¹ Bruce Hutchinson, "Canada the Unknown," from *A Pocketful of Canada* (Toronto: Collins, 1946), pp. 3-5.

² Marshall McLuhan, "Canada: The Borderline Case." Photocopied from a textbook, I received the essay in high school. It is Chapter VIII, pp. 226-248, but appears in no McLuhan bibliography I have encountered. Topical discussions in the text place it in the early 1970s.

³ Ibid.

Curated by John Massier.
John Massier is a Toronto - based independent curator and art critic. Previously Curator at the Koeffler Centre of the Arts in North York, Ontario, he is currently a founding editor of *Lola*, the Toronto journal of contemporary art.

ARTISTS

Daniel Bowden
Roger Carter
Karma Clarke-Davis
Reid Diamond
Eric Glaven
Greg Hefford
Karen Henderson
Nestor Krueger
Luis Jacob
Susan Kealy
Anda Kubis
Stacey Lancaster
Euan Macdonald
Sally McKay
Jennifer McMackon
Carl Skelton
Max Streicher
Rocco Turino

Art Director: Renee Ruffino
Design: Anna Kolberg

Exhibition organized by:
Karen Emenheiser

The UB Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canadian Consulate General/Consulat Général du Canada, Buffalo.

UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO ART GALLERY
RESEARCH CENTER IN ART + CULTURE
WWW.ARTGALLERY.BUFFALO.EDU
UB-AG@ACSU.BUFFALO.EDU
FREE PARKING AFTER 3:00
WED-SAT 10:30-8:00
SUN 12:00-5:00
716-645-6912