

James Koester *Companion*

Paula Gustafson

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PAULA GUSTAFSON

Contemporary art's current biases tend towards work that is complex, conflicted, and technically bewildering—in fact, anything other than the familiar or the easily comprehensible. Multiple screen projections. Hyper-text. Digitalized flim-flam. Perhaps that is why the ordinariness of James Koester's *Companion* is so refreshing.

Here, nothing clicks or whirs. Instead—as Koester so aptly notes in his artist's statement—the approximately 300 pieces in the exhibition embody Marcel Proust's speculation that “the journey of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes, but in refreshing old eyes.”

The “old” in this case are metal baking pans patinaed bronze-black from repeated immersions on hot ovens. Once inconsequential (albeit useful) domestic utensils, the servitude of these cake pans, loaf tins, and cookie sheets is now in the past. Indelibly darkened, they are now repositories of memories; warm breads, birthday cakes, late night snacks—the transitory “stuff” of home-cooking.

Employed as framing devices, the square and rectangular metal pans each feature simple, stylized, two-dimensional designs of copper wire covered in phosphorescent paint. The designs are indeed simple; leaf outlines, punctuation marks, empty cartoon “word balloons”. Supported on unpainted, almost invisible wire armatures, these motifs hover just below the rolled rims of the pans, parallel to the pan base. In light, the designs appear pale green. When viewers pass motion detectors controlling the gallery's light levels, the room dims, the burnished pans disappear in the darkness, and the motifs take on an eerie glow.

The effect is particularly disconcerting when approaching the wall-hung installations where

the baking pans feature sketches of body parts (feet and toes, for instance), or scripted words such as “else”, “not”, “here”, and “somewhere”. The motifs appear to emerge, floating forward out of the air, realizing Koester's intention of “a dreamlike environment, the real world slipping away along with the light.”

Ambiguously bridging the real and the unreal, the functional and the non-functional, is characteristic of Koester's artmaking, particularly during the decade following the disbanding of Protozoa, the award-winning design collective he and five other Emily Carr College of Art and Design students launched in 1985.

In his 1994 *I Object* exhibition, Koester showed drawings on paper framed by three-inch-deep welded iron boxes. In each of the one-inch sections, pencil-gridded on 11 x 14 inch paper, was either a series of simple drawings (the outline of a hand, for example) or glued-on “souvenirs” he had collected, such as bits of coloured beach glass or tiny fish heads. Perched below each drawing, mounted on brackets attached to the wall, were miniature metal sculptures which playfully referenced the imagery in the metal box frames.

His 1997 exhibition, *What*, featured elongated stick-figures

that functioned as both light source (candlesticks) and metal sculptures. Some of the figures had dangling glow-in-the-dark hands; others had cameos, wire-rim spectacles or bones attached. As awkward as fledgling herons, each sculpture portrayed a sense of predicament.

In both these illogical combinations of images and objects, Koester played with visual language, yet avoided the literalness of messages. Always, he seemed to be searching for a kind of elemental clarity, an awakening of vision. “Art making isn't a process of learning how to make art,” he said in a 1997 interview. “It's a process of learning how to be clear and saying what you want to say. The best that anyone can offer is what is truly meaningful to them.”

Individually, the components in *Companion* continue his eclectic presentation. Assembling 12 to 20 of them into Cabinet of Curiosity-like installations encourages comparisons, links, and allusions. Nevertheless, Koester's quirky mix of symbols, quotidian objects and words leaves open-ended any specific interpretation.

As with 18th century *wunderkammer*, which anticipated the development of scientific classification, *Companion* appeals to our desire to find

meaning in objects. Whether they are symbols of enlightenment or ordinary things from our own cupboards and shelves, we attach value and significance to things. Arranging and rearranging them, we construct narrative order, however wishful. (One might also suggest that the activity of collecting is itself a narrative strategy, at least insofar as Koester's need for more and more baking pans has taken him to hundreds of garage sales and secondhand shops, as well as involved friends and family in his quest.)

Not incidentally, the geometry of the old metal pans in linear, horizontal installations mimics the layout of hieroglyphic panels or coded paragraphs. The impression is not so much the appearance of text, but the texture of words and ideas. Enlivened by Koester's idiosyncratic motifs, the geometry of *Companion's* old metal pans operates most successfully as a vernacular; an informal, slightly whimsical visual language that, while engaging in discourse, gets its vitality from repartee. ■

James Koester, *Companion*
Buschlen Mowatt Annex
Keith Alexander Gallery,
Vancouver
November 1–30, 1999



James Koester,
Companion, 1999.
Installation view.
Mixed media, including
used metal baking
pans, copper wire and
phosphorescent paint.
Photo: Courtesy of
the artist.