

Snakes and Objects: New Work by Dennis Gill

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[See table of contents](#)

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complete the narrative oneself. Thus Heard succeeds in addressing the power of language and its limitations while also presenting its poetic potential.

It is the achievement of this balance that marks some of her most successful works to date. While earlier pieces were often extremely difficult to look at, the series *Ennui* works effectively to hold the viewer even while pushing her back. While images of the distorted body circle around taboo topics such as miscarriages, abnormalities, and the grotesque, they also recall rites of passage. Based on birth defects, the forms of the figures nonetheless have an unexplainably attractive quality that goes beyond fascination with the abnormal. Heard holds that if one looks at something long enough other allusions will become apparent, images that can be poetic and beautiful. Moreover, these figures serve to create insightful ideas on what it is that we perceive as normal and abnormal, as acceptable or repulsive. How is it that some things are so difficult to look at, Heard asks, or make us so uncomfortable? Her explorations of these questions lead her to make images that address a kind of horror in us; in the process, however, we discover that allusion to the poetic and the fact that we are constantly surrounded by horror in the guise of the ordinary. Here again, her intense practice with language speaks to us about its power and its corruption. *Ennui*: Heard speaks of being exhausted by language (the news) or of its useless vocalization (politics). Her imagery speaks of us being suffocated and overpowered by words, as if by a force of nature separated from the speaking individual.

Heard's use of a specific, antique fabric, believed to date back to 1790, further enters into the narrative quality of the work. The French fabric is *Toile de Jouy*, patterned fabric developed in the 18th century, featuring anything from simple flower motifs to whole narrative scenes from peasant life, mythology, novels, operas, exotica and history. When placed on a particular kind of object, like the hanged child, they take on an added meaning: violence leading to death, the disruptive and corruptive nature of conflict, and the circular inevitability of life and the grotesque.

While we could view these images as essentially pessimistic — and certainly, Heard's work can be very dark — there are also

humorous and endearing qualities. Some figures seem to ache for touch, others to ward off the invasive, and still others seem to find a nurturing sustenance in feeding off themselves. A two-headed little figure addresses the dualities of interior and exterior, of the sanguine and the melancholy — one head laughs, while the other turns inward with closed eyes.

Simultaneously on view was Heard's oil on masonite, black and white *Vanitas* series. In her artists' statement, Heard writes of the image of a skeleton passionately embracing a young woman, a recurrent motif during the Black Plague and at the turn of the 15th century, when it was commonly believed the world would end to fulfill the prophecies of the Book of Revelations. The theme cropped up again in the late nineteenth century, and Heard presents it at the beginning of a new millennium "to contrast bawdy humour with our fears about the body, the medical/psychological image of the body with the carnal, pairing the drives of Eros and Thanatos." The execution of these works is exquisite, proving Heard's considerable skills in drawing and painting. Some are quite raucous, as the depiction of a skeleton with a woman in the midst of copulation, while others are humorous, showing a skeleton farting, and still others — evoking the kiss of death, close and welcome — convey a sense of intimacy.

Seen together, these two bodies of work speak volumes about our own anxieties at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Unresolved psychic and emotional states are pitted against our powerlessness vis-à-vis language and the tide of history. On a more intimate level this work questions the process by which we see and categorize the world around us. It goes beneath the surface to emphasize experiences we all know but prefer to deny, forcing us to confront ourselves through them and to regard the ubiquitousness of our taboos, while leaving us free, as always, to complete the narrative ourselves. ■

Our Darling,
SPIN Gallery, Toronto
Vanitas, Angell Gallery, Toronto

Snakes and Objects: New Work by DENNIS GILL

GIL McELROY

The Owens Art Gallery of Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, borders on a typical university quad: a patch of lawn, with some old trees and shrubbery, ringed by sidewalks and a variety of university buildings.

Directly opposite the Owens, the university's biology building is in the midst of construction as a greenhouse is being erected in a gap between it and an adjoining building. Construction debris spills out toward the quad, held in check by the bright red webbing of a temporary fence.

The quad itself is in use.

that have come to shape the respective origin myths of Canada and the United States in his work *Frontier/Dominion* (1991). In the work, busts of the Queen and an American cowboy confront one another from shelves set at opposing ends of a glass plate etched with the overlapping words "Frontier" and "Dominion," locked in a semantic struggle. But snakes, it seems, have been his primary focus in the last decade, and *Snakes and Objects: New Works by Dennis Gill* proffered the newest work in this ongoing enquiry.

It all starts indoors. The large lobby of the Owens doubles as exhibition space, and it is here



Dennis Gill, late of the Maritimes and now living in northern Ontario, is using it as a kind of sculpture garden, as the site of a number of sculptural installations involving that figure of myth and Freudian interpretations, the snake.

Snakes are nothing new in Gill's canon. He's been working with them for years, all as part of his larger investigation of the cultural meaning and significance of symbols and icons. Himself born and raised in a symbol — the Old Town Clock in Halifax that figures so largely in representing the city —, Gill has worked extensively with the myths we hold dear, like the oppositions

that Gill has installed *SNAKE and HEATER* (1999). In front of one wall sits a small electric water heater connected by hoses to a cast bronze radiator set nearby. The system is both functional and dichotomous; hot water circulates between the two elements, spaced about three metres apart, so as to warm a steel snake that lies atop the radiator, but the heater and rad form an oppositional dyad, the former a commodified thing straight off the hardware store shelf, the latter a sculptural simulacrum (albeit functional) cast by Gill himself. The one, however, is both functionally and metaphorically useless without the other.

Dennis Gill, *Snake Grate*, 2000. Cast bronze. 7.6 x 61 cm diameter. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Gill extends his work with the idea of the simulacrum into the great outdoors. Though the Mount Allison University quad hardly qualifies as a garden, enough of its cues are on hand to permit such a contextualized reading of Gill's *Snake and Hose* (1999), a work comprising a steel snake laid out on the grass aligned toward an adjacent cast bronze sculpture of a coil of garden hose, one end of which extends from the neatly wound coil in the direction of the snake itself. The kind of dyadic visual and material dialogue that ensues outdoors with *Snake and Hose* makes for a variation on *Snake and Heater*, albeit one denuded of any functional imperative.

On another part of the quad, Gill has set a rusted section of train rail (the real thing, not a sculptural duplicate) so that it points directly toward the

entrance of the university's Fine Arts department, located in the building next to the Owens Art Gallery. A steel snake is perched half on/half off one end of it. This is *Snake and Rail* (2000), and, perhaps tellingly, Gill has situated the snake so that it appears to be moving away from the building. The construction site across from the quad affords another context, for Gill's section of steel rail manages to echo a refrain of the structural steel I-beams piled at the ready nearby. That kind of industrial aesthetic, one that can be read into so many of Gill's snake installations, is even more overt in *Snake and Bar* (1999), a work in which the slithering convolutions of the ubiquitous figure emerge from one end of a three-metre-long section of straight steel bar laid on the ground parallel to a dirt path that cuts diagonally across the quad.

The thing about all these

snakes is their sameness and repetition. Each of Gill's sculptures is an exact copy of the next, right down to the convolutions, the creature rendered as if frozen, in mid-slither. It is with this sameness and consequential allusion to industrial mass production and commodification that the sculptural installations bind together into a cohesive whole. Although Gill utilizes the products of mass-production in his works, like the section of rail or the water heater, and although sculptural elements like the cast bronze radiator employ the techniques and look of mass-production, in fact his work exploits the tensions and dynamic between sculpture and the twentieth century aesthetic of the ready-made.

At several points along the quad in front of the gallery, storm drains are set into the ground to catch rain water that runs from

off adjacent sidewalks. Into one of these drains Gill has set his *Snake Grate* (2000), a cast bronze sculpture of a highly articulated snake figure, a deviation from the ubiquitous serpentine shape of all the other works, looping back and forth within the circular confines of the grating hole. The work has some element of physical risk; unlike a conventional grate, a person's foot could easily be caught in the spaces between the snake's loops. Don't tread on me.

Snake Grate drives the point home: the importance lies not in the creature itself, but in the baggage it carries. The meaning in the risk the work presents to passersby is, of course, incidental, a byproduct of Gill's exploration of the cultural weight of symbols and icons. As if the sculptures of *Snakes and Objects* didn't have enough of a load to carry. ■

Les pierres veinées de MARIE-FRANCE BRIÈRE

MICHÈLE DESCHÈNES

Intitulée *Veines*, en référence aux veinures qui sillonnent la pierre et le bois, la récente exposition de Marie-France Brière a été suscitée par la lecture d'un texte¹ proposant une étude iconographique et historique sur les « pierres imagées² ». Ce texte montre comment certains peintres européens du XVII^e siècle, attirés par les effusions de l'art baroque, sont fascinés par les images de toutes sortes qu'ils voient et peignent à partir des dessins colorés et aléatoires qui couvrent la surface des pierres, comme le marbre et l'agate.

Les pierres imagées prennent la forme d'une espèce de tableau sur fond de pierre et représentent des scènes narratives variées. Elles sont issues aussi bien de l'imagination humaine que de la perspective des lignes et des taches sinuées décrites par le chaos des veines minérales, métamorphosées en motifs iconiques. Elles « résultent, selon l'auteur, d'une spéculation sur l'art de la Nature et la nature de l'Art³ ».

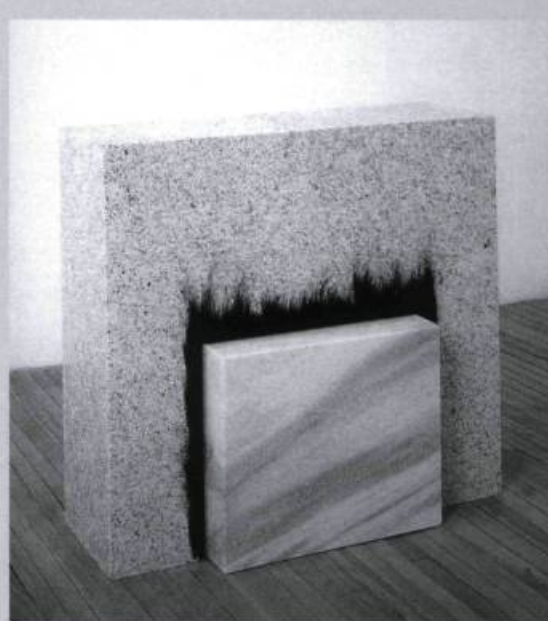
Bien qu'elles soient surtout

façonnées dans la pierre, les œuvres exposées par Brière à la galerie Montréal Télégraphe diffèrent largement des pierres imagées dont elles actualisent le propos. Mentionnons d'entrée de jeu qu'elles évoluent dans un espace tridimensionnel plutôt que dans un espace pictural. Il s'agit de sculptures, dans le sens traditionnel du terme, mais leur disposition dans la galerie tient compte de la configuration des lieux.

Saphène, la première pièce conçue pour cette exposition — et la première qui était donnée à voir dans la galerie —, investit de façon expérimentale la morphologie de la veine de la pierre dans une abstraction géométrique et organique qui montre comme tels les dessins décrits par la pierre. Pour mettre ces dessins en valeur, l'artiste a utilisé une longue et mince lisière de marbre blanc, coloré de gris, dont elle a cherché à extraire la veine principale. Elle a pour ainsi dire tenté de dégager la veine de la pierre en taillant celle-ci par ondulations irrégulières selon la configuration externe et « interne » de la veine elle-même. Le jeu souple-ment rythmé de creux et de saillies qui ressort de ce travail

maximise l'étendue du dessin formé par les taches et les lignes flexueuses des veinures. L'opposition entre l'ondoiement de la surface taillée et la planéité des surfaces latérales tranchées à la scie, de même que le positionnement de ces surfaces à l'intérieur de la sculpture, présentent les veinures de la pierre en montrant le dessin au spectateur. Pour l'artiste, l'extraction de la veine, que l'on sait formée par des résidus organiques, a constitué une sorte d'exercice, d'expérimentation liée à la connaissance du matériau et à la technique de la taille. Si cette action relève en partie du hasard et produit des effets visuels et tactiles qui semblent fortuits, elle n'en manifeste pas moins un contrôle sur la matière de la part de l'artiste.

Feu, la deuxième sculpture que proposait l'exposition, tire partie des relations entre les données visuelles de la pierre en interpellant particulièrement la fluidité de la perception visuelle qui vient contrarier la « statisme » de la pierre équare. Elle amalgame deux blocs de pierre



polie dont la géométrie orthogonale se déploie dans une relation de semi-enveloppement. La configuration spatiale des deux blocs, l'un taillé dans le marbre, l'autre dans le granite, fait en sorte que le premier devance légèrement le second. Une différenciation produite par la dissimilitude entre le dessin des pierres, moucheté pour le granite, régulièrement veiné pour le marbre, accentue cette disjonc-

Marie-France Brière, *Feu*, 2000. Granit, marbre. 1,03 x 98 x 50 cm. Photo : Denis Farley.