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Untitled: New Work by Carl Zimmerman

GIL McELROY

The work of Nova Scotia artist Carl Zimmerman has long constituted an enquiry into how period design and architectural styles culturally and socially resonate in the contemporary world. In previous gallery installations, and in a body of photographs depicting nonexistent architectural structures, Zimmerman

walled rectangular room (the "tall gallery"), and the smaller, more intimate space next door, Zimmerman tailors his installational purposes to suit the differing interior architectures and so stylistically charge them with an evocation of a time when the planet was tensely balanced between competing social and political mind-sets, winner take all. What we encounter, here, is something resembling a school

down from which runs a cord that disappears along the base of the wall. The space is dimly lit by a single lamp affixed at the centre of the ceiling. An EXIT sign burns brightly above the double doors. And there is music.

It is poignant stuff, the music. Maybe "melancholy" better describes it. It's an excerpt from the soundtrack to the film *Fahrenheit 451* by composer Bernard Hermann, known for his collaborations with Alfred Hitchcock, and his classic scores for *Citizen Kane* and *Taxi Driver*. Tellingly appropriate that Zimmerman would use the music of a composer who worked visually, brilliantly establishing the emotional mood and tone for what the eye would see on film. In the dim light of this pseudo-gymnasium, the eye restlessly seeks something to look at, and finds only the small wooden wall-hung box with the cord descending from it. But the ear—, the ear hears melancholy, perhaps triggering the proverbial remembrance of things past. For those of a certain generation, old enough, maybe, to remember the Cold War, Zimmerman's gymnasium may aurally evoke astonishingly powerful memories of school days. Zimmerman writes that gymnasiums were "central to a system of routine regimentation — for [...] physical training and regular assembly." Certainly they were, but it isn't so much an intellectual abstraction this space summons forth within us. Rather, it is emotion, pure and simple; it is a feeling of lost innocence, perhaps, the sense of youth fleetingly gone by that permeates this space, apparent especially to those of us who spent a lot of time in such spaces when physical education was mandatory in schools before societal and financial reprioritizations changed all of that. An overt connection to the Cold War, to a period aesthetic encompassing attempts at social regimentation so much a part of this politically troubled era, is intellectually accidental here, a byproduct,

really, of other, emotionally stronger resonances.

In the space next door, it's all about waiting. In this smaller, somewhat more intimate gallery (lower ceiling, irregular floor plan) painted a not entirely unpleasant shade of aquamarine, Zimmerman has assembled the props of a waiting room, circa 1950s or early '60s, perhaps. The furnishings are dated — period lamps and end tables, clock radio, ashtrays, metal magazine racks — though the molded-plastic stacking chairs have an ageless physical discomfort to them. If we were at all unsure about the time frame, Zimmerman has added two wall-hung pictures of B-52 bombers in flight, just to drive the point home. We could be in a doctor's office, a corporate waiting room, any number of institutional settings where waiting was (and is) a necessary evil. All the correct cues are there, but the two bomber images are bothersome. They rise too far above the level subtlety Zimmerman has established. They're obvious.

And that's the crux of the matter. Zimmerman's installations have largely been about how understated visual and aural cues and indicators can evoke psychological and emotional states in viewers/listeners that he can then manipulate. The key to it all is subtlety, and in *Untitled* the heavy-handed addition of two images — actually one, for each framed picture is of the same warplane — distorts the unique space-time continuum Zimmerman seeks to establish. He comes up short. The B-52 pictures delimit and restrict, localizing the room to, say, the waiting room for the defense contractor who produced the airplane, rather than a broader possible range of period settings. Zimmerman's richly evocative palate of emotional and psychological resonances is mitigated by subtlety pushed over the top. ■

Untitled: New Work
by Carl Zimmerman

Owens Art Gallery
Sackville, New Brunswick

November 24, 2000 - January 21, 2001



Carl Zimmerman, *Untitled* (installation detail), 2000. Mixed media. Variable dimensions. Photo courtesy Owens Art Gallery.

explored Streamform and Art Deco designs of the 1930s, their relationship to the period culture and politics of totalitarianism, and how "retro" reworkings of the style nostalgically distort the past, dispensing with some of its less savoury elements.

Much of Zimmerman's work also employs audio cues, usually excerpts from classical compositions that intervene aurally in the installational space, psychologically and emotionally priming us to be receptive to his environments. What the eye might miss the ear cannot help but respond to. The lessons of propaganda haven't been lost on Zimmerman. Good thing, then, that he's on our side.

In his most recent installation for the Owens Art Gallery in Sackville, New Brunswick, Zimmerman has moved from '30s Deco to '50s fallout shelter. It is the aesthetic of the Cold War that frames *Untitled*, an installation occupying two separate but adjoining exhibition rooms within the gallery. Working with a high-

gymnasium and an office waiting room.

The tall gallery is perhaps the most coveted exhibition space within the Owens. Its high walls (upwards of 6 metres) lend a drama and elegance to most work shown in the space that can be absent in more conventionally sized gallery rooms. The blank white walls of this cubical space are only interrupted by a pair of doors leading to behind-the-scenes work areas, and an opening in one corner that allows interior entry from the gallery lobby. Zimmerman has reworked the dramatic visual impact of the space and turned it into a gymnasium. To accomplish that he painted the walls. From the ceiling down to about 1.5 metres from the floor, they're yellow. The remaining wall down to the floor, and running the entire perimeter of the gallery space (including the double doors), is a battleship gray. The room is also entirely empty, save for a speaker mounted about 3 metres off the floor at one end of the room,