

## Juxtaposing the artworks of William Gill

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[See table of contents](#)

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careful and forceful stepping in order not to dislodge the pump-tube or fall out of the shoes themselves. Any attempt to take a breather on the inflated latex sofa is thwarted by the slipperiness of the material and the likelihood of sliding off onto the floor. Deflation takes an additional five minutes, and many suits are removed still partially inflated.

If it is her desire to debunk a myth of consumer satisfaction in the retail world, Rewakowicz is successful. *Uniblow Outfits* is an uncomfortable, humiliating and ultimately unrewarding performance. No pleasure was to be had and no one looked cool. Those who were convinced by her strategies of seduction learned a lesson most of us know by heart: what seems good isn't always so, and looks can be deceiving — especially when allied with fashion and advertising.

However, there is more to this installation than meets the eye. *Uniblow Outfits* seems to be just a simple demonstration of what everybody already knows; regarded from an oblique angle, however, the exhibition becomes much more interesting.

Rewakowicz's model of the retail experience becomes nothing more than a prop, as the gallery itself is revealed as an important space of consumer transaction. For many visitors to the Khyber galleries, Rewakowicz's "desire strategies" are irrelevant. Most gallery-goers expect that when an artist invites them to physically engage with an artwork there is a good reason to do so, and that their understanding of the work may hang on their participation. They do not need to be manipulated into trying on a rubber suit because they are already drawn to it, in a spirit of investigation. In return for their effort, they expect to emerge from the experience somehow enlightened.

Rewakowicz highlights this exchange of participation for enlightenment by thwarting those looking for the artistic meaning of *Uniblow Outfits*, just as she thwarts their more naive counterparts by rather unusual physical discomfort and public humiliation relieved only by the removal of the latex suit and disengagement from the work. Meaning, made contingent on an almost intolerable physical action, is constantly deferred. The artist shows us how desire — not for pleasure, but for definitive meaning — is tied with the consumption of art, and creates a cycle of anticipation that can never be fulfilled. ←

Ana Rewakowicz: *Uniblow Outfits*  
Khyber Centre for the Arts, Halifax  
January 15–February 9, 2002

William Gill's work<sup>1</sup> is informed by contrasts and juxtapositions, the most obvious being the dichotomy between nature and culture, but he also plays with that of the traumatic and the monotonous, the exuberant and the upsetting and, of course, the man-made and the natural. Formally speaking, his work is rich in textures, forms and patterns. His sculptures are mostly in wood, with some mixed media elements. Interestingly, Gill never cuts a tree for his sculptures; instead, he recycles and reclaims fallen trees and dead wood that he finds in the forest or salvages from building demolition sites.

An example of such recycling is the wood coming from the infamous Mount Cashel orphanage ground. The main building was levelled four years ago, many years after the scandal of sexual and physical child-abuses by Christian Brothers. Trees were also cut down to put up a supermarket. The maple the artist recovered from the site is found in his work titled *Workhorse*, permanently installed at the Sculpture Park and Garden Foundry in St. John's. Hanging from the maple beam are some 500 rectangular pieces of birch on bronze rods. While the birch and bronze elements reflect each other by their similarity in size and shape, these two parts of the sculpture present opposing qualities. The marks left by the chainsaw stand as witness of the artist's intentions while conferring roughness, solidity, and strength to the piece. In contrast, the mirror image hung on bronze rods that is animated when the wind blows is delicate and lyrical in feeling. The work engages us in a troubling dialogue about nature and human culture, even more so when one knows the provenance of some of the wood used. Wind blowing through the rods produces a soothing sound — a metaphor, perhaps, for the passing of time that one hopes will bring peace to those who suffered at the infamous

site of Mount Cashel.

Most of Gill's works bear textural marks reminiscent of the rich encaustic oeuvres of Jasper Johns and of the large wall pieces on plywood by Paterson Ewen. Gill is also attracted by the latter's approach to natural phenomena, space, and stars. Beautiful in its quietness, the painting *Winter Road to Heaven*, which Gill produced in 2001, is directly inspired by Ewen's work. The plywood panel is divided into three parts. The middle one looks like snow flakes falling in very orderly fashion. On either side, are parts of a sphere, like the surface of the earth seen from space, from which, as the title suggests, one can see the roads to the heavens.

Heavenly occurrence appears in

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WILLIAM GILL,  
*Black Onions*,  
2001. Douglas  
fir, birch, tar,  
burning. 152.4  
x 33 x 93.9 cm.  
Photo : Ned  
Pratt.

other beautiful objects created by Gill. *Black Onions* is a sculpture that seems to reconcile nature and culture, the wild and the domestic, the indoor and the outdoor. On a shelving unit, a large massive piece of wood, rest three handmade bowls filled with dozens of burnt twigs. The bowls are inspired by tiny lichen cups found in the forest and the side of the beam has been marked by a chainsaw, leaving the trace of what could have been a comet or a shooting star. Its shadow is still visible on the shelf.

Similarly, *Black Ball* is reminiscent of a comet. The burnt round shape has been cut in half, hollowed out, and joined together again. Small wood blocks keep a distance between each half. Each



## Ginette Légaré

joint is marked by an "X" as if to emphasize the artist's presence and his intention of keeping both parts separated. The "X" reminds one of a cross-roads. Often seen at train track crossings, it is a sign that marks progress and that has become natural in our every day life. In Gill's work, markings are a comment on humanity being at an intersection in its relation with the natural world and on the need for one to distance itself from the other, for one to respect the other.

William Gill is in awe of the natural world that surrounds him in Newfoundland. The land around St. John's is powerful: the roaring of the sea, the rugged coast line, the enormous floating icebergs, the massive boulders, and the dark wilderness of the forest — all inform his work. His abstract constructions negotiate our understanding of nature, its fragility, its force, that of industrialization, progress and their destructive power.

Interestingly, in many pieces, one feels the artist's dedication, his passion. He reveals that he never knows what the final product is going to be. Each work is often left aside for a period of time and then re-worked. He lets the pieces speak and guide him through the creative process. They take him on a mission. In their final form, his sculptures take us on a journey of personal discovery and questioning.<sup>2</sup> ←

## NOTES

1. C. William Gill is a sculptor based in St. John's, Newfoundland, where he works as a technician in an artist-run Bronze Casting Foundry. Native from Ottawa, Ontario, his artistic journey took him to Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, where he graduated in Fine Arts in 1991. He exhibited in many group and solo exhibitions and did residencies at the Vermont Studio Center and at Terra Nova National Park.
2. This article is the result of e-mail exchanges with the artist. Some information has been taken from the transcript of an interview conducted by Mary Reid, curator of *William Gill: Into the Woods*, an exhibition held at the MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario, in 2000.

Ginette Legaré's *Eyeful* consists of 365 spoons arranged in an oval pattern directly on the wall. It is a sculpture installation where formal arrangement, shadow and light, and rhythm play a crucial role. The objects themselves are transformed entirely so that, in a moment of suspended belief, one sees not spoons but sculpture. Legaré's work is about seeing: about perception, metamorphosis, order and disruption. It presents itself as aesthetic and ordered, only to interrupt the aesthetics and order as it questions modes of representation, of looking, and how we define reality. Towards the bottom left of *Eyeful* an object has obtrusively inserted itself; a rounded thing, reminiscent of an eyeball or tongue, bulges out of a small change purse. It is a disconcerting object that breaks the order of the piece and introduces discomfort; its presence signals that this piece is more than simply a play with domestic objects or a study in light and shadow. The unease it evokes moves us to question how we see and how we construct meaning.

The transformative play with found objects runs through the entire exhibition. We see pieces made from altered paintbrushes, spoons, forks, flan pans and the metal blades from pizza wheels. Legaré admits that her viewers spend a lot of time trying to look for what they are supposed to see. What one finds is structure rather than content. She brings us back full circle to ideas around perception. *Through a looking glass*, lightly is an excellent example of this: mounted on the wall is a bowl cradling a long-handled ladle. Mounted adjacent to it is a tilted mirror, like the ones used for shaving. Peering into the mirror we probe what it is that we are supposed to see — mostly it is part of



GINETTE LEGARÉ, *Painter's Stroke Series*, 2002. Photo: Peter MacCallum.

the space around, not, as expected, a focused view of the object. It underscores the idea of multiple perspectives and undermines that of the autonomous object. As well, looking further, we see that the bowl is truncated, it is a container that cannot contain. The relationship between what we see and what we know is thus confounded, as are expectations regarding certain objects and their uses.

A paintbrush, for example, is intended to make a mark. When the end of the brush is inserted at the ends of coiled metal, like the kind used for plumbing, then the function, while recalled, is made moot nonetheless. The clean brush is a precursor to making a mark; making a mark is a translation of what we see, whether that be a drawing or a text. Again, Legaré takes us a step back to the point before the sign is made in order to question and ascertain the act of representation. When two ends connect in a flourishing loop from which to write, does this suggest

schizophrenia, multiplicity or negation? When a single brush emerges through a circular plate, is it then cut off from perspective, as the plate defines its space as flat and its view as limited? And when protruding from each end of a twisted knot, does it signal complexity or merely confusion?

When referring to this piece, collectively entitled *Painter's Stroke*, Legaré expresses an interest in the implications of the creative act: How does one think of the world and of the objects in it? She speaks of "pondering through painting," as art is clearly one way of making sense. In *Occlusions*, using the false bottoms of flan pans, Legaré has stacked four sets of two pans, each bent such that half the pan is angled at ninety degrees from the wall, creating a rhythmic stepping structure rising vertically. Recalling art history, *Occlusions* references minimalism and modernism, for-