

Stephen Schofield: *Stumble*

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Stephen SCHOFIELD: *Stumble*

Gil McELROY



Stephen SCHOFIELD, *Dibutade #1*, 2008. Recuperated clothing, sugar, steel rope. 295 x 234 x 86 cm; Back: *Dibutade #2*, 2008. Clothing and new cloth, sugar, steel and PVC pipe. 282 x 239 x 86 cm. Photo: courtesy Textile Museum of Canada.

The exhibition spaces at the Textile Museum in downtown Toronto are all on a single floor, arranged like a series of boxes around a central core of the building in which a stairwell and an elevator are situated. To get to a specific exhibition area, you have to pass through others, and so the work located in those spaces can – intentionally or not – shape your experience of what you were looking for in the first place. So to find *Stumble*, an exhibition of recent sculpture by Montreal-based artist Stephen Schofield, an encounter with small, complementary exhibitions of work by American artist Lia Cook and Canadian David R. Harper showing simultaneously (all of it cumulatively entitled *Person Place Thing*) was likely, even inevitable.

At issue in Schofield's work here: the human figure, in whole and in part. Using the body of his partner Michel Daigneault, Schofield created a kind of three-dimensional human version of those drawings often found in old butcher shops showing, say, an

entire animal (cow or pig usually) with the different cuts of meat drawn diagrammatically atop it. Daigneault's body was somewhat similarly mapped out with patterns drawn directly on it, which Schofield then transferred to textile, using items of his partner's old clothing as source material. Sewn together to make a figurative shape, the cloth was then soaked in sugar water and blown up with air to dry, stiffening into a fully three-dimensional sculptural form that is light yet strong enough to be structurally self-supporting.

It's the anti-gravity in this lightness that Schofield installationally

exploits, perhaps best exemplified with the sculpture *Dibutade #3* (2009). This muscularly well-defined, anatomically correct male figure has been installed as if caught in the very midst of attempting to defy the laws of gravity. He's horizontal in this gallery space, one of his feet (the left) braced against a wall, the other several inches away. His left forearm is in contact with the floor, while his right arm extends straight upward. The whole picture seems to be that of a figure instantaneously frozen, camera-like, in mid-tumble, as if the body has only just come into contact with the floor and in a mere moment

will entirely crash down against it and so encounter the consequences of his brief and inevitably failed defiance of the gravity well that is our planet. Seeing him, we are situated at an aesthetically penultimate moment, just before the whole venture gives way.

The penultimate figures elsewhere as well. *Dibutade #1* (2008), situated in the same space, gives us a full-size figure posed upright, arms outstretched and slightly raised to either side of his head, his feet arranged in what appears to be a dance position, one foot resting flat as if supporting the body, the other slightly forward and turned to the side, its toes pointing downwards. But like its companion work suspended at right angles to it, *Dibutade #1* has no physical connection to the ground to which it responds. It is supported in mid-air, held in place by wires extending from the gallery ceiling to connections on each of the figure's palms. All very Christ-like, with the wires substituting for nails. But Schofield hasn't given us a figure in torment and on the verge of death. Rather, this is a man (again, rendered anatomically correct) articulating what really seems to be a dance position, and while echoes of the contemporary Christian hymn "Lord of the Dance" might indeed resound, any real tendency toward the spiritual is displaced by the aesthetic. Unlike his companion work, this figure is not rendered on the verge of collapse, but caught forever in the penultimate moment before alighting (seemingly with somewhat more grace than his companion) upon the floor.



Stephen SCHOFIELD, *I and I*, 2006. Ceramic, cotton, sugar, PVC tube. 35 x 49 x 86 cm. Photo: courtesy Textile Museum of Canada.



Dibutade #2 (2008) sequentially messes things up. It's another male figure, leaning slightly forward with his arms raised straight above his head, standing on the floor on one foot (the right, tilted a bit to one side) and with his left leg bent back and the foot inches from the ground. Problematically, he aesthetically articulates either a before or after: either he models a frozen moment *before* engagement in some bodily maneuver (based on the suggestiveness of his companion figures, perhaps a dance move, or even something more acrobatic, like a tumble or somersault), or Schofield gives him to us *after* such activity, just as he might be rendered having completed whatever move he is executing. It's deliciously uncertain, and added into the interrelated mix of the other two *Dibutade* figures, it all adds up to a keen exploration of how we experience and aesthetically enquire into the fundamental forces of nature—here, the one-way arrow of time and how it is bound up with how we live on this planet with the force of gravity—with subtlety and a whole lot of grace.

Oh, I forgot to mention humour. Schofield's three *Dibutade* sculptures also seem to overtly make references to the comic book superhero. It really cannot be otherwise, for the textiles that make up each figure resemble superhero uniforms more

than they do anything like flesh or everyday clothing. Think of any comic book superhero, and skin-tight outfits highlighting every muscular turn of the body are seemingly part and parcel of having to save the world from evil on a regular basis. Barring the genitalia of Schofield's figures (which, alas, wouldn't figure in any comic book or film) these three figures are indeed superheroes.

Well, almost. While Schofield proffers us sculptures that are demonstrative of weightlessness (or at the very least, the ability to defy gravity that is once again part and parcel of the whole superhero thing), it is actually the weightlessness of the frozen moment, of the instantaneous capture of a stillness that isn't actually there, that doesn't actually exist, but which can be seen—in fact, created—in any camera image. It is we who narratively fill in the remainder of the story, who create the stories: the figure falling to the floor (*Dibutade #3*), the figure alighting to the floor (*Dibutade #1*), the figure poised on the floor before or after some physical gesture (*Dibutade #2*). We're good at stories. It is what we do best.

Off in an alcove all by itself, and hanging suspended in mid-air from the end of a single cord, is *Green Man* (2008). It's actually just a bit of a man: a hollow textile head and neck that is open at the bottom. It is a

monochromatic green on the exterior and pink on the insides. The interior hollowness is partially filled with what could be likened to a throat: a textile bladder sealed at the end that extends down from the figure's mouth. It is a mute work, perhaps telling us something of a before, but which has no after to it at all. Dangling at the end of its proverbial rope, it says nothing.

Sitting over in yet another alcove is *I and I* (2008), the only piece in the exhibition that is fully floor mounted and that has the further distinction of bearing little overt relationship to the rest of Schofield's work here. It's a sculptural ceramic figure—a small male laying on his back with his arms bent back, his hands held up near his shoulders, and his head raised up, as if looking down along his body at his toes. The textile connection here is minimal, residing in the fact that the figure is adorned with a pair of long underwear rolled up to his knees,

and that the sculpture rests on a large pillow.

But while it has little formal relationship to the truly textile-based sculptures, *I and I* does indeed reiterate the conceptual premise of our relationship to the gravity well that is this planet we inhabit. Flattened against the floor, though buffered from it by the comfy pillow, the figure still poses some resistance to that which persistently pulls us all down and holds us here. He may not be engaged in an activity like dancing or even falling, but even in the mundane act of simply raising his head up, he strikes a pose of defiance in the face of crushing inevitability. ←

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Stephen SCHOFIELD,
Green Man, 2008. Silk,
sugar, suspended from
cord. 74 x 81 x 86 cm.
Photo: courtesy Textile
Museum of Canada.

Stephen SCHOFIELD,
Dibutade #3, 2009. New
cloth, sugar, supported
from the wall by steel pipe
clad with PVC tube and
steel rope. 168 x 242 x 148
cm. Photo: courtesy Textile
Museum of Canada.

