

Tim Whiten

Up, Down, In-Between

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For years now Tim Whiten has been creating sculptural work using non-traditional materials rooted in daily experience such as glass, gum, hair, mud, blood, coffee grinds, juice containers and mirrors. His impetus in doing so is his long-standing interest in the transcendental — spiritual, physical and mental — all of which act to “conceal” or “reveal” our place in the physical world. A Professor of Fine Art at York University since 1968, Whiten has exhibited in solo, group and/or ritual-based exhibitions nationally and internationally including shows at prestigious venues in Mexico, Brazil, Germany, the United States, China and Canada. In the summer of 2008 his latest exhibition, *Up, Down, In-Between* was presented at the Olga Korper Gallery in Toronto.

The works in this exhibition are created primarily with glass — a material that Whiten has worked with for a number of years. It is eminently mutable, a material that transforms from one state of being to the other and can be reshaped in myriad of forms. At one time it was in fact believed to be a “solid liquid” with the molten pieces of sand from which it is composed moving but at a rate that is imperceptible to the human eye or senses. Whiten characterizes

glass as a transcendental material, something that is simultaneously both a conduit and a barrier. It is this duality, this tension between transparency and impediment, which Whiten brings forth in his work. It allows his to explore in his sculptures that which we see and that which we know or perceive without necessarily being able to see it. His chosen material, glass, something that we’re in contact with everyday in mundane, functional and practical ways (windows, cups, plates, etc) somehow becomes transformed into a metaphor for the mystical through Whiten’s creations.

Mary’s Permeating Sign is a glass rolling pin which rests atop a pillow which is encased in a pristinely ironed pillow case. The rolling pin is an homage to the artist’s mother. It is reproduced on exactly the same scale as a wooden one that his father made for his mother. It is far more than a simple recreation however. Etched onto the surface of the rolling pin is a “magic square.” Magic squares are ancient boxes of numbers whose sums of rows, columns and diagonals all add up to the same sum. This matrix represents perfect equality in all directions or dimensions. As one looks at this work one is drawn into what seems to be a mystical, celestial realm. Air bubbles trapped within the glass become a fluid cosmos, blending the line between what we see, what we know and what we intuit. His mother’s presence is evoked, a sense of who

she was is presented more fully and completely than a literal portrait could do.

In *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* by David Freedberg, he writes:

In our minds we construct images on the basis of our memory of things seen, in order to grasp the unseen...whether we have an image before us or not, the mind can only grasp the invisible by means of, or with reference to, the visible. (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, p.188)

Whiten’s work exemplifies this idea, using ordinary images imbued with the essence of the “unseen.” It is precisely in fact that his sculptural technique, his *modus operandi* is through using the ordinary and familiar that this transformation to extra-ordinary can take place. And that transformation occurs as a result of the material with which he chooses to work.

Kanopi is an umbrella, almost impossibly created through thin segments of individual curved cast glass pieces. In viewing it one is almost incredulous that it could actually, physically, exist. Whiten describes this work as being a metaphor for who we take observances. He exploits the idea of an umbrella as being an item that we use to protect ourselves from the elements — from the sun, the wind or the rain. But by rendering it in glass it becomes a less visible but nonetheless still a tangible barrier — but the experience is different. One isn’t necessarily “touched” by the sun,

wind or rain but there is a heightened awareness. It is more real. In current vernacular a canopy is something architectural with a utilitarian function about it. But Whiten’s choice of using the Greek spelling is very deliberate. Traditionally a “kanopi” would be held aloft above a sacred object or person, or over a niche, altar or tomb. In this case Whiten is intentionally bringing in the association of the sacred with the everyday. We may not be aware of or thinking consciously of it but the “divine” in the sense of all of creation being linked explicitly or implicitly in the apotropaic. What Whiten does masterfully in his work is to offer insight into the potential of the object /image /subject and the variety of responses it is capable of arousing.

Whiten also offers the viewer a telescope made of cast glass with brass fittings. A telescope is an object used for viewing objects at a far distance, it is a means of bringing something that is far away closer. Whiten’s telescope, titled *In-Sintilate*, works in a somewhat different manner. When one looks through the eyepiece rather than seeing the magnification of the physical, real world one sees instead an always changing array of coloured glitter. Instead of clarity and enhancement one is given abstraction and metaphor. Whiten turns us from the literal and visible interpretation of the world and exhorts us once more to look to the realm of intuition and imagination in order to really “see” what is there. The transcendental can be found in the ordinary, if only we remember to look for it. ←

Tim Whiten: *Up, Down, In-Between*
Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto
June 5 – July 31, 2008

Virginia EICHHORN is curator at the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery in Waterloo. She sits on the board of Visual Arts Ontario and the Association for Native Development in the Performing and Visual Arts. She lives in Kitchener, ON with her husband and three sons, who she hopes never have to go to war.

Tim WHITEN, *In-Sintilate*, 2008. Brass, glass beads, crystal and standard glass. 57.5” x 27” x 23.25”. Photo: Linda Martinello.

Tim WHITEN, *Kanopi*, 2008. Slump glass, brass fittings. 36” x 53.5” diameter. Photo: Michael Cullen, Trent Photographics.

