

Robin Collyer at the AGO

Ted Rettig

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ROBIN COLLYER

AT THE AGO

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Robin Collyer, *Idioms of Resistance*
 January 24–April 18, 1993
 Art Gallery of Ontario

In recent years, a number of artists of national stature active in Toronto have been working at establishing themselves in the art communities internationally. Robin Collyer is part of a group that includes Tony Brown, Ian Carr-Harris, Vera Frankel, Liz Magor, among others. These artists must get the collegial and professional support they need and deserve since it is especially difficult for Canadian artists to make a move of this nature. For many years, I have had respect for and admired Collyer's work. With this recent body of works, I had numerous critical reactions that merit discussion. In the end, one remains supportive of his fine work.

A show of Robin Collyer's works covering 20 years opened at the newly renovated Art Gallery of Ontario. The show, much like a mid-career retrospective, included earlier pieces from the Gallery collection in one gallery and works from 1987 to 1992 in two additional galleries. A good portion of the latter body of works will represent Canada at this year's Venice Biennial.

Collyer sees his work as acting as a mirror for social realities using the visual language of the urban landscape. The general morphology of his work seems to consist of the post minimal use of materials as form, with the addition of media imagery, models of buildings and types of vehicles.

The pieces that approach a real size context seem to be the most engaging: *The Zulu* (European version), *Louver*, *Circus*, and *Songs for Manuel*. Pieces like *Things Men* and *Mosque*, which are meant to be model-like structures, are more problematic.

The Zulu remains one of his finest pieces in that it has a metaphorical nature, evoking a way of life and a cultural context, that of the recreational vehicle. It stands between a model and an actual sized smaller European version. The work communicates in a broader range than many of the later works. It is one of the few works that is a completely closed structure and has therefore an implied interior. None of the other pieces in this show has a similar quality of interiority. The choice of the name accentuates a dislocation of reference that heightens the gap in associations the work opens up. According to Collyer, the title has two sources, in the corporate giving of a name of an entire culture to a vehicle such as Jeep Cherokee, and in the more obscure 1930's hobo use of the word for a vehicle piled high

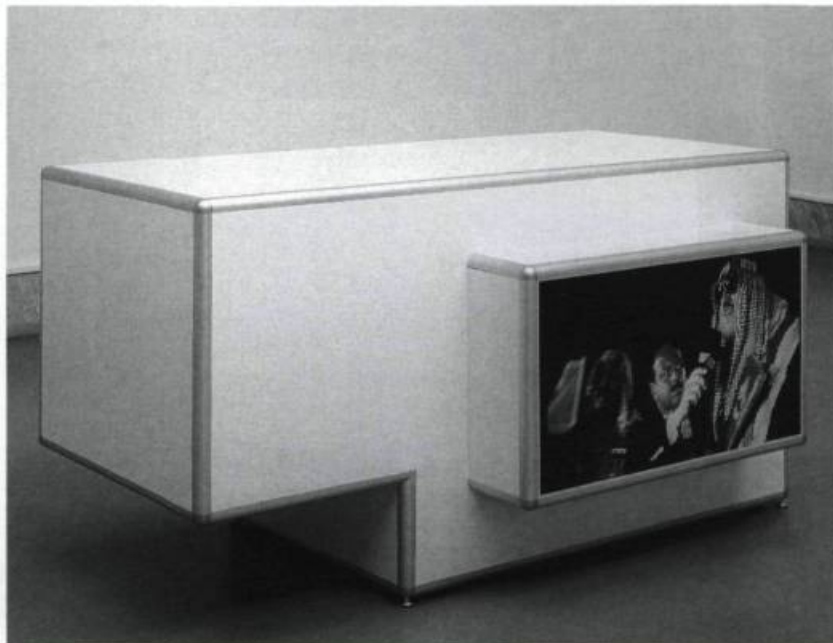
with the belongings of American refugees of the Depression era. The title does have a problematic dimension in that the name, Zulu, is taken as an exotic word without cultural reference or history, and so unintentionally evokes an ambiguous reference to the hidden part of North American history, that of the slavery of Africans and the resulting politics of race.

It is in *Louver* that the ideal of mirroring social attitudes is realized, with issues around a primitive form of sexism given presentation. The Playboy car accessory tray points to the commercialization of a lifestyle. The segmented nude photo, on the louver element, points to a glamorization of sexist imagery. It is the section of ducting with the handwritten messages that is a found element from a factory environment. It acts as the focus that ties the mass produced elements together. The handwritten words with the remnants of a photo clearly articulate a primitive violent sexism that is personalized and interiorized and that assumes a shared attitude on the part of its readers. It is this personal marking that gives this piece its impact and presence. The other two elements, the nude photo and the car trays, are superficial in comparison; they do reinforce the brutal sexism in their cliché-like normalcy.

Songs for Manuel is an intriguing piece having two views of mass media's participation in recent wars. The list of popular songs making up one side of the tower is a partial list of the music that was played at high volume to get Manuel Noriega to surrender to U.S. troops. The music, played around the clock, was used as a weapon of psychological warfare. It became a form of torture that kept the inhabitants of the Vatican Embassy from sleeping at night. Two other sides are racks for framing and displaying a set of collectors cards, the Desert Storm Pro Set, available from a local convenience store. The set of cards implies an encyclopedic range of categories illustrating bits of information about weapons, leaders, places and countries. This recycling of random images as militarist propaganda romanticized for the consumption of young sports fans is unbelievable. The strength of the piece derives from the straightforward presentation of these two catalogues excerpted from mass culture in the display tower.

Circus is similar to *The Zulu* in that it has the general shape of a model of a camper-like addition to a pickup truck. However it has no sense of interiority since all surfaces are of the same somewhat glossy Formica. On one side there is an added rectangular volume with an image in colour of two or three Arabs. On closer inspection, one sees a blurred 'flower' image at the microphone, the WWF insignia of the World Wrestling Federation, Sergeant Slaughter and a side kick dressed up like sinister Arab leaders. This work needs the proximity of *Songs for Manuel* to give it greater density of meaning. Once it is read and understood, it tends to be a bit thin on its own.

Near these two works is one entitled *Mosque*. It consists of a large industrial cylindrical yellow plastic container that is inverted and that has a white hemispherical top. The shape of the large lower container recalls oil storage tanks, and the yellow and white colour scheme is similar to that of Islamic architecture. Unlike *Songs for Manuel* and *Circus* this work is not about the interweaving American popular and military cultures, it is a reference to corporate petroleum revenues as the basis for Islamic culture. This can only be understood as an indirect nod in the direction of anti-



Robin Collyer, *Circus*, 1992. Aluminium extrusion, melamine, colour photocopy. 108,5 x 207 x 110 cm. Galerie Arlogos, Nantes. Courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario.

Islamic sentiments now so well established in North America and Europe. The Islamic tradition has an especially rich heritage in architecture that can not be reduced in this way. Having done so in

this work shows that Collyer has not thought the piece through well enough.

I saw *Things Men* when it was exhibited in the former Carmen Lamanna Gallery. It was an attractive minimal structure with imagery. It did not coalesce into the resolved image Collyer has described. The work is meant to be a model of a selfserve gas pump pavilion roof with two signs. The symbolic content seems to run something like this: An image of a soldier of fortune lore, a macho soldier being washed by a Vietnamese woman beside a tank, is mounted on an insulated metal suburban house door that has been cut to act as a small roadside price of gas sign. The gas pump pavilion has an illuminated sign as most do. The backlit image here is of junked missile bodies. The links are from U.S. corporate interests, to military and domestic ones.

This work actually reads more like a minimal structure calling attention to the aesthetic qualities of the surfaces and materials like a Ryman painting. The signs seem as separate and added elements. It is the sexist image of the woman and soldier that is the most striking part of the piece. The image is from a Belgian plastic model kit. It looks like it could have been taken from a magazine. The image is incongruous, puzzling, and offensive. Instead of adding to the intended layers of readings, it has an ambiguous presence that seems to rely on its sensational value rather than on its critical potential. In this way the fascination the image holds seems reinforced. This objection can also be made to a lesser degree for the use of sexist images in the piece entitled *No TV* (Stoa Brokdaon Finis). The transformation of images of this type in the minds of the viewers does not take place. The issue here is one of communication and assumptions about the location of meaning. The meaning of the sexist images is put in relation to the industrially produced elements and the overall goal is to build the corporate, military, domestic and sexist signifiers



Robin Collyer, *Idioms of Resistance*, 1993.
From left to right: *Circus*, 1992; *Marker*, 1992.
Courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario.

into a model of the world, therefore the work as mirror. The models established are entirely male and Western. There are no women's voices among the various chosen elements, nor are there voices from other traditions beyond that of the North American media and industry, even though definite references do exist.

In the semiotic mode of analysis, signs are fragments in a shifting Text and with their assembly into the syntactical context of a work of art, they become tools for showing relationships of power in society. The fact that these images also exist in consciousness in an emotional or affective way as a dimension of communication seems less important. For this reason, some of the images that deal



Robin Collyer, *Louver*, 1992. Aluminium, plastic, colour photocopy, ventilation duct, polyurethane. 133 x 96 x 56 cm. Galerie Arlogos, Nantes. Courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario.

with communicated human relations are not as easily abstracted into the model of analysis as are the industrially based signs.

The general post-modern assumption that signs are free floating to be used by a decentered self denies that they may be part of a history much longer and richer than ours. In *Mosque*, the two plastic elements become a sign with a small range of signifiers that excludes the history of the culture referred to. The work therefore does act as a

mirror for the assumptions and range of understanding of both the artist and the audience.

There has been a shift in Collyer's work and voice over the years even though the appearance and means of making of the work have been quite consistent. The works from the early 70's have a personal voice that is faintly present. It is a voice that speaks of aspirations to a larger public one. With *The Zulu*, the voice is clear and authentic. It is grounded in a regional urban context with a mature artistic language. *The Zulu* remains for me one of the finest works of its kind in Canada.

Collyer's voice in the recent pieces seem more distant, impersonal and faint. One hazard incurred by adopting a semiotic theoretical framework with a belief in a decentered self is the abdication of a personal voice in favour of relations among signs. In some pieces the three dimensional element serves almost only as a support for images and, once these are read, the presence of the work becomes rather thin.

It seems that this new voice is directed to the international scene. Artists do make works for particular audiences, in this case for European museum patrons. This inference is supported by the numerous references to Dutch and French galleries in the catalogue and the photo credits. The content of recent works is American popular and military culture presented in novel and critical ways that would fascinate European viewers. He uses these larger North American cultural themes in a topical way. Even though Collyer's presence in these recent pieces is less clear and more impersonal, his voice again aspires to speak seriously in a transnational context. Let us hope that he will meet this new challenge and continue to grow as an artist. ◆

Une exposition des oeuvres de l'artiste torontois Robin Collyer a été présentée au Musée des beaux-arts de l'Ontario qui, fraîchement rénové, a rouvert ses portes en janvier dernier. Parmi les pièces récentes de Collyer, plusieurs seront exposées cet été au pavillon canadien, à la Biennale de Venise.

S'inspirant du vocabulaire visuel du paysage urbain, Robin Collyer considère que son travail est un reflet des réalités sociales actuelles. La configuration générale des oeuvres semble relever d'une approche post-minimaliste de la forme et des matériaux, s'inspirant de divers types de véhicules et de constructions architecturales.

Dans l'une des oeuvres les plus percutantes, *Songs for Manuel*, l'artiste a affiché la liste des chansons que les soldats américains utilisaient comme torture psychologique, lors de l'invasion de Panama, pour amener Manuel Noriega à se livrer. La liste est apposée sur une tour, en parallèle à une série de cartes à collectionner, appelées "Desert Storm Pro Set", dont sont friands les jeunes amateurs de sports. Collyer montre l'interrelation qui existe aux États-Unis entre la culture populaire et militaire.

L'oeuvre intitulée *Mosque* consiste en deux réservoirs de plastique dont l'un ressemble à un contenant d'entreposage pour l'huile. Le plus large est peint en jaune, surmonté d'une demi-sphère blanche, rappelant les couleurs que l'on retrouve dans l'architecture de l'Islam. Collyer les juxtapose pour produire un signe qui possède un éventail limité de signifiants, niant de la sorte la richesse de la tradition islamique. Ainsi, plus ou moins consciemment, il paraît encourager les sentiments racistes anti-islamiques qui se sont répandus en Europe et en Amérique du Nord.

Dans ses oeuvres plus récentes, le témoignage de Collyer se fait plus distant et impersonnel, comme s'il avait voulu adapter ses oeuvres à un public européen en développant des thèmes plus généraux issus de l'actualité de la culture nord-américaine.