

Espace Sculpture

Ilan Sandler *Double Storey*

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ILAN Sandler

GIL MCELROY

Double Storey

In summer we begin our requisite, seasonally-induced search for paradise, or some reasonable facsimile thereof. The sun and the warmth of the year must trigger some primitive urge within us to seek out Eden and set ourselves there, if only for a short while. For urban folk who can afford it, a trip to, and a stay at, a cottage set along some lake, river or ocean will suffice. For the rest of us, urban or not, it is typically a shady spot somewhere with something cool to drink and, most importantly, something upon which to sit and relax.

And that's the crux of the matter. Eden, no matter how mundanely it may be conjured forth in our attempts to relax and repose, seems to be inextricably bound up with chairs. For cottage dwellers of a certain kind, maybe it's the wooden Adirondack (or Muskoka) chair, or perhaps even the annoying (albeit fashionable) discomforts of twig furniture. For the rest of us, it's probably a park bench, or, if an available back yard ensures travel and portability isn't a factor, perhaps one of those moulded plastic stacking chairs intended for out-of-door use. But more often than not, it's the ubiquitous folding metal-frame lawn chair, that classic of portable, one-size-fits-all discomfort consisting of a light-weight tubular steel or aluminum frame and a seat woven of some truly godawful synthetic fiber that will have inevitable occasion to rot or tear. The artefacts with which we furnish our quasi-Edens, it seems, tend to be of the non-permanent variety.

Which brings us to the Toronto Sculpture Garden (TSG) and the summer of 2003. The ring of trees, the small patch of lawn, and the (artificial) waterfall that comprise this place in the heart of downtown Toronto denote something remotely akin to the Edenic. So perhaps it is no great surprise to discover that the summer occupant this year has been what looks for all the world to be an enormous folding lawn chair set squarely in pride of place on the TSG grass.

This is sculptor Ilan Sandler's *Double Storey*, and it looms over the TSG's visitors and the patrons of a nearby open-air restaurant as if awaiting the return of an occupant equal to its enormity.

But here, all is not right, and that realization is entirely dependent on the significance of the second look. In passing (and I mean that quite literally), Sandler's sculpture overwhelmingly resembles a larger-than-life folding lawn chair. But, in fact, this is a resemblance that only really works from the seat of a moving car passing along King Street East in downtown Toronto, and via a brief glance past parked cars and through the fence that encloses the TSG and frames something of a view of *Double Storey*. The possibilities of strict representation — of real mimesis — are truly and only available to those for whom the cursory look suffices; for to stop and to look again, to visually apprehend Sandler's sculpture beyond the mere passing glance from the vantage of, say, the aforementioned moving automobile, is to note departures from the expected representational norm.

To start with the most obvious of those departures: this "chair" has no real seat or back. The woven webbing of the real thing is entirely absent here, only allusively suggested through a few taut lines of nylon monofilament (you know, fishing line) that run in one direction up and down within the framework of what would otherwise be a seat and a back. It does not for a chair make, and neither do the actual physical proportions of the work. Sandler's chair looks spindly and insubstantial. It is. The tubular stainless steel used for the frame is incorrectly proportioned. The tubular metal frame of a real folding lawn chair would, if it had been appropriately magnified in size to correspond with Sandler's work, be of a greater diameter and appear much thicker and more

robust. By comparison, Sandler's work is puny, a veritable 98 lb. weakling barely able to support itself. And what about the overall proportions of the piece? An exacting look at *Double Storey* suggests that the legs are disproportionately long in comparison to the rest of the structure. It's gangly.

In a nutshell, then, *Double Storey* seems to be a mimetic mess, coming up well short of its apparent intentions of true representational fidelity. In fact, the piece would appear to be little more than a failed caricature. How could Sandler get it so wrong? Here's a thought: perhaps mimesis isn't what he had in mind at all. Perhaps our employment of a mimetic yardstick to take measure of the work's shortcomings as a scaled-up copy of some mass-produced artefact that is itself part and parcel of our attempt to create something akin to paradise in our backyard, just leads us off in an entirely wrong direction — down a dead end, in fact. Perhaps this sculptural object contextualized by its situation within TSG's urban environs is indeed something else, something other than a mere simulacrum. Perhaps all is not what it seems at first glance.

No. Of course it isn't. We are reminded (yet again) of the inevitable flaws inherent in a dependency on first impressions as a cheap and dirty way of determining and fixing meaning — aesthetic or otherwise. While the late American poet and novelist Jack Kerouac summed up his poetics with the advice "first thought, best thought" (advice he didn't always follow), his reference points only toward the front end of the aesthetic equation. Here, standing in front of *Double Storey*, at the other, experiential end of things, Kerouac's prescription could be taken as suggesting we should well be satisfied with the drive-by, the quickie, the casual glance out the car window at this crazy giant chair. But to take recourse in stopping and staring, even to rubberneck or gawp, at this spindly stainless steel and monofilament thing is to watch as an artefact is gradually evaded — to watch as Ilan Sandler makes a chair slowly and utterly disappear before our very eyes. ←

Ilan Sandler: *Double Storey*
Toronto Sculpture Garden,
Toronto, Ontario
May 7–September 15, 2003



ILAN SANDLER, *Double Storey*, 2003. Stainless steel and nylon. 548.6 x 305 x 396 cm. Photo: Courtesy of the Toronto Sculpture Garden.