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Bang Bang You're Dead (Toy Gun Shop)

René Price, *Bang bang you're dead, Powpow t'es mort*, Centre d'art contemporain du Québec à Montréal, Montréal. January 15th - February 22nd, 1997

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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

MONTRÉAL

BANG BANG YOU'RE DEAD (TOY GUN SHOP)

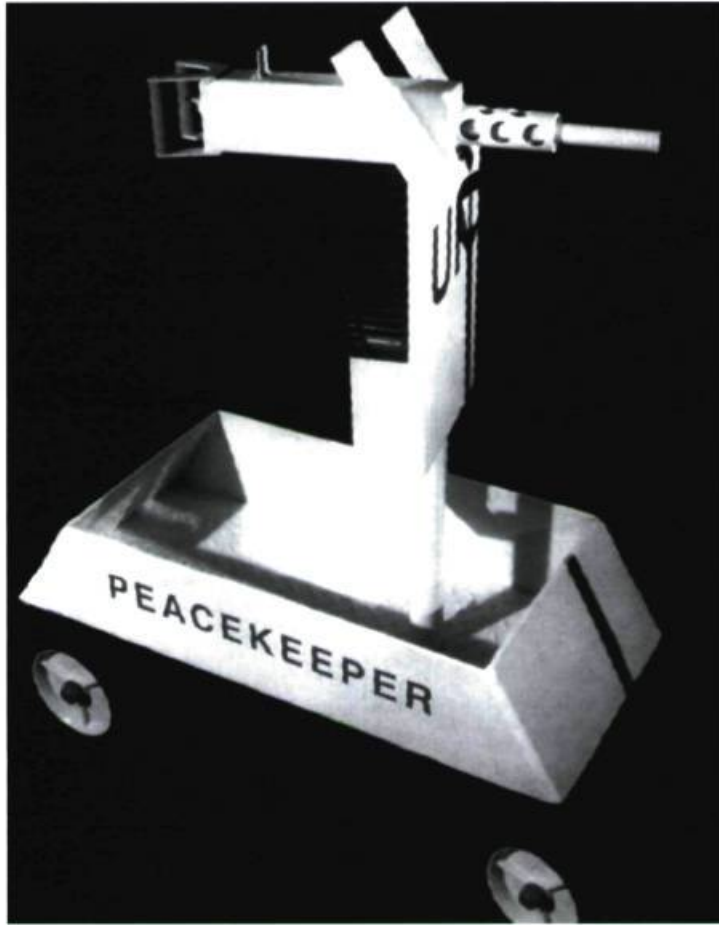
René Price, *Bang bang you're dead, Pow pow t'es mort*,
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In his recent book *The Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin describes an aboriginal Australian hurtling through the desert in a truck while trying to sing or pay homage to the specific character of the land... Chatwin's description adequately describes a world where geo-specific cultural identity, for all its encodings about the absolute and our place therein, is rendered somewhat ludicrous by the intrusions of mass-produced material and technologies into regional cultures. We are as likely to see Aboriginal songlines painted on a BMW for a car commercial, as an IBM or Coca Cola icon on an Innu's T-shirt in Tuktoyaktuk. René Price's *Toy Gun Shop* show at the Centre d'art contemporain du Québec à Montréal, though ridiculous and ironic, also shows that our worldview is actually quite resilient in the face of such a surfeit of cheap, facile and meaningless material. White, suburban, pissed off and disaffected René Price is a vague Pop-primitive, who casts his deferential gaze on the banal side of violence and transforms it into a rough-'n-ready art. For Price both an *art for art's sake* attitude and the well cultivated anti-aesthetic that grew out of it deserve to be challenged. His art is so bad it says it is bad. In the exhibition window, two painted representations of guns — one blue and the other green — point at each other with signology that reads "Bang Bang You're Dead!" It is a potent symbol of the clash of issues in a politically correct era.

On entering the CACQM one immediately sees row upon row of pegboard with Price's ingenious variations on weaponry appended to them arranged like a real gun shop. Everything is in excess at the Toy Gun Shop. The paintings, collages and toy assemblages are imprecise, as if they've been thrown together in a few minutes. There are Hold Up Kits with masks, toy guns and black spraypaint cans in packages, and "official" looking framed "RCMP approved" Restricted Toy Gun Permits at the end of each pegboard wall. The toy gun authorization permits mock the way legislation is seen as a cure-all for social problems in North America. This control of the absolute is every bureaucrat's dream and every citizen's nightmare. It breeds a pent up state of mind that pours out through the seams to become — violence. There are Rifle Lamps, Death Ray Duellers in a purple plastic portfolio case, a Crossfire Mobile, Safe Guns, a Bubble Gun, Snowflake Guns, a Martian Mobster Gun in a guitar case, a Back to School Special, a Chocolate Gun, and even a Martian Gun Holder. Walk this aisle and you've got this, walk that aisle and

you've got that. Walk any aisle and you've got anything and nothing. That's part of the message. Price's non-art is an art that builds on the seriousness of museologically correct anti-art. It is as well manicured and tame as Price's photo of a pussy cat sprawled out with a gun next his or her head titled *Dead Cat*. *Guns Salad* is a mélange of guns, all spliced and diced and served up in a mixing bowl with a few Sheriff's badges thrown in for flavour. A pop gun, cowboy gun and the James Bond detective variety are attached to chains like oversized necklaces, decorative object sketches for the boudoir. A sign at the end of each row reads: "\$99. Two for the price of one. No kidding!". Price's *Suicide Suckers* are a Special Christmas Edition handgun equipped with candy canes and placed on wall mounts like trophies all neatly arranged around Santa's Workshop assembly table. They may come in handy for parents obliged to edify their children's TV bolstered hunger for a crass commercial Christmas at Are-Us-Toys. Aside from the toy guns, there's the packaging, rapidly assembled in a gesture of somnolent respect for the eco-conscious. Packaging, after all, is impact oriented, what ultimately sells these toys to the parents, even if it all ends up in the recycling box a few days later. This is the dominant worldview of the dispossessed white Western culture. New, impersonal and store bought, the mass-produced throw-away object may be the last vestige of colonialism, a superficial "look-alike" that indelibly inscribes the ephemeral cultural consumerism's pragmatic patterns onto the minds of our youth.

An extension of TV culture, Price's objects are neither violent nor extreme, just material malapropisms devoid of any fantasy or conjecture. Like theme parks, KOA campgrounds and the *pro forma* plastic playgrounds our communities import to replace the ones that used to be made by public works, this art describes a future where creativity has been subdued, conquered and sequestered, delineated to the point where marketing, pricing and production quotas decide it all. The eclectic and mismatched presentation of the show is the very embodiment of attention deficit disorder. A target on one wall has multicoloured guns in rows across it, and an adjacent "gun rack" is realistic looking, but the placements are again toys. A plywood section that looks like it is from a basement wreckroom has tools in place over their black outlines. One space is empty but there's an outline of a gun there. The gesture pokes fun at utilitarian values. A nail gun a



René Price, *Peace Keeper*. 33 x 91,4 x 96,5 cm.

carpenter now uses may seem more efficient than an old fashioned hammer but the problems that arise out of efficiency, the truncation of our unconscious feelings and desires, are still ultimately human.

A photo of Price himself with three guns (his proverbial gun-foot) in his mouth, makes fun of Price's own role in all of this. This is a work that will leave the philosophers cold, for it builds with kitsch upon kitsch, if only to say that kitsch is kitsch and nothing more. *Gunboat Diplomacy* has a toy boat placed in a turquoise child's swimming pool. Both ends of the boat are identical. On entering or exiting the show you'll see a large painted panel titled *No Kid's Land*. Grimacing, cartoon-like hoards of kids face each other in mobs with guns in a playing field as if there's an audience and this is a spectacle. Placed next to the piece is a toy wagon version of a United Nations mobile peacekeeping vehicle. And who are the real peacekeepers in kid's wars? The parents of course.

René Price is Duchamp raised on television, Pop Tarts and videogames — suburbia's answer to art

history. Price's Toy Gun Shop is post-Duchampian, acknowledges how well worn and *clichéd* the anti-art gesture really is. The inexactitude of his art, its rough-'n-ready look and the sheer volume of stimuli that compete for one's attention are a vehicle for expressing social rather than aesthetic concerns. His work thus becomes a critique of the unfocussed mindset that post-industrial consumerism demands. It criticizes its own content at the same time as it uses it to introduce a new charge of meaning to the commonplace. Rife with an absurd sense of humour, his art makes the best of a bad idiom. Stretching the syllables of humanity's truncated vision through the standard vehicle of every child's expectation — another toy — Price aims his artistic sights squarely at the post-media generation. The price is neither right nor wrong for René Price, it's just incredible.

JOHN K. GRANDE