Espace Sculpture

James Koester

Companion

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Companion James. Koester

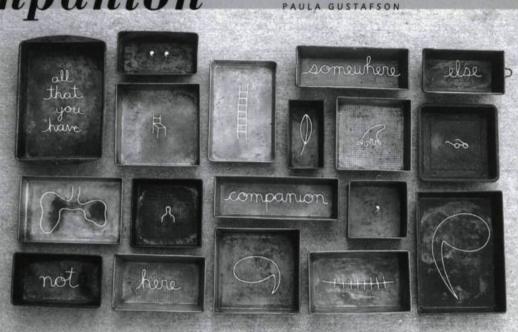
Contemporary art's current biases tend towards work that is complex, conflicted, and technically bewildering—in fact, anything other than the familiar or the easily comprehensible. Multiple screen projections. Hyper-text. Digitalized flim-flam. Perhaps that is why the ordinariness of James Koester's *Companion* is so refreshing.

Here, nothing clicks or whirs. Instead — as Koester so aptly notes in his artist's statement the approximately 300 pieces in the exhibition embody Marcel Proust's speculation that "the journey of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes, but in refreshing old eyes."

The "old" in this case are metal baking pans patinaed bronze-black from repeated immersions on hot ovens. Once inconsequential (albeit useful) domestic utensils, the servitude of these cake pans, loaf tins, and cookie sheets is now in the past. Indelibly darkened, they are now repositories of memories; warm breads, birthday cakes, late night snacks—the transitory "stuff" of home-cooking.

Employed as framing devices, the square and rectangular metal pans each feature simple, stylized, two-dimensional designs of copper wire covered in phosphorescent paint. The designs are indeed simple; leaf outlines, punctuation marks, empty cartoon "word balloons" Supported on unpainted, almost invisible wire armatures, these motifs hover just below the rolled rims of the pans, parallel to the pan base. In light, the designs appear pale green. When viewers pass motion detectors controlling the gallery's light levels, the room dims, the burnished pans disappear in the darkness, and the motifs take on an eerie glow.

The effect is particularly disconcerting when approaching the wall-hung installations where



pans, copper wire and phosphorescent paint. Photo : Courtesy of the artist. meaning in objects. Whether they are symbols of enlightenment or ordinary things from our own cupboards and shelves, we attach value and significance to things. Arranging and rearranging them, we construct narrative order, however wishful. (One might also suggest that the activity of collecting is itself a narrative strategy, at least insofar as Koester's need for more and more baking pans has taken him

to hundreds of garage sales and

involved friends and family in his

Not incidentally, the geom-

secondhand shops, as well as

etry of the old metal pans in

mimics the layout of hiero-

linear, horizontal installations

glyphic panels or coded para-

graphs. The impression is not so

the texture of words and ideas.

Enlivened by Koester's idiosyn-

cratic motifs, the geometry of

Companion's old metal pans

operates most successfully as a

vernacular; an informal, slightly

whimsical visual language that,

its vitality from repartee.

James Koester, Componion

Buschlen Mowatt Annex

Keith Alexander Gallery,

November 1-30, 1999

Vancouver

while engaging in discourse, gets

much the appearance of text, but

quest.)

James Koester,

Componion, 1999. Installation view.

Mixed media, includ-

ing used metal baking

the baking pans feature sketches of body parts (feet and toes, for instance), or scripted words such as "else", "not", "here", and "somewhere". The motifs appear to emerge, floating forward out of the air, realizing Koester's intention of "a dreamlike environment, the real world slipping away along with the light."

Ambiguously bridging the real and the unreal, the functional and the non-functional, is characteristic of Koester's artmaking, particularly during the decade following the disbanding of Protozoa, the award-winning design collective he and five other Emily Carr College of Art and Design students launched in 1985.

In his 1994 / Object exhibition, Koester showed drawings on paper framed by three-inchdeep welded iron boxes. In each of the one-inch sections, pencilgridded on 11 x 14 inch paper, was either a series of simple drawings (the outline of a hand, for example) or glued-on "souvenirs" he had collected, such as bits of coloured beach glass or tiny fish heads. Perched below each drawing, mounted on brackets attached to the wall, were miniature metal sculptures which playfully referenced the imagery in the metal box frames.

His 1997 exhibition, What, featured elongated stick-figures source (candlesticks) and metal sculptures. Some of the figures had dangling glow-in-the-dark hands; others had cameos, wirerim spectacles or bones attached. As awkward as fledgling herons, each sculpture portrayed a sense of predicament. In both these illogical combi-

that functioned as both light

nations of images and objects, Koester played with visual language, yet avoided the literalness of messages. Always, he seemed to be searching for a kind of elemental clarity, an awakening of vision. "Art making isn't a process of learning how to make art," he said in a 1997 interview. "It's a process of learning how to be clear and saying what you want to say. The best that anyone can offer is what is truly meaningful to them."

Individually, the components in *Companion* continue his eclectic presentation. Assembling 12 to 20 of them into Cabinet of Curiosity-like installations encourages comparisons, links, and allusions. Nevertheless, Koester's quirky mix of symbols, quotidian objects and words leaves open-ended any specific interpretation.

As with 18th century wunderkammer, which anticipated the development of scientific classification, *Companion* appeals to our desire to find