

The Conative Object

Exhibition at York Quay Gallery, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto, 2005

Conatus” the drive, force, urge possessed by a thing directed towards the preservation of its own being.

Relates to a thing’s “power of existence”

Dagobert D. Runes, Dictionary of Philosophy, 1942

The title of this exhibition loosely plays on Immanuel Kant’s ideas around the conative powers understood as the driving force behind cognition. If the *cognitive trait* simply notes the regularity of events occurring, the *conative trait* selects which event to focus on or pursue. The selection is based on an intrinsic (not utilitarian) value, and this value has a moral or aesthetic aspect. As interpreted for the purposes of this exhibition then, the conative object is urged towards the preservation of its own being, on the one hand, and a way to give meaning to the disconnected fragments of being on the other.

The works in the exhibition focus on the interplay between material construction and content that is shaped and/or represented¹ What is left when the functionality and decorative elements are removed from the object? It is at this point that I have brought together artists and makers to investigate the object itself, its intrinsic value, and its insistent presence as it relates to its own ‘power of existence’.

All five participants make speculations on their own field. Linda Sormin is trained as a functional potter. While she remains dedicated to the material, her process is porous and investigative. Pushing her objects beyond the function of containers or vessels, she applies traditional potting techniques only to deconstruct and then rebuild her works. Her practice is an accumulation of and speculation on material and technique: her method becomes improvisational and performative as she crafts, and as the work grows in dialogue with craft practice. What remains of the vessel is mere citation as the work expands into space and begins to explore its relation to architecture.

The architectural elements that Carmelo Arnoldin creates are fragments of a non-denominational cathedral that is being built one component at a time. This ongoing project, essentially a life’s work, is precisely and expertly crafted. Arnoldin cites a variety of architectural precedents from diverse cultures and time periods. The completed structure will pull together diversity under a coherent whole made up of multiple unique parts. Although a cathedral, it will reflect a contemporary culture made up of diverse histories and individuals. It is a work that reflects arduous craftsmanship and complex intent in an age where simulation and surface reflection are the norm.

Like Arnoldin, Carlo Cesta references art history only to thwart these references by introducing parody and play. His piece is an insulated shed, the roof a garage door and the insulation aluminum. The work plays on replicating fine cabinetry with functional materials like the garage doors that have been adorned with raised panels in a grid, faux

wood-grain and then embellished with silver ornamentation (using automobile tape). The functional form of the door is literally inverted to become a wall or then a ceiling, the simple form is decorated to become a kind of caricature of minimalism, and the insulation, while literal (its form is molded into the sign for insulation) becomes both support and aesthetic element.

A technique used by Sormin is burning out, citing the absence of things, as she builds and reconstructs her works. Similarly, Greg Sims, playing with the notion of traditional jewellery making and the diamond ring, omits a single element in each ring: notably, the diamond. Thwarting conventional expectations surrounding a jeweller, Sims continues to make precious and wearable objects that nonetheless make suggestions that defy traditional forms. Kant's precondition for the conative trait is grounded in the free will. Therefore, an object can have both intent and integrity whilst deviating from an expected form. The subsequent content of that form, as it pertains to material and content, is more complex. Consequently, and perhaps contrary to expectations, Sims is able to expose the symbolic value of the diamond as a constructed myth while retaining his integrity as a jeweller.

The Conative Object explores both material and reason for: architecture and its single elements rebuilt in an age of technology, utilitarian objects transformed without losing their functionality, traditional craft methods applied to push beyond conventional expectations. The works and processes cite and stray from their origins ultimately to return to the object itself. Susan Mills' series of handmade books cite antique account books, including cheque books, receipt books, ledgers, notebooks and writing tablets. While the books preserve and connect with the physical and historical form, they nonetheless cite an 'absence' for they contain no text. Having separated the content from the form, Mills continues to celebrate the book as both object and metaphor in an age where paper is threatened with obsolescence.

The juxtaposition of sculptures, a bookmaker, a potter and a jeweler offers the opportunity for thought around the meaning of cultural objects. Together, these artists and makers offer a combined textured force contemplating contemporary art and culture. The exhibition situates work historically on the one hand, because all these artists both cite and build on precedents, and within a contemporary discourse on the other. Understood as *endeavoring* and *striving to make meaning to disconnected fragments* The Conative Object emphasizes the importance of the physical object as a thing of integrity that heightens tacit knowing: the awareness of processes of knowing, doing and persuasive acts as they are grounded in free will.

- Corinna Ghaznavi, Curator
