



WINTER 2014

IAN JOHNSTON: REINVENTING CONSUMPTION

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DUNLOP
ART
GALLERY

EXHIBITIONS | CENTRAL GALLERY

Ian Johnston: *Reinventing Consumption*

Curated by Wendy Peart

Organized by Dunlop Art Gallery in partnership with Access Gallery, Art Gallery of Swift Current, Esplanade Art Gallery, McMaster University Art Gallery, and The Robert McLaughlin Gallery

JANUARY 31 TO APRIL 3, 2014

Artist Talk: Friday, January 31, 6:00 pm, RPL Film Theatre

Opening Reception: Friday, January 31, 7:00 pm, Central Gallery

One Thing And Then Another

by Kimberly Phillips, Director/Curator, Access Gallery

Ian Johnston's sculptural practice is a supple one, having involved numerous shifts in both method and expression over the course of his career. It is a trajectory he has likened to a stream of consciousness.¹ At its core, however, is a persistent inquiry into the nature and consequences of our relationship with the material world, an exploration, to quote the artist, "of the space that engages our physical selves."²

Johnston arrived at his present place by way of architecture. Desiring to work more closely to the physical realm than that discipline most often allows, he spent the next ten years teaching and exploring a host of other, more malleable forms and materials through which to articulate his ideas. Traces of his architectural training remain however, as his projects manifest in complex



FINISH STAGE

A. W. WILSON

1950-1951

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and visually arresting installations, often taking on aspects of built form. The medium of ceramic has been particularly seductive for the artist, concerned as he is with the matter and metaphor of material culture.

Johnston's questions about our relationship to material culture or, more specifically, about our culture's voracious appetite for the consumption of material things, have led to the realization of several multi-part projects. From the outset, Johnston sought to create work that explored the peculiarities of material consumption within different cultures, especially as indicated by the detritus left in their wake. What became quickly obvious to Johnston, however, were the commonalities rather than particularities—the sheer uniformity of global consumer culture. This realization underpins the three components of *Reinventing Consumption*, which, typical to Johnston's process, evolved organically through a complex web of associations. In this project, alongside his inquiry into the global crisis of consumption that arguably defines our present cultural climate, is a related but seemingly opposite interest: the invention of objects from an earlier moment in western society, one defined by the onset and consequent acceleration of such voracious consumption.

While in residence at the European Ceramic Work Centre in the Netherlands in 2010, Johnston developed a method of molding wet ceramic material using a vacuum forming process. He draped wet clay over an object, placed that object within a plastic bag and then, sealing the nozzle of a vacuum around the bag, drew out the air until the clay clung tight to its object-mold. His discovery of this technique led to an obsessive repetition of some 750 experiments, and the casting of a series of found objects including pots and pans, manual typewriters,



and a 1950s rotary dial desk telephone. These “objects of convenience” were simply at hand,³ but interestingly, the vintage of each refers, not without some nostalgia, to an era buoyant in its belief in progress and unabated growth.

The fluctuation between these two seemingly opposed and yet interdependent actions—the perpetual invention of objects of consumption and their subsequent reassignment as detritus—describe the tension under which *Reinventing Consumption* is held. The dizzying effect of this oscillation is explored in *The Antechamber*, where we encounter 68 linear feet of ceramic reliefs cast from a variety of objects, installed in a relentless grid formation. Layered like roof tiles and printed with clay slip in narrow bands of contrasting colour, the Op-Art effect of this environment is overwhelming, designed to produce “a vertiginous state of imbalance” in the viewer.⁴

A second component of *Reinventing Consumption*, *The Inventor’s Room*, takes the form of a multi-media archive, presenting the various ephemera relating to Johnston’s vacuum-formed experiments. Notes and diagrams, found objects that served as molds, as well as the first vacuum itself, are presented in glass vitrines. Johnston offers these objects up as though they were artifacts from a long-extinct culture, severed from their original context and artificially heightened in value under the gaze of the onlooker.

But it was Johnston’s observations during the vacuum-forming process itself that provided the departure point for *Reinventing Consumption*. In his repeated experiments, he noticed that the “respiration” of the plastic bag—which deflated as the air was sucked out—alternatively both concealed and then revealed the



object(s) beneath. This discovery led to *The Chamber*, and to bagging a veritable mountain of cast-off things. In this monumental installation, Johnston has conjured a colossal variant of the vacuum-form bag. In the centre of the gallery floor lays an enormous, limp nylon sac. Like an enormous synthetic lung, the sac expands slowly until it becomes taut with air and swollen to proportions that threaten to fill the entire space of the gallery. Fully inflated, its contents are lost to view, but as the sac deflates a pile of miscellaneous objects is gradually revealed. Scavenged from thrift shops, dumpsters and roadside curbs, these things have been retrieved, as the artist has stated, “from the banks of the waste stream.”⁵ Accompanied by sounds that alternate from rushing water to the menacing crackle of flames, the experience of this luminous, respiring bag is immersive, unnerving and eerily beautiful. Not unlike Baudelaire’s famous rag picker, who horrifies nineteenth-century bourgeois culture by scavenging discarded items from trash bins and making visible that which is hidden in plain view, Johnston reveals the cast-off detritus of modernity, dispensed with for the ever-new in a perpetual cycle of the imminently obsolescent.

Karl Marx argues that the commodity’s market success depends upon the erasure of its marks of production: the grime of the factory, the imprint of the machine and, most importantly, the exploitation of the worker. Built into the commodity object, then, is a screening device, which enables consumers to disallow knowledge in favour of belief. But oscillating precariously between revelation and revulsion, desire and disavowal, the ugly reality covered over by the commodity always threatens to reveal itself, for that which we repress inevitably returns. Perhaps herein lies the tension with which Johnston’s

installation holds us rapt: first balloon-like and luminescent, then shrunken and drawn, at once concealing and revealing the wreckage of consumption within, *The Chamber* is both mask and memorial, an uneasy epitaph to our culture's unsustainable ways.

This essay is adapted from Kimberly Phillips' "One Thing and Then Another," printed in Ian Johnston: Reinventing Consumption, published by Robert McLaughlin Gallery and McMaster Museum of Art with Access Gallery, Art Gallery of Swift Current, Dunlop Art Gallery, and Esplanade Art & Heritage Centre.

¹ Skype interview with the author, June 14, 2013.

² Johnston, in email correspondence with the author, July 1, 2013.

³ Johnston, Skype interview with the author, June 14, 2013.

⁴ Johnston, *Reinventing Consumption* Project Description Draft, July 2013.

⁵ Ian Johnston, *Reinventing Consumption* Project Description Draft, July 2013.

Artist Biography

Ian Johnston is an architect-turned-sculptor based in Nelson, BC. He has completed several international residences and worked at the Bauhaus Academy in Berlin developing workshops surrounding urban renewal and public intervention. Johnston has exhibited extensively throughout Canada and abroad.

IMAGE CREDITS

IAN JOHNSTON *Between the Lines (Dark), Process 5* 2010-13 LightJet Duratrans print

IAN JOHNSTON *Vitrine 6* 2012 objects and ephemera from the creation of *Between the Lines (Georgia)*

IAN JOHNSTON *The Antechamber* 2010-2012 silk screened stoneware

Photo: UNIVERSITY OF REGINA PHOTOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT

IAN JOHNSTON *The Chamber* 2013 rip stop nylon, computer-controlled fans, lights and audio, objects from the banks of the waste stream

Photo: UNIVERSITY OF REGINA PHOTOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT



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For more information, please visit our website, www.dunlopartgallery.org.

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