

CONTEMPORARY ART FROM
JOE FRIDAY'S COLLECTION

Prototype



Germaine Koh. *Prototype: Contemporary Art from Joe Friday's Collection*. Ottawa: Carleton University Art Gallery, 2006.

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Joe Friday's is the most significant private collection of contemporary art in the Ottawa area and among the best in Canada, one that places notable Canadian artists in the context of the leading edge of international art. However, the outward respect it has accrued¹ is not the most notable thing about this collection. Certainly its emphases on conceptual photography, sculpture and language-based works are enviably coherent. Even more remarkable, though, is that Friday's collection – much of which would befit a leading museum – also manages to reflect the importance its collector puts on intangible conditions such as questioning, reflection and uncertainty.

One Begins²

This first extensive public exhibition represents about half of Friday's larger collection. The selection focuses primarily on acquisitions of the past decade or so, and secondarily on what I will argue seems to be Friday's increasing tendency to favour works that harbour an interesting

attitude of *productive doubt*. Displacing the collection from its domestic installation – while preserving some of Friday's perceptively unconventional juxtapositions³ – this show is a rare opportunity to consider the development of an exemplary collection-in-process.

Friday's collection is far from static, revealing in its makeup something of how his priorities and convictions have evolved over some fifteen years. Perhaps naturally, he started (around 1990) collecting from local dealers and artists, but soon expanded the scope of his collection. In the mid-1990s he began collecting repeatedly from particular Canadian dealers from whom he felt strong conceptual support⁴ but also ventured further afield, concentrating briefly on openly political and body-focused works and then increasingly on the subtle varieties of idea-based art that now predominate in his collection.

Most recently, his wide-ranging excursions have resulted in acquisitions by emerging international artists such as Candice Breitz, Kirsten Pieroth and Simon Starling, whose works are notable for their dexterous research and complex modulation. His acquisitions of the past decade range thematically from body politics to re-assessments of modern and historical traditions and pop-cultural conventions, by way of critical pranks, serious archival documentation, and various eccentric attempts to model the world. Yet through this diversity, the majority of the works in Friday's collection partake of the basic conceptualist premise that the job of the artist is to deal in *ideas*, to theorize the world.

Like a public collection that is accountable to an audience, Friday's has evolved as a self-conscious and deliberate – yet still

provisional – public enunciation, one cultivated through his research and relationships with colleagues. In other words, his approach to collecting is also conceptual and discursive. The focus on recent acquisitions rather than a wider overview acknowledges this collection's function as an evolving *proposition*.

As for the content of such a proposition, the initial impression of Friday's collection is one of intellectual reserve, but on consideration one can see that a wholehearted commitment to investigation and questioning is one principle underpinning the fairly wide range of themes. While the selection of artists testifies to Friday's sophisticated, current knowledge of the international art world, his collection is built around works that individually express a great deal of doubt, many of them reckoning with failure, whether imminent or existential. Many of the works are individually fraught with vulnerability, infirmity, loneliness, and desire – attitudes that turn out to be useful lenses for viewing the collection as a whole.

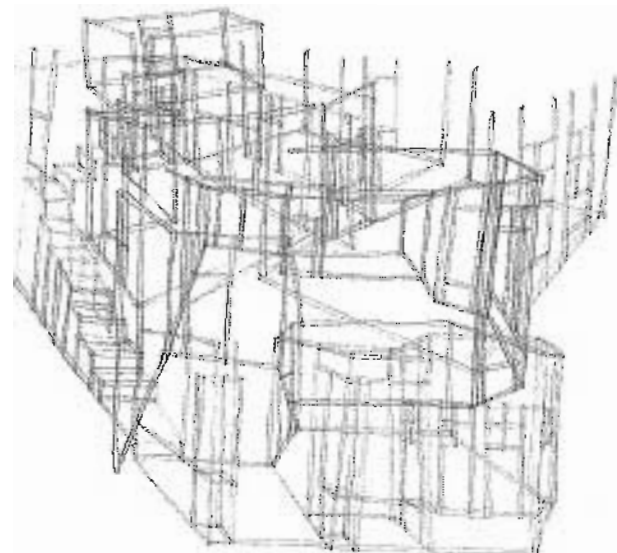
It may seem somewhat perverse to consider artworks not (only) in terms of their art-historical lineage or outward thematics but for their embodiments of various conditions of uncertainty. However, the states of hesitation, waiting, and wanting generously shared by many of the works Friday has collected do also provide the opportunity to reflect upon the interplay of uncertainty and hope that drives both worldly and intellectual undertakings. This mixture is similar to the delicate and perilous balance between under- and over-statement that is at the heart of many conceptually-oriented art propositions.

Crust

Some of the works in Friday's collection operate through a brute physical negotiation of the world, in which the work itself appears as the physical residue of a makeshift modelling of the world – a *Crust*, in the terms of Richard Hughes's re-created slice of a burnt mattress (Cat. 15). Some have a sense of making do with – or even making more of – things at hand. Daniel Olson combines a small fan blade and music box to create a sad, yet intrepid, hobbling agent that feels like an emotional companion to Francis Alÿs's dog-shaped urban scrap-metal collector (Cat. 38; Cat. 2). Mitch Robertson's rule-driven production of hockey-tape balls, each twice as heavy as the former, incidentally produces something like a crude model of the galaxy (Cat. 41), while Alex Morrison's *Homewrecker* video documents the re-mapping of a private house as skateboard venue (Cat. 35).

Speech Patterns⁵

Another work by Morrison, an early version of *Every house I've ever lived in, drawn from memory*, is another kind of reclaiming of space, this time in terms of the kind of mental repetition used to create memory patterns (Cat. 34).⁶ One can think of the Morrison drawings as the graphic pole of a range of language- and video-based works collected by Friday that use repetition as an expression of doubt or questioning. Their narrative counterpart might be Tracey Moffat's *Scarred for Life* series, which tersely relates psychologically formative moments



Cat. 34 Alex Morrison, *Every house I've ever lived in, drawn from memory* (detail)

(Cat. 27–28). These works present a kind of stuttering: involuntary convulsion, compulsive repetition of difficulty, or physical spasms in which desire overshoots and then loops back on itself.

Other works concerned with parsing linguistic structures include Fiona Banner's epically laborious *Corrections to the Text of Apocalypse Now*, a revision of the screenplay in the form of tiny typographic marks, speechless in themselves, on a large white field (Cat. 3). Ken Lum's *Untitled Language Painting* series (of which Friday's may have been the very first)⁷ presents gibberish according to the stylistic conventions of sign painting, simultaneously creating and frustrating the expectation of communication (Cat. 23). Candice Breitz's video *Soliloquy (Clint)* inverts this strategy, extracting the narrative gist of a particular Hollywood movie by excising all but the lead man's speech (Cat. 6).

This and other videos collected by Friday remind us that compulsive repetition is in fact structurally integral to the animation of moving pictures – and perhaps to the expectations and rhythms that they bear. Julia Loktev's *Press Shots* presents a compelling image of ecstasy and obsession, using only the basic cinematic structures of close-up and repetition (Cat. 22), while Euan Macdonald's *House (everythinghappensatonce)* creates an expectant situation of perpetually deferred climax (Cat. 24).

The reflex of the shutter is something like a speech pattern with its own insistently repeated conventions, and mechanical pulsation is possibly a reference for certain works concerned with the pace and situations of contemporary society. Macdonald's doubled resin airplanes create an uncanny vision of excess and

looming tragedy, perhaps felt as a lingering afterimage of media over-saturation (Cat. 25). Nearby (in Friday's domestic installation), the inexorable ticking of AA Bronson's clocks in the designs of sub-Saharan African national flags have a doomsday feel,⁸ especially as distilled into the twinned pair owned by Friday, in which the reversed colour schemes of the flags for Guinea and Mali reiterate each other's tragic beat (Cat. 7–8).

Rapture

Desire is a current in the world that is revealed by various works – perhaps unexpectedly, given the apparent “coolness” of Friday's collection. Photographs by Douglas Gordon (Cat. 14) and Thomas Ruff (Cat. 42) use abstraction to reveal archetypal bodily want while Spring Hurlbut concretizes the lust in architectural forms (Cat. 16–17). Yet importantly, in none of these does desire obliterate a sense of social import. Friday points out that “some of the more aggressive works, like [Lum's] language painting, or the Ruff porn image, and [Fiona Banner's screenprinted text account of a pornographic movie], combine their aggression with, or perhaps use it to more sharply define, an acute sensitivity and humanity.”⁹

In Shirin Neshat's photo *Rapture* (Cat. 37), Jana Sterbak's *Cones on Fingers* (Cat. 47), and Joyce Wieland's print *The Arctic Belongs to Itself* (Cat. 54), bodily resistance is evoked as a driving force in socio-political processes. The inseparability of physicality, form, and politics is also evident in a subtle multiple by Liam Gillick,

installed by Friday as a lampshade (Cat. 12).¹⁰ It illuminates living space through its cut-out text excerpts from the vicious death sentence of Sir Thomas More, the barrister and thinker whose fate was sealed by his insistence on principle. Only read with difficulty, Gillick's artwork operates physically as a sort of index of intangible absence.

Other works in Friday's collection express a sort of existential dissatisfaction by creating states of waiting or wanting, conditions driven by a simultaneous desire and perceived lack. In pieces by David Shrigley or Jonathan Monk this appears as a kind of sad wistfulness, while in others there is a poignant sense of seeking, as in Ben Judd's elegiac and tender video "*I Miss...*" (Cat. 18), or of expectation, as in Macdonald's *House (everythinghappensatonce)*.

Jeopardy

A willingness to jeopardize established convictions and conventions is fundamental to the investigative method that has been the defining feature of art-making since the advent of modernism. Ron Terada, represented in the exhibition by one of his *Jeopardy* paintings, introduces (or reveals) impurities within those high modernist traditions by crossing them with references to popular culture (Cat. 48). Joanne Tod also uses paint, deftly handled and with all its attendant pomp and circumstance, slyly to draw out the absurdities of social conventions (Cat. 49).

In fact, this impertinence is important to a fair number of

artists in the collection. Monk and Shrigley both display attitudes of intellectual irreverence that might be mistaken for pranksterism or nihilism, but which actually display wickedly incisive, and devastatingly witty, observation skills. Monk's *Onkell Leopold Wellnitz, Erased* reprises Robert Rauschenberg's 1953 erasure of a Willem de Kooning drawing, but enacts this on a portrait of someone's dear uncle, rendering more immediate the complex emotions of influence and filiation that underlay the intellectual gesture of that earlier artistic moment (Cat. 29). In another cheeky endangerment of an innocent (i.e. academically sanitized) modernist icon, Myfanwy MacLeod remakes Marcel Duchamp's 1915 found-object snow shovel as a plastic shovel with a cartoonishly exaggerated ready-made dent, and re-designates this as *Propaganda for War* (Cat. 26).

Seriously Dadaist humour aside, a self-conscious assessment of how one's practice fits into the world inevitably involves wrestling with histories and traditions, and many works in Friday's collection are concerned with dislodging the certainties of given systems. The utopian goals of Modernism are particular touchstones for artists such as Terada, Jungen, Lynne Cohen, Ian Wallace, and Simon Starling, while a range of other philosophical and intellectual traditions are sources for Gillick, Carol Wainio, John Massey, Damian Moppett, Kirsten Pieroth, and others. What these artists have in common is a commitment to investigative practices that seems to generate more instability than certainty. Both Starling works in Friday's collection involve handmade objects that reveal the rough development of modern(ist) ideals

PROFESSIONAL
NAME OF THE
PUNK ROCKER BORN
JAMES JEWEL
OSTERBERG
IT SOUNDS LIKE
A WEIRD
SOFT DRINK

(Cat. 45-46). Starling and Damian Moppett – the latter represented by a series of drawings relating rococo and naïve art forms (Cat. 33) – are two of the heirs-apparent to the attitude of agile and wide-ranging critical research of an artist such as Rodney Graham, also collected by Friday.

Prototype¹¹

The uncertainties expressed throughout Joe Friday's collection are very often the product of real attempts to make sense of the world and our actions within it. Friday himself views Ian Wallace as an exemplary artist whose practice is essentially concerned with trying to make sense of the world, his own operations within it and the weight of the histories these bear.¹² Wallace's works are the visual record of his attempts to reconcile the physicality and content of different social realities and spaces, such as the street, the studio and the museum (Cat. 51-53).

A younger generation of artists such as Brian Jungen and Kirsten Pieroth are equally concerned with formulating new working models – prototypes – for understanding the world. Pieroth's expansion upon an obscure document is part of her larger practice of disrupting the authenticity of historical records (Cat. 40), while Jungen's *Prototype for a New Understanding* series relies on carefully-observed formal convergences and conflicts between different cultural traditions (Cat. 19). The work of nineteenth-century photographer Karl Blossfeldt could be seen as an art-historical

precursor to the provisional relation of different orders of phenomena that we see throughout Jungen's work. One of the few historic artists in the collection – and thus especially revealing of Friday's intentionality – Blossfeldt's detailed photos of plants opened botany onto architecture, and aesthetics onto science, and can thus be thought of as a prototypical conceptual disturbance of established definitions (Cat. 5).

Careful observation leading to consciously inconclusive theories was also central to the N.E. Thing Co.'s 1960s documents of "Aesthetically Claimed Things" (ACTs, the acronym also to be understood as a gesture of agency), represented in Friday's collection by a photo of a monumental grain silo (Cat. 36), and to the photographic piece by Francis Alÿs in the collection. Alÿs's documentation tracking the movement of crowds seeking shelter from the Mexico City sun is a fine example of a work whose methodical technique ultimately reveals a deep human empathy (Cat. 1).

Scarred for Life¹³

The conditions of simultaneous hesitation and resolve, uncertainty and doubt, searching and seeking, that we thus see embedded in works throughout Friday's collection, might by extension lead us to consider how they might reflect the attitudes of its collector. We could venture that the humanist concerns for understanding social activity, which we see shared by so many of these works, are likely fundamental to Friday's values and his aspirations for his collection. Without

venturing too far into a biographical interpretation of a collection whose rigour would seem to resist an easy equation of personality and product, one could also wonder to what extent Friday's immersion in the field of law (he works for the federal Department of Justice) predisposes him to approach artworks with an attitude of provisional questioning. In one of our discussions about this exhibition, Friday affirmed that the balance between uncertainty and resolve is one that resonates with him, for "this co-existence is key to legal thinking and analysis [...] as much as it is to thinking about contemporary art."¹⁴

Friday notes that his collection's (necessary) state of incompleteness and provisionality derive not from a lack of knowledge or belief, but from a positive desire to remain engaged and open, and it could be said that his confidence is really demonstrated by his commitment to collecting open-ended work. His recent observation that ideas of waiting, questioning, stumbling, hesitating, thinking and rethinking, "are all integral parts of [both] confident art-making and collecting, as contradictory as that may seem,"¹⁵ displays a self-conscious and humble understanding of *collection* as both object and process, and also a respect for the necessarily conditional nature of artistic (and indeed other reflective) enunciations.

Incidentally, the proposal hatched by Friday and Sandra Dyck, Acting Director of the Carleton University Art Gallery, to invite an artist in his collection to guest-curate this show, is an additional confirmation of Friday's commitment to all possible avenues of dialogue opened by the works. It reveals a valuation of discourse

as a process – and of course this present selection of works should be understood as a volley in this public dialogue.

Whether or not one is convinced by my own framing of Friday's undertaking as a sort of relational and relative project, the collection is certainly a real and tangible achievement. Still, like the building itself that has housed it for the past seven or so years – a circa-1867 heritage house whose façade has settled into a crooked existence and whose flourished mouldings create a sense of in-suppressible yet elegant mischief – Friday's collection is also a remarkable evolutionary object, a prototype that embraces its own state of *want*.

Germaine Koh

- 1 Conventional measures of a collector's perspicacity would be, for example, acquiring key works or collecting emerging artists who go on to great success. In the past year, Friday has been featured as a collector in *Canadian Art* Vol. 21, No. 2, (Summer 2004) and lectured on his collection at Art Forum Berlin, the Toronto International Art Fair and The Ottawa Art Gallery, while works from his collection have appeared at the Whitney Biennial (New York), the National Gallery of Canada, the Seoul Museum of Art, the Vienna Secession, Castello di Rivoli (Turin), the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, the San Francisco Art Institute, and the Pasadena Museum of Art.
- 2 Title of a 2001 two-panel colour photographic work by the author in Friday's collection (not included in the exhibition).
- 3 Friday's installations in his home draw on felt similarities of form, content, and attitude, and include unexpected groupings such as Jøna Sterbak and Roy Kiyooka; Fiona Banner and Ken Lum; Douglas Gordon and Joyce Wieland; and AA Bronson's clocks and Euan Macdonald's airplanes.
- 4 Email to the author, 13 June 2004. For instance, Friday has made a number of acquisitions from Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver and the now-defunct S.L. Simpson Gallery in Toronto.
- 5 Title of a 1991 mixed media on paper work by Carol Wainio in Friday's collection (Cat. 50).
- 6 The ongoing project requires that Morrison create a new set of drawings (including any new homes he has had since the previous set) for each edition of the piece, so this is one case in which the canniness of the collector is revealed by how few drawings he has.
- 7 Email to the author from Ken Lum, 13 June 2004.
- 8 A booklet giving HIV and AIDS statistics for each country accompanied the original exhibition of the clocks.
- 9 Email to the author from Joe Friday, 4 March 2004.
- 10 According to Friday, Gillick's *Prototype* can also be used as a wastepaper basket.
- 11 Referring to titles of works in Friday's collection by Brian Jungen, *Prototype for a New Understanding #7*, (1999), and Liam Gillick, *Prototype*, (2002).
- 12 Email to the author, 4 March 2004.
- 13 Title of a series of offset prints by Tracey Moffatt, of which *Piss Bags, 1978* and *Scissor Cut, 1980* (both 1998) are in Friday's collection.
- 14 Email to the author, 4 March 2004.
- 15 Both comments in this paragraph are *Ibid*.