

On James Carl and Building a Public Collection

By Jessica Bradley

The Art Gallery of Ontario's
Curator of Contemporary Art
reflects on her practice



LEFT: James Carl
White Walls 1998–ongoing
Corrugated plastic and adhesive
Dimensions variable

ABOVE: James Carl
A Trophy 1997
Corrugated cardboard
164.8 x 76.2 x 59.4 cm

The value of a contemporary collection to a multi-period museum may be incalculable. One thing, however, is sure: it must be the vital beat at the heart of the museum.

Risk-taking is part of the job for any curator of contemporary art, a job that is done knowing that today's judgements will themselves be judged over time, again and again. Alfred Barr's comment on curators and collecting, dating from his tenure as the Museum of Modern Art's first director, went something like this: if the judgements that curators make about the art of their time are demonstrated to be superb in ten percent of the collection, the job is well done. It is a sobering thought. Most curators (and the public) would like to think we can do better than that. But in the contemporary field there are no guarantees. We engage the artistic production of our time without the hindsight of history or

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ABOVE: **Jac Leirner**
To and From Walker 1991
Used mailing envelopes, steel rod, acrylic sheet
46 x 34 x 395 cm

RIGHT: **Germaine Koh**
Knitwork 1992–ongoing
Unravelled used garments with text and photo documentation Approximately 2 x 60 m

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The best public collections are formed through a conjunction of curators who made prescient decisions and donors of extraordinary foresight and generosity. In either case, risky and sometimes unpopular choices have been backed by steadfast commitment. We have only to think of the Donald Judds acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in the 1970s or the Gerhard Richters acquired by the Art Gallery of Ontario in the 1980s. It would be difficult to acquire works by either artist today, because they are no longer available or within reach of diminishing budgets exacerbated by the weak Canadian dollar. We might think also of the institutions across the country that acquired Jeff Wall's work by the early 1980s, or Stan Douglas's and Jenny Holzer's by the late 1980s, or the video and film collection established with its own curator in 1983 at the National Gallery, or the early multi-media works and pieces by contemporary First Nations artists in the collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Directors, museum boards and patrons are well-advised to remember that for better or worse, when the exhibitions come down the permanent collection stays. The reputation of so many art museums here and elsewhere has been built on collecting great works in their time, with no guarantees and usually before the works are widely recognized to be of importance. When all is said and done, great museums around the world draw a sustainable

public and attract today's enormous cultural-tourism industry largely on the basis of their collections.

At their best, curators of contemporary art look and look again at today's and yesterday's art, wherever and whenever they can. Looking and thinking and writing about art are not simply the luxuries that appear to constitute curatorial work. They are elements in a serious and challenging undertaking that too frequently risks being compromised by other demands, including pressure on the museum to survive as an entertainment venue at the same time as it is a de facto custodian of those objects that embody knowledge of our past and present. The greatest privilege that contemporary curators must strive to share is the learning that occurs through enduring contact with artists and their works.

Every work acquired for the collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario has inherent implications for the existing collection and its direction in the future. This is inevitable, rather than a fact that burdens initial curatorial instincts about the value of a specific work. For example, in the mid-1990s two works by Toronto artist James Carl were accepted by the AGO as donations: *Empirical* (1996–1997), made of two cardboard facsimiles of banking machines and a stack of blank newspapers, and installed in the museum entrance hall in 1997–1998, and *A Trophy* (1997), which was commissioned by Tom Dean, recipient of the 1996 Toronto Arts Award, as part of its Protégé Honours Program. This year we



were able to acquire Carl's major sculptural assemblage *White Walls* (1998–ongoing). The selection of this piece was based on several factors, including my long-held conviction, matching that of several colleagues, that Carl is an artist of rare talent, innovation and intelligence.

I had been looking closely at his work since 1994. Carl began making *White Walls* while living in New York in the late 1990s. Like his earlier cardboard pieces, it is a witty, even acerbic rejoinder to consumer culture, for the artist counters our mass-produced reality with meticulously handmade re-creations by using materials associated with convenience—and the wastefulness of an economic ideology based on disposability and built-in obsolescence. Carl's ongoing production of tires suggests the endless proliferation of goods and their eventual destiny in the junk pile. While drawing attention to the invisible labour at the origin of so many common consumer items, Carl's handcrafted production, conceptual succinctness and subversive wit provoke reflection on the moral and cultural complexities of a market-driven global culture in a world increasingly full of "stuff." Familiar and playful as they are, Carl's tires invite questions about the nature, necessity and ethics of production. At the same time, the double entendre of his title, *White Walls*, refers to the art museum and its apparent distance from mundane realities.

Like Germaine Koh's *Knitwork* (1992–ongoing), another work

acquired this year, Carl's *White Walls* introduces certain museological conundrums: the artist has previously sold individual tires from his limitless edition and will continue to do so even as he adds tires to the piece now in the AGO collection. Koh will also continue to add to her work, knitting future portions with the unravelled wool from garments she collects. When thinking about these works, and installing Carl's recently, the legacy of conceptual and minimal art that belongs to these artists (both born in the 1960s) was often on my mind. I relish the thought of one day installing Germaine Koh's piece with Brazilian artist Jac Leirner's *To and From Walker* (1991), acquired in 1996. These artists are linked by a generation, but have emerged in the vastly different contexts and cultures of two hemispheres. This, too, tells us something about the art and artists of our time. Koh's *Knitwork* is a quiet yet visually stunning extravaganza—an homage to other lives and artists' labour. Leirner has assembled a similarly ordered, conceptually resonant work; however, her collection of envelopes (including those used by the Walker Art Center's development department), and jet-paks which ferried slides and floor plans back and forth between countries, are a sort of mapping that tells the story of the making of an exhibition, the artist's first in North America.

Two other recent acquisitions, Max Dean's *As Yet Unrealized* (2000) and Marla Hlady's *Drumming Displaced into Different*



ABOVE: **Max Dean**
As Yet Unrealized 2000
 DVD video, 12 wooden model chairs Photo Sean Weaver

RIGHT: **Marla Hlady**
Drumming Displaced into Different Sized Jam Jars 1999
 Plywood, melamin paint, lead, clay, glass, steel tube and wire,
 casters, audio equipment, computer, mechanical toys, jars
 with wire stands, electronic equipment Dimensions variable

Sized Jam Jars (1999), were both installed for periods over the past year in a small gallery directly adjacent to canonical minimalist works. Each manifests a certain anxiety about technology while masterfully incorporating computer and audio-visual systems that imply, and react to, our presence as viewers. As Max Dean's generic wooden chairs sat posed ready to disassemble and reassemble themselves, like they do in the sequence on the accompanying video, their suspended animation seemed to spill into the next room, leaving me with fantasies of the Judd "stack" piece reordering itself, and wondering what LeWitt's cube would become if set in motion by some internal volition. In the end, all five artists mentioned here address classical issues of sculpture: weight, mass, volume and position, with the added component (since sculpture came off its pedestal in the mid-20th century) of the viewer's body to complete the work. But Dean's work does much more. Among other things, rather eerily it questions our very necessity to its existence. Marla Hlady's piece introduces an auditory element to the surrounding space, a clattering that subtly

invades the solemn silence of the gallery. Two white cubes, the central elements of her work, are quintessentially minimalist forms with overtones of high-tech medical units. What a delight to find two stripped-down, battery-operated toys inside, banging maniacally on their tiny drums in their padded containers lined with egg cartons.

With each installation a work reveals itself further, and the value of its contribution and meaning are renewed if the piece proves over time that it is as compelling as the reasons for which it was first acquired. When I brought Tom Dean's *Excerpts from a Description of the Universe 2* (1986) into the Art Gallery of Ontario collection in 1996 (the first work by this artist to enter the collection and ten years after it was made), it was because I believed that Dean was a figure of both eccentric and influential presence in the Toronto scene and elsewhere, and that the absence of his work at the AGO needed to be addressed. This particular work, by its very nature, encompasses his varied and unique artistic development over a twenty-year period,



through performance art, multiples, drawings and sculpture.

The plan for the first installation of this piece came in a middle-of-the-night thought about Rebecca Horn's *Pendulum* (1984) in the AGO's collection. The precariously placed ostrich egg, nearly grazed by the intermittent swoop of a giant, threatening needle of steel, had the right drama and tension. The egg is one of nature's perfect sculptures, a form Brancusi envied, and one that speaks of the very genesis of life that preoccupied Dean. *Excerpts from a Description of the Universe 2* constitutes a marvellous, indulgent compendium of sculptural form. Yet the other three pieces that came to mind for this installation were two-dimensional, or almost. The recent acquisition of two large drawings by Cathy Daley (both *Untitled*, 1995 and 1996) began to complete an imagined picture: their wispy, seductive, overflowing forms, so material yet ephemeral, corresponded to those on Dean's tables, especially the miniature slip dress tossed on one of the tables like a memento of a big night out. But something was missing. It was Kiki Smith's *Lucy's Daughters* (1992), a huge paper

piece with hundreds of linked, tiny, doll-like, hand-formed female figures suspended upon it. Unfortunately this work was not in the collection. In fact, Smith had always kept it for herself.

Knowing she and Dean were friends, each with deep mutual respect for the other's work, I asked her if she would lend it to the museum. And so the visceral materiality and shared subject matter of much of Smith's work came to join Dean's in the same room through a piece that is both sculpture and drawing—and one that also spoke of a universe in biological origins.

It is a privilege as well as a daunting responsibility to acquire works for a public collection. It is a gift to have access to a collection on a daily basis, to discover new things about works we think we know, sometimes as if by osmosis. Repeated exposure over time works upon both the imagination and received notions of an artwork's meaning or stature. No curator is without those notions, and all curators should question them.

* James Carl's *White Walls* will remain installed in the contemporary galleries at the AGO until March 1, 2002. ■