Toy Box junkies

by Robert Fones

Toys have had a conspicuous presence in art since the mid-1980s when a number of American artists – Mike Kelley, Jeff Koons, Laurie Simmons, Paul McCarthy – began using them in their work. **Toys** evoke innocence, naivety and idealism, making them particularly suitable for iconoclastic, scatological or satirical statement. They are appealing, in life and in art, because of the sense of play and engagement they engender. Their capacity for psychological projection means they can be used to act out forbidden scenarios, giving expression to the darker side of our own nature. More recently, in a number of **exhibitions**, toys and their attributes – both positive and negative – are being exploited by a new generation of **Toronto**-based artists: **M**itch Robertson, **M**arla Hlady, **D**aniel Olson and **S**ally McKay.

Opening page: Sally McKay – *Skippy and Butch* (1994, from the Species Loyalty series), c-print, 3 x 5 in, photo courtesy the artist
These pages: Mitch Robertson – *Baby Doll* (1998), plaster and enamel on wood shelf, 4.5 x 4.38 x 4.38 in (head 3 x 2.5 x 2.5 in)
Screened-back image opposite includes *Baby Doll* and *Cabbage Patch* (1998), plaster and enamel on wood shelf, 4 x 4 x 4 in, photos courtesy the artist

The work of Robertson, Hlady, Olson and McKay differs in scale, ideological focus and aesthetic sensibility from the photo-based, sculptural or installation work of American and British artists currently working with toys or toy elements. These four employ humour, novelty and parody to engage the viewer in an unselfconscious play process that may demand active participation. They use predominantly mass-produced toys (or parts salvaged from them) and often recycle existing objects rather than create new ones. They intervene in the normal cycle of mass-production, consumption and disuse, producing works of art that question the social and cultural conditions behind these phenomena and our role in this process.

Off with Their Heads

The first toy items that came to my attention were Mitch Robertson's casts of the heads of a Cabbage Patch doll, a troll and a generic baby included in an exhibition of multiples at Art Metropole. Robertson (a boyish 24-year-old) has co-opted Jeff Koons's quest for fame by producing his own lines of multiples, personal icons and trading cards, all geared to the creation and reinforcement of his own art stardom. Fortunately, Robertson has a healthy wariness of the whole notion of fame and pursues it tongue-in-cheek. His *famous*™ product lines mimic conventional marketing strategies and parody them at the same time. Robertson has replaced the comic book "Chihuahua in a teacup" with himself – appealing to potential buyers with his earnest sincerity and "give me a good home" posturing.

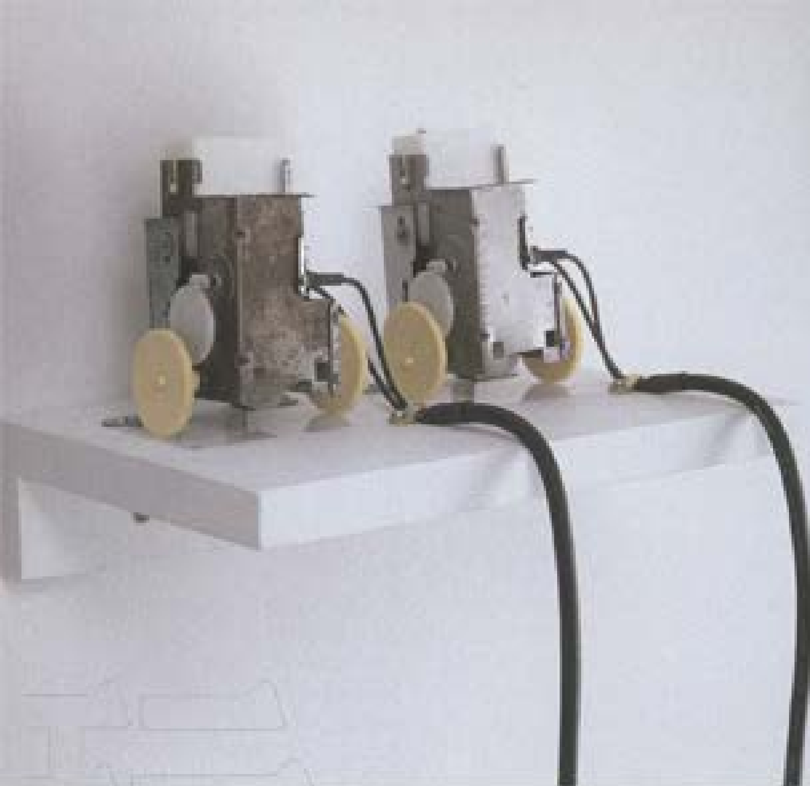
Robertson's dolls' heads evoke the plaster-of-Paris kitsch collectibles – such as statues of classical figures, TV's Lassie and dwarves or busts of Elvis and the Pope – commonly seen in variety-store windows. They also mimic the tradition of museum gift-shop reproductions, which are often cast, like Robertson's *famous*™ dolls (1997), from moulds taken of the actual object. Each head, in an edition of "up to 30 depending on demand" comes with a brochure that outlines its unique features. Using language similar to that of the Franklin Mint and other collectible marketing companies, Robertson promotes his hand-made multiples with phrases such as "painstaking reproductions" and "very limited edition." In fact, the heads are crudely cast with air bubbles and irregularities that should not have passed the implied quality control. That they don't live up to the written description is exactly Robertson's point: western manufacturing is more hype, brand names and marketing than quality goods.

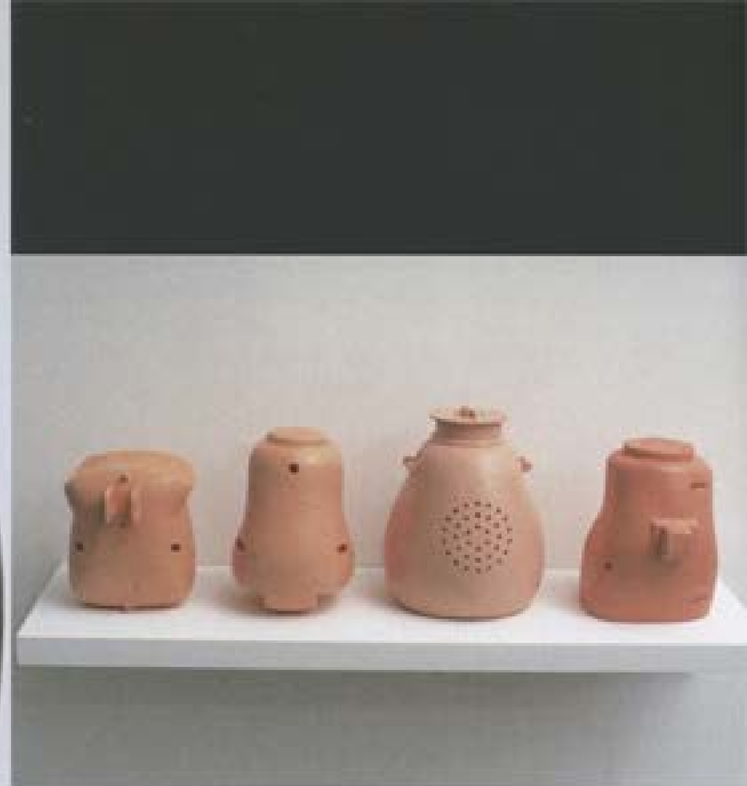
Although Robertson, in Duchampian readymade tradition, claims complete detachment from the dolls he has chosen, they are dolls with significant attributes. He didn't buy the dolls off the toy-store shelf; they were salvaged from a local Salvation Army store, hence they are near the end of their commodity cycle of production/use/neglect. He has given them a new life by casting their heads as fine-art objects. (They are dolls with soft bodies so their heads can easily be detached.) They are also dolls from the last two decades and would have been the playthings of Generation X, the Baby Boomers' children, a demographic group to which Robertson also belongs. He plucks the heart-strings of his own generation, suggesting that, through the acquisition of one of his *famous*™ dolls multiples, previous doll owners can experience "that certain glow which will win your heart ... for the second time."

One of the doll heads is from a Cabbage Patch Kid, one of the first mass-produced dolls to be personalized by making each one slightly different by varying skin and hair colour, clothes, shoes and accessories. The initial popularity of the Cabbage Patch doll (first produced for Christmas 1983) caused a buying frenzy that swept through the toy industry, depleting stocks and fueling black-market prices. It is consequently significant that Robertson's Cabbage Patch heads are all uniform and that their individuality has been erased by presenting only the heads. Robertson claims "their 'huggable' qualities have been removed by reproducing only the head of each doll." Being bodiless also removes the dolls from their former function as toys since Robertson places them, like busts, in a "museum-like setting" to be enjoyed through an aesthetic distance.

In this setting – displayed on individual white shelves – one can study these heads with either the misty-eyed nostalgia of a kitsch-collectible collector or the philosophical detachment of a fine-art connoisseur. One notes, for example, that the Cabbage Patch doll has a negligible cranial cavity, suggesting a harmless Neanderthal naivety. Baby Doll, being top-heavy must be displayed on its (his? her?) side, giving it an air of banal pathos. Troll's blue hair and skin identify him as an alien of sorts, a vestige of the dark side of toy ancestry rooted in the Brothers Grimm and the dark forests of Germany. He is cute but not to be trusted.

The overwhelming quality of these dolls is cuteness – caricatured by toy designers by exaggerating cute features





such as chubby cheeks, dimples and large eyes. In his accompanying brochure, Robertson mentions the ruthless marketing of these dolls to children under ten by aggressive toy manufacturers. Decapitated and displayed on white shelves, his reproduction heads are trophies from a marketplace hunt where the cloying and overly cute have been culled. Like busts of notorious emperors, these heads speak of successful campaigns, ruthless exploitation and heartless subterfuge; like severed enemy heads displayed on a conqueror's palisade, they are warnings to other toy manufacturers and to the unsuspecting public.

survival of the fittest

The missing bodies of Mitch Robertson's dolls seemed to appear a few months later in Marla Hlady's solo exhibition at Cold City Gallery, where the artist displayed four torsos of unidentified dolls on a single white shelf. Like Robertson's heads, Hlady's doll torsos are casts taken from the real things. They look strangely non-anatomical, something between a Henry Moore sculpture and the casing from an electric drill. They are more sculptural than biological and – with perforated grills in some of their stomachs and screw heads in recessed, cylindrical spaces – more android than human. (The grills would have been the sound holes for the voice mechanisms that originally were housed in each doll's abdomen.) Like fossils, once complex innards have been replaced by a uniform solid mass: flesh-coloured plastic fills the former voids.

Unlike Robertson's heads, Hlady's doll bodies do not preserve or memorialize. Their mute materiality is probably intended as a counterpoint to the rest of her exhibition, which consists of sound mechanisms that have been removed from various mechanical toys and displayed in pairs on small shelves. Hence, the exhibition includes the dense and impenetrable as well as the exposed and accessible.

These sound mechanisms display in miniature many devices from the history of technology: gears, cranks, connecting rods, cams and bellows. The only difference is that parts that originally would have been cast iron are in these versions plastic. The batteries that powered these small mechanisms have been replaced by electricity, with switches that can be controlled by the viewer. During the opening, the room was filled with a cacophony of squawks, wheezes and quacks.

Each shelf displays two of the same or similar mechanisms, which can be run simultaneously or alternately. These paired devices prove what I have always believed about mass-produced objects: no two are exactly alike. Subtle differences distinguish the "call" and operation of each machine. Often one of the pair seems weaker, possibly heading for earlier mechanical breakdown than its stronger sibling. Such observations recall Darwin's theories of natural selection, particularly as they were applied to aspects of life and industry outside the natural world.

The actual sound-producing mechanism of most of

Above: Marla Hlady – Untitled (1997, from the Amusement Machine series), wood shelf, battery-operated toys, electrical hardware, plexiglass, 9.5 x 6.5 x 5.75 in; untitled (1998), polyester resin, wood shelf, 8 x 16 x 5 in / Photos courtesy Cold City Gallery
Opposite: Daniel Olson – *Stereo A/V* (1998), wooden construction with two hand-turned music boxes, stereo viewer and stethoscope listening device, installation view, photo by Marina Polosa; *Red Elf* (1998), altered stuffed toy with amplified music box, photo by Mitch Robertson

these machines is a translucent plastic accordion-like shape that functions like a lung to send air through a reed or whistle. Since we associate the animal sound with the mechanism, the machine parts inevitably draw parallels with their anatomical counterparts. Gears, connecting rods, bellows and metal strips seem to approximate muscles, sinews, lungs and vocal cords. Also like vertebrate anatomy, each machine has hard parts (metal armature, gears and axles) and soft parts (everything made of plastic). And like the anatomical organs they simulate, the hard or soft material used for each part is determined by its suitability for the function it has to perform. Hlady has made the connection between machines and humans in an earlier work titled *Gut Machines* (1995), in which two metal boxes vibrated rubber casts of a solar plexus when activated. But this recent work is less overt and more metaphorical.

In most of her work Hlady maintains a minimalist acknowledgement of the role of the viewer in activating a work of art. But with her noise machines the relationship between viewer and object goes beyond minimalism's perceptual and phenomenological considerations to encompass psychological and moral issues. These machines can only operate with human intervention. They can't turn themselves on or off. With us turning them on, they will wear down and eventually stop, especially if we walk away and leave them running as I saw several people do while I was in the gallery. Perhaps people feel they are doing others a favour by leaving the machines running or assume that the machines will inevitably – like most user-activated devices – turn themselves off. The relationship between these machines and the viewer/activator parallels many similar situations in the world where we endanger the life of something by our desire to see it: the Lascaux caves, for example, or the fragile habitat of the Galapagos. The cries and bleats of these pointless mechanisms may make us laugh but they also issue an unsettling warning about the effects of our own actions on the things we claim to love.

It is telling that these tiny remnants of the Industrial Revolution are hidden in the interiors of mechanical toys. Many of these products are made in China, Indonesia and other developing countries where the Industrial Age, along with its unfortunate exploitation of natural resources, child labour, low wages and environmental costs, still persists.

In the West, manufacturing has become all but invisible. Factories have moved, if not to developing countries, at least from the cities to the industrial parks of our suburbs. The products we use, from computers to refrigerators are mysterious ergonomic shells encasing little-understood electronic circuitry. The exposed mechanisms of Hlady's tiny machines are refreshing to see and delightful to watch. She has pulled aside the curtain hiding our recent industrial past and revealed the wizard of human ingenuity.

Stop, Look and Listen

Daniel Olson is also fascinated with the mechanical devices concealed within toys, particularly those that produce sound. His liquor-bottle containers, first exhibited in 1984 and now sold through Art Metropole, emit a chiming tune when picked up. There is no external evidence of the chime mechanism concealed inside (taken

from a Fisher Price "Roly-Poly Chime Ball") so the effect is unexpected and pleasantly surprising. For the Cold City exhibition, "Double Your Pleasure," Olson exhibited a work titled *Stereo A/V* (1998). Somewhat inspired by Olson's recollection of a note from Marcel Duchamp's *The 1914 Box*, which proposed combining looking and listening in a single work of art, this piece consists of two different music-box mechanisms mounted side by side inside a small wooden box, a stereoscopic viewer (from an old Viewmaster) and a stethoscope.

No instruction is necessary. It is obvious that one should put on the stethoscope, look through the viewer and turn the small crank mounted on the top of the box. Through the magnifying viewer a tiny music-box cylinder is transformed into a giant revolving drum, like a brassy machine designed by Leonardo da Vinci. Each metal prong emits a distinct note as its corresponding pin trips it. Everything happens slowly in a kind of dream-like fog.

What one doesn't immediately realize is that the apparently single rotating cylinder is in fact an optical fusion of two different cylinders, one seen by the right eye, another seen by the left. The fused image appears solid for parts that are identical in both cylinders, slightly fuzzy where they are not (i.e. in the arrangement of pins on the cylinder). Furthermore, the discordant melody heard through the stethoscope is a mix of two different tunes playing at the same time.

Stereo A/V is a demonstration of looking and listening. Normally the eyes see two different versions of the same reality and the brain fuses them into one three-dimensional spatial conception. In Olson's sculpture, the eyes see two different realities and the brain does its best to fuse them into one. A stethoscope usually has two ear-pieces and one point of focus so that both ears hear the same sounds; Olson splits the stethoscope so that each ear hears a different tune. These strategies initially disorient the viewer/listener by providing magnified or amplified sensory input. But by excluding other external sounds or visual references these apparatuses allow complete concentration on the experience of looking and listening.

The music-box mechanisms, quaint and charming at normal scale, become strange and fascinating when magnified. Likewise, the two familiar melodies – *When You Wish Upon a Star* and *It's a Small World After All* – are transformed into a haunting piece of synthesized music when fused in the listener's brain. Olson conceals nothing. The apparatus is open to inspection via holes in the top of the box that give access to the two music-box cylinders. But the sense of wonderment persists and the pleasure in experiencing this simple mechanism is not diminished by an understanding of how it all works.

Another piece in the "Double Your Pleasure" exhibition, *Red Elf* (1998), a stuffed children's toy mounted on the wall, is activated by turning its red ball nose. This action winds up an internal music box that then repeats a familiar child's bedtime lullaby, but played so slowly as to be almost unrecognizable. Like *Stereo A/V*, the apparent simplicity of this work is deceptive. It takes a while and a few twists of the nose before you realize that all the sounds are amplified: the sound of the nose turning, the geared mechanism of the music box and the melody it plays. All are picked up by a concealed contact microphone and played back through a speaker hidden in the elf's torso.

These amplified sounds (there is no visible evidence of the speaker or any sound equipment) have a disturbing and uncanny effect. Freud defined the uncanny as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar." *Red Elf* looks innocent enough but there are signs that hint at his darker side. His plaid pants hark back to the origins of fairy tales in which nasty things often happen. He hangs on the wall like a corpse on a meat hook or, if alive, by some magic of self-levitation. The act of turning his nose seems risky since one doesn't know initially what is being wound up or what might happen.

At the same time, *Red Elf*'s worn fabric body, torn arm with missing stuffing and slowly dying melody gives him a real poignancy. Turning his nose seems transgressive and demeaning. The hearts on his cheeks seem like garish tattoos of past affection rather than rosy blushes of health. Originally retrieved by Toronto artist Max Dean from a mound of discarded toys at the side of the road (Dean later gave the doll to Olson), the circumstances of its discovery testify to *Red Elf*'s unkown past. Like Hlady's noise machines, *Red Elf* can appear sardonically funny one minute, then tragic and haunted the next.

collect call

A mound of toys at the side of the road would have also stopped Sally McKay, an avid toy collector who has amassed a sizeable collection of Fisher Price Chatter Telephones – fifty-five to be exact – which she included in her recent exhibition curated by Michelle Jacques at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Like Mitch Robertson, she has an ambivalent relationship to popular culture: while

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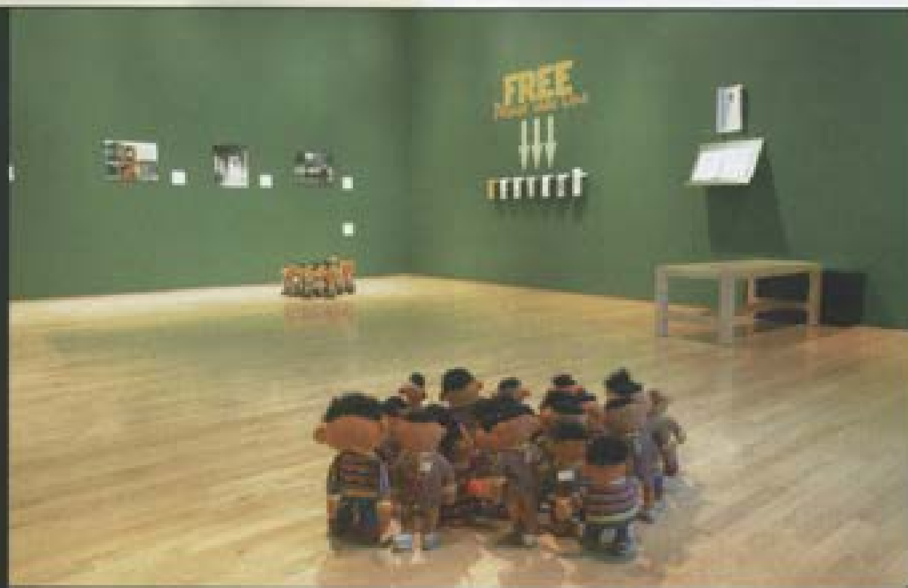
her work develops out of a genuine collecting impulse, the pieces she creates parody the collecting habits of individuals and museums.

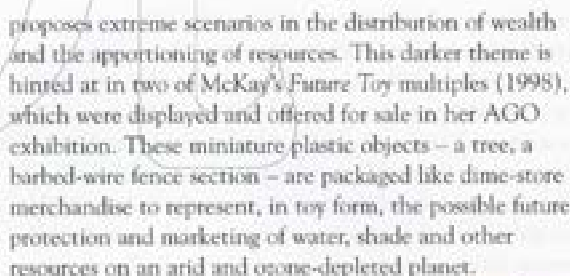
Her collection of fifty-five Chatter Telephones, titled Collection (ongoing, begun in 1992), was displayed on grey industrial shelving in a room painted grass green. What appears initially to be a collection of identical mass-produced objects gradually reveals subtle differences of manufacture and evidence of individual use. McKay has provided a printout from a database inventory that lists – in imitation of museum condition reports – the nicks, scratches and dents peculiar to each telephone. Collection is a genuine and fascinating collection that documents – as any good collection of designed objects should – the technological changes within design history. The evolution, for example, of a wooden base to a plastic one reflects the economic reality of seeking lower material and production costs. The switch from a cartoon-like speaking or laughing mouth to a tight-lipped Smiley-button graphic mouth may be indicative of the societal shift from personal to electronic communication. The mixture of head, telephone and automobile also suggests the fusion principle of design evolution when existing products or technologies are combined to create a new one, such as the fusion of typewriter, television and telephone in today's computer. From a cultural perspective, Chatter Telephone seems to symbolize the importance for human beings of mobility and communication, a now-ubiquitous phenomenon with so many car and mobile phones. It puts a smile, literally, on the training version of a technology that will become a vital part of every child's future.

McKay's collection is also a testament to the overwhelming popularity of Chatter Telephones; it is Fisher Price's all-time best seller with over thirty million sold since 1961, when the first version was introduced. It is a very endearing yet curious object with its bobbing eyes and rotary-dial forehead. Why is it so popular? Once again, Freud comes to mind with his anecdote about an infant who delighted in tossing his pull toy out of his crib, uttering a sound that indicated "gone," then pulling it back by its string and exclaiming "da" (German for "there") when the toy reappeared. Chatter Telephone mimicks this peek-a-boo scenario about things that disappear and return. In this case, what is gone is mom, dad or a friend and what returns is their imaginary voice over the telephone.

McKay's Chatter Telephone collection is augmented by a bulletin board with a number of pinned-up photos, newspaper clippings and articles, several of which were fabricated by McKay herself. She poses in several photos as the fictional collector of Collection. In one article, titled "Chatter Phonophile," McKay, the collectibles collector reveals: "I used to be just plain old Sally McKay, now I'm that lady with all the adorable toy telephones" – as if her collection alone had elevated her to a higher social status. In the down-scale world of collectible collectors this might be true. However, the fictional Sally McKay's estimate of the value of her collection at $14 million is an absurd exaggeration that reveals her desire to rank her collection among the world's great works of art and to rub shoulders with serious collectors of fine art. Alas, collectibles collectors and fine-art collectors are worlds apart, separated by class, money and education.

Elsewhere in the same "Chatter Phonophile" article, McKay acknowledges – in words reminiscent of self-help books or right-wing ethics – a desire to own all the Chatter Telephones in North America: "With my hard work and perseverance I will one day achieve my dream." The possibility of such a collection questions not only the sanity of collector Sally McKay, but also the ethics of hoarding, whether it's used toys or some other commodity. Through the guise of this fictional collector McKay underlines the class disparities within our consumer society and





proposes extreme scenarios in the distribution of wealth and the apportioning of resources. This darker theme is hinted at in two of McKay's *Future Toy* multiples (1998), which were displayed and offered for sale in her AGO exhibition. These miniature plastic objects – a tree, a barbed-wire fence section – are packaged like dime-store merchandise to represent, in toy form, the possible future protection and marketing of water, shade and other resources on an arid and ozone-depleted planet.

Issues of production, ownership and ideology also arise in two other related works from McKay's AGO exhibition, *Bert* (1997) and *Ernie* (1997), twin collections of the famous Sesame Street characters. McKay has arranged these stuffed toys on the floor in apparently marching groups, as if they were alive. These two groups – all Berts or all Ernies – are positioned on adjacent sides of an imaginary square so all the members of each group face in one direction but neither group looks directly at the other. So familiar a duo seems strangely lost when separated as if Ernies are searching for Berts and vice-versa, oblivious to each other's nearby proximity.

A clue to understanding *Bert* and *Ernie* is found in an earlier photographic series in this same exhibition titled, Species Loyalty (1994–97) in which two different versions of the same species – a realistic dog and Disney's Pluto for example – confront each other in a simply constructed landscape tableau. These inter-species confrontations juxtapose the natural and the supernatural, the generic and the brand name, the colonial and the imperial. As in much of McKay's work, these encounters are both hilarious and disturbing. Bert and Ernie are not posed in an obvious confrontation; however, McKay sets up tension by separating two characters who always appear together, by multiplying their identities and by isolating them in these apparently marching groups. The implied movements of these groups suggests miltary drills, protest marches, parades, even uniformed school groups having a tour of McKay's exhibition. Why are Bert and Ernie in separate groups? What are they doing? What are they looking for? These questions, initially projected onto the two groups, ultimately point back at us, their creators and compatriots in group behaviour and periodic social unrest.

Furthermore, the massing of these stuffed toys serves to reveal that all the Bert dolls and all the Ernie dolls are not identical. Differences in size, colour and facial features may indicate different manufacturers or products produced by the same manufacturer at different times. These variations point to the fact that Bert's and Ernie's likenesses are corporately owned and reproductions are supposed to adhere to the licensed standard. Their unidirectional posturing within each group may reflect this search for their own Platonic form, materially invisible yet reflected in all their multiplicity.

Robertson, Hlady, Olson and McKay tinker with the manufacturing process: they take things apart, re-cast already cast parts, interchange existing parts and repackage existing products. They intervene in the inevitable fate of manufactured items, rescuing them from flea markets, recycling programs and landfill sites. They cannibalize existing toys, re-using their parts in new constructions or, in the case of Marla Hlady's work, simply exposing their parts to view. The interventions serve to question the nature of manufactured objects as well as the purpose of manufacturing itself. At a stage in industrialization when the workings of many consumer products are far beyond the comprehension of the average person, the empirical experiments and cultural investigations of these artists are refreshing, revealing and humanizing.

Olson's and Hlady's work must be activated by our intervention. Though we may wonder who is playing with whom (Do we control their mechanical devices or do the devices control us by offering sensory rewards every time we turn them on?), our participation is not intimidating or controlled but is more a kind of willing play. Robertson, McKay and Olson produce multiples, pamphlets or bookworks that are inexpensive (or free), allowing anyone to purchase their work, take home a free sample or buy into their marketing schemes. The use of parody – in McKay's fictional collector or Robertson's spoof of collectible merchandising – also provides easy access for anyone who similarly mistrusts mass media.

Unlike much of the photo-based art from this decade, these artists do not rely on commercial or industrial processes to make their work. While their art provokes questions about our impact on the planet and its resources, their modest material expenditure and re-use of existing objects are themselves a concrete statements about how art as well as manufacturing can continue to create more from less.

Previous two pages: Sally McKay – screened detail of *Bert* (1998), stuffed toys, photo courtesy the artist, installation view of Art Gallery of Ontario exhibition with *Ernie* (1997) in foreground, photo courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario

Above: screened detail from Sally McKay's Species Loyalty series (see page 27)