

Transcending an Unnatural World

“Space has always reduced me to silence”. – Gaston Bachelard, “The Poetics of Space”¹

When envisioning the “natural world,” what is it that comes to mind? Over time has the meaning of these words changed? Artists have continually responded to and represented the environment that surrounds them. Often this space becomes illusionary, transposed onto a two-dimensional surface or recreated in the third dimension. When considering Bachelard’s words from the “Poetics of Space,” I imagine an immense space where I am standing in a large open field that cascades over rolling hills as far as I can see. This visual memory of a landscape is an internal understanding of what constitutes the natural world. But, there is an innate difference between this pastoral recollection and the built environment or constructed landscape. As the environment continues to transform and change, artists viscerally respond and adapt to what surrounds them.

In the last four years Kingston-based artist Don Maynard has moved away from his two-dimensional practice, specifically encaustic painting and drawing, to three-dimensional projects that incorporate discarded industrial materials. He constructs an environment out of waste, which acts as a façade for what we have come to understand as the natural world. With the ever changing and depleting landscape, and the overloaded landfills, Maynard’s work seems only fitting in its reuse and recycling – and intuitive attempt to re-imagine an environment that is slipping away. There is a distinct beauty in Maynard’s work that contradicts the mundane and utilitarian nature of the objects. Metals, glass and mirror, air conditioner parts and large numbers of florescent light bulbs have been adapted in his sculptural installations. The sheer volume of these mass-produced materials allows the art work to transcend the individual component parts. At the same time, the magnitude of his installations profoundly underscores a culture based on excessive consumption and swift discard.

In this exhibition, Maynard has installed two works. The first installation, “Looks Like Rain,” featured in Gallery 3, includes several hundred Pyrex glass rods each 3/8” in diameter. This large-scale, precarious structure, when complete, stretches the full length of the gallery. These transparent and fragile strands of glass, overlapping one another, appear to lean lightly against the wall. As one enters the dimly lit room, the strands of glass glimmer and dance in the light. As one’s body slowly moves back and forth with the work, the pieces begin to visually bend. The viewer is transported into an unknown space that has a familiarity to it. Maynard

generates a play on our past experience, memory and knowledge of what we have come to understand as “rain.” He touches a moment in time that precedes an anticipated occurrence. An illusion of space and uncertainty surrounds the viewer as the real limits of the space and the work become altered. Maynard explains, “It is a fundamental human desire to know where we are in space. This work confounds the ability to do that. It unbalances our assumptions about how we expect the world to be.”² The viewer’s relationship to these works is experiential; the process and finalization is only complete through the audiences encounter with the objects in space.

Formally, Maynard’s works can be compared to the works by Minimalist artists of the 1970s, such as Donald Judd and Carl Andre. Maynard’s work is stripped down to the most fundamental aesthetic features of the found material, as he would state, “simplified.” Repetition of form that explores the use of space and how we think about space are also characteristics of Judd’s work, but there is more happening in this recurrence that speaks to the transformation of the object itself. Many objects hold a specific identity or presence that cannot be permeated; others can be manipulated as the artist builds on this association between object and meaning. In speaking with Maynard about his practice, he expressed an innate relationship to the materiality of the object, however, there is an intimacy in Maynard’s work that counteracts the cold, unemotional quality that Minimalism embraced.

The second installation, “Falling to Pieces,” consumes the entire space of the Molson Gallery. Twelve hundred pieces of mirror are installed from floor to ceiling. The gallery is dimly illuminated. As the viewer enters the room, their surroundings are slowly realized. Images of one’s self are reflected back, distorted and repeated throughout the space. Maynard began working on this project following the destruction of the Twin Towers in 2001. He states, “When I first started to assemble it in my studio I felt a great sense of loss and agony. I was trying to imagine the first thing someone would experience on the ground, the huge quantities of glass exploding from the building after the planes’ impact.”³ With each installation, the project is transformed and developed in meaning and experience. Maynard explains that, over time, it has changed, acquiring now an atmosphere of calm, silence and mystery, projecting a meditative quality, in part induced by the repetition of the object and the intimacy of the space.

In our fast-paced world, we are continually bombarded by material objects. So much time and money goes into making, designing, and producing objects that have a dump-heap destiny. We begin to question whether our natural landscape is just merely a human construct of man-made materials, or a recollection of a place

that we hold in our mind. Maynard pushes the boundaries of these objects, past their initial purpose to recreate a new environment, and a new space. His installations are poetic reflections; recontextualized found, industrial objects allow us to ponder what exactly does constitute the natural world?

¹ Gaston Bachelard. "The Poetics of Space" (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969) p. 183.

² Don Maynard. Interview with Don Maynard conducted by Sarah Beveridge, May 30, 2008.

³ Ibid.