

Mark Clintberg

Long term relationship

Love Empire

2005

bois, système de sonorisation, sacs
de couchage, oreiller et photocopies /
wood, public address system, sleeping
bags, pillows, photocopies on bond
paper

dimensions variables / variable
dimensions

Photo: © Musée des beaux-arts du
Canada / National Gallery of Canada







Text mess age

2013

tubes au néon, transformateur, variateur / neon tubing,
transformer, dimmer

68 x 63 cm (27" x 25")

édition 1/3

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Jon Davies

In August 2013 I met Mark Clintberg for dinner in Montreal. We quickly became intimate; both of us had freshly emerged from long-term relationships. The next morning I set out to Ottawa to visit the National Gallery of Canada, and lo and behold, installed prominently in the gallery was Clintberg's 2005 participatory installation *Love Empire*, essentially a stage from which people could declare their love to another. At that moment the work's appearance was not just a surprising coincidence, but also a kind of beacon saying that we would remain close.

This encounter felt paradigmatic of Clintberg's artistic practice, which beautifully mines the terrains of kinship and affection through the use of words, signs and gestures. For Clintberg, meaning rests not precisely in the object or statement itself, but in the spatial arrangements and relationships that they describe. In Clintberg's engaging work seemingly simple forms or phrases take on a poignant, poetic significance when they are tasked with representing the complexities and nuances of interpersonal relationships. The related series of *The gift (that I protect)* and *Pudenda* share a visual vocabulary of broken glass, a potent metaphor for the fragility of our bodies, our psyches and the bonds that we forge with one another.



The gift (that I protect) 3

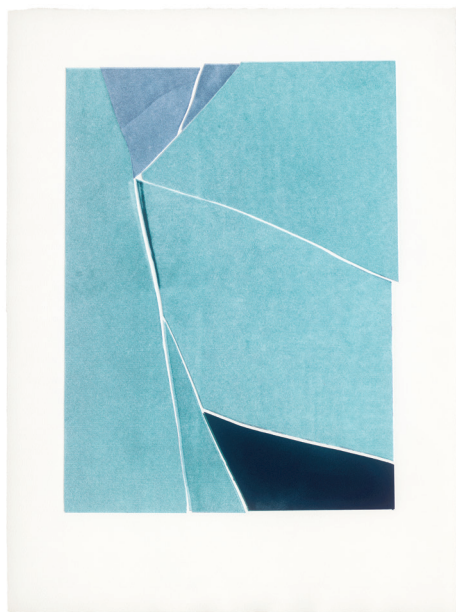
2015

verre de couleur ancien et contemporain, cuivre et soudure /
contemporary and antique coloured glass, copper, solder
140 x 43 x 43 cm (55" x 17" x 17")

Collection Musée Giverny Capital

Pudenda is a striking series of unique monoprints that could be taken as modernist abstractions, but are in fact representations of shattered panes of glass. The fragmented shards rest cheek by jowl in a state of tension, with the title suggesting that the array of angular lines subtly evoke our body's private crevices and folds. (As the artist notes, "the term 'pudenda' is often used in art history to refer to the genitals... The root meaning of the word refers to 'parts to be ashamed of.' It can also imply an intimate object that deserves protection, or a relationship to be protected.") The series embodies how, in Clintberg's practice, we can find traces of ourselves, our lovers and the social formations we participate in in the most unexpected places, including in seemingly innocuous or unrelated visual forms.

The *gift (that I protect)* is a series of cubic forms modeled on museum display cases but crafted from coloured antique and contemporary glass as well as copper. They exist both to be looked at and to be looked through, shaping light and viscerally capturing a sense of fragility, particularly when installed in a busy gallery space suffused with the



Pudenda 1 - 4

2014

monotype sur papier Somerset / monoprint on Somerset paper

46 x 9.5 cm (18" x 24")



risk of the works being damaged. On each, a single façade is marked by the shatter pattern articulated in the *Pudenda* monoprints. In the context of a vitrine in a gallery, the break hints toward narratives of vandalism or theft, while drawing attention to the impossibility of museological display conventions acting as a completely neutral lens through which to examine the artifacts inside.

Drawn to delicate materials, Clintberg has made several works in light and neon in particular, a medium appealing for its ephemerality as well as its alchemical quality: a trapped tube of gas transformed into dazzling coloured light. In *Our Arrangement*, he uses neon as a line to draw an iconographic representation of 3 figures – represented as sets of scissors – forming a triangular relationship. The work coyly invokes post-binary experiments around polyamory and queer forms of kinship while, on its surface, appearing as an innocent composition of everyday objects. The composition is reminiscent of some of the polymorphously perverse choreographies performed by the poodle avatars for legendary artist collective General Idea's three members, in iconic works such as their 1984 *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* canvases.



3 x 3 with Opening tool

2014

cuivre et patine verdegris / milled copper, verdigris patina

91.5 x 91.5 x 5 cm (36" x 36" x 2")

Photo: Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre; Rita Taylor

3 x 3 with Opening tool intervenes into a minimalist floor-based work modeled on the work of Carl Andre, acting as a “reply” to the revered American minimalist. It is impossible for me to think of Andre without remembering his parnter Ana Mendieta, the Cuban-born artist whom Andre is believed to have thrown off a balcony to her death during a fight. With the shimmering copper wedge gently lifting up one of nine 12” x 12” copper tiles, each treated with a vibrant patina, Clintberg disturbs the placid horizontal surface and draws out the potential for secrets that lie buried beneath the façade of the everyday. The wedge exists as an artist’s multiple, and as the artist describes it, “is designed to open, disrupt, and break planar surfaces such as windows, walls, and doors.” The work therefore acts a kind of toolkit for opening up one space to reveal another, creating thresholds for new possibilities and worlds.

Passion Over Reason arguably functions as Clintberg’s motto, intervening into a set of relationships and rhetorical positions involving former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, former First Lady Margaret Trudeau and feminist multimedia artist Joyce Wieland. Trudeau famously claimed

that privileging reason over passion was his *modus operandi*. In 1968, Wieland responded with two quilts – one in English, one in French – emblazoned with Trudeau’s creed: *Reason Over Passion* and *La raison avant la passion*, the former ending up in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada and the latter (produced during a quilting bee in her New York apartment) in the Trudeaus’ own art collection. (Margaret reportedly tore their quilt apart in a frenzied display of passion-over-reason during a very heated argument with Pierre). Wieland’s quilts embedded a constellation of agonistic affects including homage and irony within them – and Clintberg’s critical reversal of binary terms re-opens this knotty philosophical question in the twenty-first century. The quilts were produced with a group of professional women quilters on Fogo Island, Newfoundland, during Clintberg’s residency there, and act as a record of their collaborative labour. As the artist describes it, “*Passion Over Reason / la passion avant la raison* is intended to leverage a similar – perhaps more sanguine – exchange around an artwork, combining political awareness, strategy and subjective feeling for community members and the artist.”

As with Clintberg's practice more broadly, *Passion Over Reason / la passion avant* draws on the power of concise words and images to incarnate fraught histories and relationships. Perhaps unexpectedly, Clintberg's highly pointed and pithy precision manages to capture all of the emotional complexities that can evade the rigours of analysis.

Jon Davies is a Toronto-based curator and writer; his work has been published in venues such as *C Magazine*, *Canadian Art* and *Fillip*, and he recently co-edited (with Sam Ashby) issue 5 of the magazine *Little Joe*.