

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Depth of Perception

OAKVILLE GALLERIES

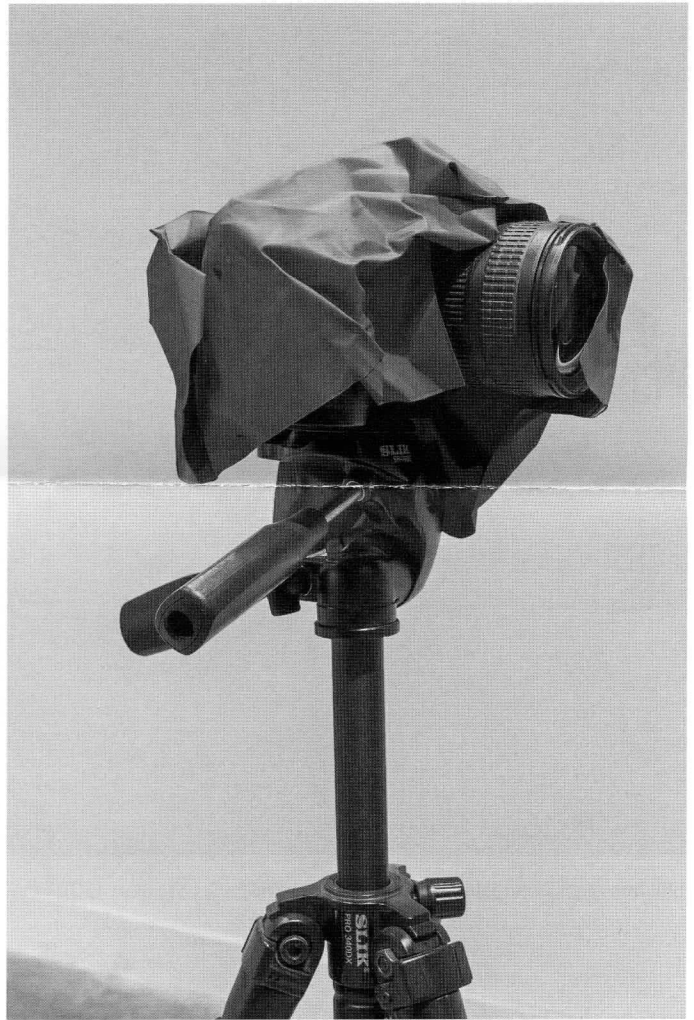
OAKVILLE, ONTARIO

JANUARY 18–MARCH 15, 2015

Addressing the complexities and failures of dominant modes of representation, the group exhibition *Depth of Perception* included a range of video, installation, and new media works that explore the nuanced and ever-evolving mediation of contemporary experience. In the accompanying exhibition essay, curator Jon Davies argues that, with the current prevalence of mobile screen-based media, we are increasingly attuned to the tactility of the technology that we use, as screens themselves become tangible and require an unprecedented amount of interaction. Many of the works included were similarly focused on their own tactility, considering the strengths, weaknesses, and nuances of the media within which they operate.

Judy Radul's work focused most intently on its own presence and the surroundings within which it was situated. Her body of work titled *Object Analysis Spectator Poem* (2012) involves both the presentation and representation of a number of objects that are placed in the gallery space and yet found simultaneously in documentation showing them in environments outside the gallery. The objects included a camera, a chair, a conch shell, and a heater. Loosely "draped" on top of each object was a colorful copper sheet molded to roughly mimic the object's form. Brought to a parking lot, park, or similar public space, the objects were then photographed using a mirror, with approximately half of the frame showing the reflection and the other half showing the space in front of the camera. While the mirror is disorienting at first, the compounded levels of representation make it clear that the viewer is not looking directly at the object, and indicate that such a direct view is impossible with these, or any, photographs. As with the camera's internal mirrors, one is, in fact, always seeing a reflection. On the gallery wall, viewers first and foremost see a photograph, and not a park, parking lot, or other exterior space.

The intent behind the molded copper, however, was less clear. The didactic tags referred to the copper sheet as a "flawed rendering" of the object, though there seemed to be little attempt at any actual verisimilitude. There is, of course, an inherent contradiction in referring to any "actual verisimilitude," since that which is simulated is, by definition, not the actual thing itself. It is possible that this was the point. As with the mirrored images, viewers saw only an imperfect representation, rendered in a material that differs greatly from that which it represents. A question that has lingered since viewing the work, however, is: Why copper? Of all the materials that could be molded to loosely form the shape of these assorted objects, why use copper and not a more common sculptural material? Is it because copper has been used for centuries in printmaking, as a solid but workable material that retains printmakers' impressions well? Or might it reference the use of copper in mirrors? Early mirrors were often simply polished copper, and even today most consist of layers of copper, silver, and glass, as well as a range of other synthetic materials. Like the loosely



Detail of *Object Analysis Spectator Poem (Camera)* (2012) by Judy Radul; courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver; photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid

draped sheets, however, none of these readings quite fit, and the artist may have chosen the material simply because it is malleable and can hold a distinct color, concealing yet following the contours of the unassuming object beneath.

While Radul explores our perception of these everyday objects, Oliver Husain's videos occupy a space between the banal and the fantastical. His video *Leona Alone* (2009), originally commissioned by the Toronto-based Public Access Collective and LOT: Experiments in Urban Research for the *Leona Drive Project* (2009), explores a rather unremarkable Toronto neighborhood through the use of autonomous stained-glass windows. The first four minutes consist of a series of shots of streets, buildings, and construction sites, each with a freestanding, ornate stained-glass window positioned within the frame. In some shots, the camera is placed so close to the glass that the street is visible only through the colored glass, as if one were sitting inside looking out.

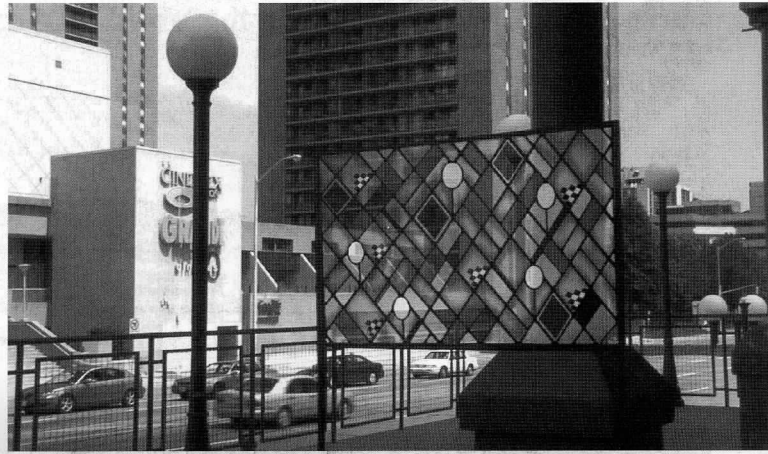
This juxtaposition of the deadpan street scenes with the stained glass speaks to both the ornate aestheticization of traditional art, and the more somber contemporary aesthetic of much video art. Where the same frame includes elements of both forms of representation, each medium itself becomes increasingly apparent, and the accuracy of either is called into question.

The video was played along with two of Husain's other videos in a small mock theatre constructed in a side room of the gallery, functioning as a reference to the settings in which film and video are typically viewed. While the other two videos, *Mount Shasta* (2008) and *Purpled Promises* (2009), were decidedly more dreamlike, the simplicity of materials and relatively banal settings in *Mount Shasta*, which appeared to be filmed in a garage or basement, again brought the medium itself to the forefront.

Unlike Alex De Corte's videos in the exhibition, which attempted to conceal their production and were thus rendered flat and overly ambiguous, Husain's were comical but revealing, simple yet pointed in their play with the medium that presented them.

Such humor and play can be surprisingly productive in a consideration of the nuances of a medium, an approach used most adeptly in this exhibition by Marisa Hoicka and Johnny Forever. For *Untitled (YouTube frame)* (2011), Hoicka and Forever recreated the iconic YouTube video player in a large rectangular form made of crocheted yarn hung in the gallery space. The crocheted red bar at the bottom of the opening, where the screen would be, even expanded horizontally during the exhibition's run, showing how far along in the "show" viewers were. Similar in reference and approach, Hoicka's *This is Not a Test* (2012) is a short video that features material sewn in a pattern that closely resembles the color bars that once appeared on out-of-service television channels late at night. While the multicolored material hangs idle in front of the camera, viewers can hear the artist humming in an attempt to mimic the droning sound that would accompany the color bars. Hoicka's attempt made me smile, and even laugh aloud. There was a warmth and comfort to the materials she used to represent the otherwise cold, technical forms that normally accompany these media.

The materials in these works seemed to slip from one medium to another, with the overlapping levels of various, even disparate, media simultaneously aiding and disrupting their ability to represent. In Radul and Husain's work, the materials are effective in that the compounded representations allow for a series of entry points (including varying references and perspectives), yet they express the blatant failure of any representation, since what is expressed is constantly altered depending on the view and the viewer. Radul's work often draws from the writing of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Radul's consideration of representation is furthered by Merleau-Ponty's significant contribution to the subject, as the philosopher's writing helped pull philosophy away from René Descartes's floating, disembodied subject and brought it back down to earth. Grounded in the experience of the everyday, Merleau-Ponty continued and made more accessible the dense theory of Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, who asserted that perception hinges on our bodily experience



Still from *Leona Alone* (2009) by Oliver Husain; courtesy the artist and Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto

of the world around us, the *phenomena* with which we come into contact. Throughout *Depth of Perception*, the use of both handmade and digital media continually invoked the body. The various forms of representation made apparent that even the most mundane street can have distinctly different appearances when seen through digital video or delicately crafted stained glass, and that the viewer is as important as the view.

While the range of approaches present in *Depth of Perception* produced a somewhat unfocused exploration of this reflection on media and perception, at times reaching to tie in otherwise unrelated works, the exhibition did account for salient themes and practices in video and new media art, and most importantly, did not overlook the significance of the medium itself. Upon entering the exhibition's primary location, the viewer was presented with Peter Campus's video *Four Sided Tape* (1976), in which Campus appears to pull away his own image to reveal other images of himself present beneath. At the furthest end of the exhibition's second location was Owen Kydd's *Knife (J.G.)* (2011), a high-definition video of a long carving knife sitting on a store shelf, played on a shallow digital screen that made it appear in passing as if it were a photograph. While Campus's work reflects the early era of video art, Kydd's "durational photograph" demonstrates a dominant contemporary form of this reflective, medium-conscious work, the two artists thus essentially bookending the exhibition with strong video works from the past and present.

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