

Gill Gatfield – 'Third Person'

28th April – 23rd May 2010

Centre of Contemporary Art Christchurch NZ
Front Gallery



Gill Gatfield, *The Maquettes 2010* - M. Le Blanc, Rose Sélavy, Portia



Gill Gatfield, *Third Person* 2010

Gill Gatfield, *Portia*

Gill Gatfield's innovative and thought-provoking practice defines an indeterminate space between sculpture and Conceptual Art. Her work is noteworthy for embracing both traditional sculptural media (stone, wood, glass) and more novel materials (grass, feathers, mirrors, pins, etc...), and for its tendency to set up intriguing juxtapositions – for example, between positive and negative forms or living and non-living materials. Extending and interrogating the formal possibilities of sculpture, Gatfield's *Being-Made* works of 2006-07 embraced the idea of art as in-process, occurring in an environment – transforming a space and being transformed in turn. In this way, her work undermines the notion of both supposedly autonomous and self-sufficient art-objects and observing, judging, ostensibly independent and impartial art-subjects.

In rendering ambiguous the relationship between art-object and art-observer, Gatfield's *Portia* (2010) extends these themes. As a sharply geometric, glass shape on a concrete plinth, the sculpture immediately generates a tension between positive and negative space. Reflecting and refracting incident light, the glass portion of the sculpture undermines distinctions between inside and outside. In viewing their reflected selves, spectators experience a sense of displacement and destabilisation of selfhood only amplified by the distinctive I-shape of the glass. Where, precisely, does the viewer stand in relation to the work? Does the work function as an assertion of the artist's unique identity – or of the art object? Is the artist 'in the work' or is the work 'in the artist?' Characteristically, Gatfield frames these questions, but leaves them tantalizingly unresolved.

The I-shape resonates throughout New Zealand art history – most famously in Colin McCahon's *Necessary Protection* paintings and *Victory Over Death No.2* (1970). In McCahon, the Tau-cross, 'I' or 'I Am' motifs signify a desire to validate Selfhood through a union with the divine. The drama and tension in McCahon's work is a product of his own struggle with questions of faith. The questions Gatfield poses are more abstract but, in a sense, even more fundamental. Selfhood and Objecthood – as well as the frameworks within such categories are defined – are now placed in question. Like the female lead in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, from which it takes its name, Gatfield's *Portia*, in the artist's own words, 'addresses the restraints of convention by the exposure and enforcement of those conventions' tenets, ultimately questioning the veracity of "black letter law." '

David Khan
April 2010



Artist Portrait, Art New Zealand 2010

Artist Text

The exhibition *Third Person* enters the much maligned 'weird relic' of identity-art not as an exponent or as a critic, but as a contestant looking for more behind the fast shutting doors of this 'art of closed surface and of no depth' (1). Using the rubric 'I' and a slim concrete-art form, the works in glass and stone explore the terrain of identity discourse, potentially scouring a different landscape where authorship is more elastic and meaning less transparent.

In uniform, a group of three works, *The Maquettes*, march through the gallery. Soldiers, bearing the nom de plume of iconoclasts with transformative impact outside the originating disciplines - *M. Le Blanc*, *Rose Sélavý* and *Portia*. Behind their masks lie deeper secrets about authorship, strategy and authenticity. Towards the light, the freestanding large glass *I*, *Untitled*, and the wall-hung *Je suis*, with a black I emerging out of the blue, reflect the gaze back into the discourse of identity art with its emphasis on heroes, prophets and activism. *Je suis*, French for 'I am', is a recombination of the letters 'I Jesus'. *Untitled* remains un-named, a liminal I.

With time, the monosyllabic forms may start to mouth more than essentialist statements. Classical art tropes mix with new media, and philosophy with the ephemeral. The edges between subject and object bleed, and the obvious becomes obscure. Materials absorb and reflect. The works give and take. The idea that the artwork is looking back at the artist and the spectator while being looked at, creates a locked-in, inescapable circle of merged identities. The independent object rises and presides over concerns about meaning.

The *Third Person* exhibition notice (2) shapes a connection also between the work's ideas and the process of its making. At a moment of compression a snapshot of work in progress finds the artist on hands and knees on a black-I glass. The composition frames an accidental or subliminal replay of Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1597-1599) where a handsome youth kneels before a blackened pool, falls in love with his own reflection, is captivated and unable to move. The artist in the glass factory mounted on the black glass also builds a double figure and self-regarding loop but here is without closure. The body caught in movement is not fixed, and looks not at Self but towards a 'reflection' that is abstract, manufactured and man-made. Questions arise: Is the body in homage or prayer, and if so - to what: process, art, art history, science, philosophy? Is the body exerting force to keep the 'I' down or is the 'I' anchoring the body, 'downunder'? What happens when the anchor is lifted or the weight is removed? Does transference occur from body to text?

In filmmaking, the third person view refers to the technique of shooting film from a viewpoint outside any of the actors. This omniscient viewpoint incorporates the perspective of the set or scenery, and includes contextual elements, such as weather, light, shadow, and environment in the composition. In English grammar, the third person refers to any person, object and context other than the present speaker or addressee. An expansion of time, space, character, and content occurs, affording a more reflective stance and the potential for objectivity. Offsetting this remoteness is the element of gender identity built into the third person. The first person 'I', and the second person 'You', make way for the more specific third persons - 'He, She, It, They', bringing gender into play.

In art history, and especially religious art based on Christianity, symbolism in painting and sculpture traditionally references a Trinity: the First Person - the Father (God), Second person - the Son (Jesus), and Third Person - the Holy Spirit. Controversial recent scholarship argues the trinity consists not of an anonymous Holy Ghost with the Father and Son, but Mary, Mother of Jesus as the Third Person. Recasting the liberating Spirit in this light would centralise the female sex in Christian discourse.

The Maquettes bring these and other ideas to the fore. Using title or name as a point of entry, each figure proposes a situation or character where subject, identity and audience blur. The black figure *Portia* takes the name of the lead in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, a character with multiple identities: a male actor playing the part of a female character disguised as a male attorney, in courtroom black robes. In Elizabethan England, female performers were seen as immoral, a remnant of the Catholic Church's views from the Middle Ages that all non-spiritual theatrical productions were blasphemous hence protecting women by exclusion. Faced with this obstacle, the Shakespeare company used boys and young men whose voices had not yet matured to play female roles. The triplicity of *Portia* is found in the sculpture where the physical 'I' form is repeated in double-sided I-reflections, merging characters and form.

M. Le Blanc reprises the nom de plume of the French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher Sophie Germain. In the late 1700s, Germain impersonated a male colleague (M. LeBlanc) to gain access to classes and enter mathematics competitions. She was not able to attend the Academy as women were excluded unless married to a member. Germain undertook pioneering work in number theory and elasticity theory, finally winning the 'prix extraordinaire' from the Paris Academy of Sciences yet her death certificate lists her occupation as property holder, not mathematician.

Like nerves of steel inside a fragile strategy, *M. Le Blanc* encases a polished steel grid in crystal clear glass. The grid, a mathematical tool, holds the I-form, a symbol of Sophie Germain's quest for identity and status as 'a person'. Discretely clamped between two piers of white stone, the sculpture disguises the internal mechanism and system, the guile needed to gain through deception. The supporting white masonry is raw and rough, and rubs against the shining clear-cut I-glass.

The third Maquette, *Rose Sélavy* adopts the nom de plume first used by Marcel Duchamp in 1921, an erotic pun based on the French phrase 'Eros, c'est la vie' (Eros, that's life). Works 'by' Rose Selavy, Duchamp's female alter-ego, employed aphorisms and puns to critique blind spots and establish turning points in both artists' oeuvres. In *Rose Sélavy* the twin towers of raw block and single paned two-faced glass develop a split personality, inclined to self-critique. Depending on the angle of approach, the artwork offers an opaque surface, an outline, and a translucent mirror. In profile view, the multiple features slide into one line held tight between two legs. In a narcissistic loop, the work internalises itself and the viewer who in turn cannot escape the self.

When Duchamp's work was exhibited in Christchurch in 1967 two works, *Fountain* and *Please Touch* were withdrawn from public viewing - banned on the grounds of immorality (3). Works by Rose Sélavy were exhibited.

(1) Leonhard Emmerling 'PLZKLME' (quote from Part IV), Conceptual Art Online, www.imageandtext.org.nz/print_leonhard_plzklme.html Art New Zealand 133 Autumn 2010

(2) Art New Zealand 133 Autumn 2010 (reproduced above)

(3) 'Councillor Bans Two Works from Duchamp Exhibition' Christchurch Press 26 July 1967



Gill Gatfield, *Rose Sélavy* (two faces)

GILL GATFIELD
THIRD PERSON
Centre of Contemporary Art
Opening Reception 26 April
Exhibition 27 April – 23 May 2010

CATALOGUE OF WORKS

Untitled 2010
2.4mH x 1.2mW x 1.2mD
12mm cut toughened sandblasted glass
White square plinth

Je Suis 2010
1335mmH x 198mmW x 6mmD
6mm cut toughened blue glass, enamel

Drawing for Je Suis 2010
300mmH x 200mmW
oil on canvas

The MAQUETTES

M. Le Blanc 2010
1840mmH x 400mmW x 400mmD
6mm cut Georgian Polished Wire Glass, Ōamaru masonry block
Ed. 1/3

Rose Sélavy 2010
1840mmH x 400mmW x 400mmD
6mm cut toughened sandblasted glass, Natural masonry block
Ed. 1/3

Portia 2010
1840mmH x 400mmW x 400mmD
11mm cut toughened painted glass, Painted masonry block
Ed. 2/3