

Brochure Text

The following text is an email interview between Eric Glavin and Robin Merksich, in which each artist asks the other questions. The resulting conversation inevitably draws attention to their common concerns and as such addresses their desire to exhibit together at Mercer Union. (Toronto, Canada, 2003)

Eric Glavin: Can you speak about your move to photography from non-figurative painting.

Robin Merksich: As a non-figurative painter, using the photographic medium allowed me to move outside of an isolated and internalized aesthetic. As a photographer, I'm not responsible for creating the whole setting, and therefore, photography is more about the process of selection – each photograph is just one possibility from a mound of opportunities. I see photographs as having a pictorial character that is always related to something, which for me is distinct from the process of abstract painting and sculpture. There is a source existing in real space – no matter how much the object is abstracted, the photograph is inseparably connected to the object through the light that was used to create it.

The switch in medium was inspired by different ways of working and seeing. My painting practice was generally the expression of an inner world, unlike photography, which, I feel, has an inherent reprographic aspect. As such photography is a medium that at all times transforms the physical three-dimensional space into a collapsed surface.

E.G: This is related to what you've told me in the past, removing the subjective view from your work. As such you spoke about your earlier photographs as being too composed – like a theatre set with a foreground, middle-ground, background – in contrast to now, where the object, as you say, sets its own parameters. Do you think of your recent digital work as sculpture? What is its relation to sculpture?

R.M: The digital images, B/01 or Transformer T/01.1, T/01.2, are the result of the reduction of a three-dimensional setting into two dimensions. With my earlier pieces, I tried to formulate this physical reality through a frontal, nearly flat image in an attempt to create a relation between the actual object /subject and the final print. The only change in my recent pieces is the non-fragmentary representation of objects. The earlier pieces, from 1998 to 2000, were comprised of the parts of bigger and more complex structures. With this latest sequence of photographs, I'm shooting the pieces in their entirety, and in their customary surroundings.

E.G: Can you talk about your desire to create work on the computer?

R.M: Every process means modification. I'm trying not to narrow myself to a particular medium – in my practice some concepts reveal themselves in the second dimension with a decided perspective while others need to be walked around.

R.M: The selection process (collecting/archiving) – what makes you choose a particular image/design out of the mass?

E.G: I can be rather obsessive about my gathering process, documenting entire streets and things like that. I rely on intuition to a large extent and I think I really try not to second-guess myself too much. I see something on the street that attracts my attention and I document it – most of the time

photographically – and latter I try and sort out what it was about the object that I was drawn to and if it's still engaging then I'm trying to reproduce those elements as closely as possible. Ultimately, I think I'm trying to reproduce a kind of awkwardness: incongruous pairings of images, jarring colour choices. Perhaps a certain sense of being out-dated despite the fact that they are still functioning in a contemporary context and might even have been designed as recently as last week. It's important in my mind that these images I draw from don't look designed in a high-fashion sort of way and that they are also not museum pieces, that they don't come off looking like there are exemplary of a certain era. They are active elements in the urban framework. When I first started working in this manner it was the specific store-front signage of Manhattan's Chinatown that attracted my interest. Sign-painters making tangential references to modernist design principles filtered through many levels of appropriation. I was very attracted to the irreverent way in which they approached the material and that there seemed to be very little attention paid to maintaining a certain style or having the graphics perform a certain function and I think I've tried as much as possible to incorporate these characteristics into my work.

R.M: Differences in media/material?

E.G: I have no inherent connection to painting or photography or any other mediums per say. The medium has to satisfy the requirements of my idea and I try to find the medium that's appropriate to the particular project I have in mind. Most of these projects then are revolving around some central theme. I guess I see myself working somewhat conceptually. In this culture you certainly inherit through the art education system a bias towards working with drawing and painting materials that I am a product of, but I also studied design for a while, which created a very easy segue in my practice between painting, sculpture and the computer-based work I do – even, to some extent, the performance work that I do from time to time. It is often the problems that I encounter working with a particular medium that pushes me to find another medium that would solve the problems. I have a strong affinity to Clement Greenberg's who talks about how two-dimensional media should address two-dimensional concerns and I think I have stuck pretty close to his philosophy. In a way I guess my work is very literal – if I encountered something that I wanted to use as a subject and it was primarily cinematic in nature I wouldn't try to fit it into my painting practice I would rather learn how to use a camera or hire someone to shoot it for me. The idea takes priority.

R.M: What is the relationship between "fragments" and "units" in your work?

E.G: If I interrupt this question as being essentially a question about formal decisions, then I would have to say my primary interest is with the constellation of elements. Both the paintings I produced previously and the computer works I've done for this exhibition or previous pieces like the Regent Park series aim at drawing a particular element – whether it be a building or a store-front sign or a coffee label – out of its context and into a realm where it can be viewed more abstractly. In that sense, one could see them more as fragments but this would almost suggest that they were cut off from their roots so to speak and I would rather believe that something of this history will contaminate the viewing of it as an abstract composition and that this will create some kind of awkwardness in the work. The architectural works came from the idea of seeing the canvas and the building façade as synonymous – a standard unit within which were a series of elements that needed to be arranged in some new way to create differentiation. So yes, I think there is some sense within the work of using grids and creating standardized units that could be used repeatedly. Does that answer your question?