

More than meets the eye at new exhibit

Conceptual works make people look twice

The Durable Idiom: Eric Cameron, Christian Eckart & Stéphane La Rue
Trépanier Baer Gallery; Saturday, March 26th - Saturday, April 23rd, 2011

Marcella Ducasses
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They say good things come to those who wait. If you extend that logic to art, take your time viewing the conceptual works currently at TrépanierBaer and you will be rewarded.

The Durable Idiom features works by Eric Cameron, Christian Eckart and Stéphane La Rue. Inextricably bound by their interest in existentialism, a willingness to let the material take the spotlight and a relentless aim to blur the boundaries between image and object, their works straddle a fine line between painting and sculpture.

Upon entering the gallery, the first observation is Cameron's beautifully suspended, colourful array of latex-covered Remembrance Day poppies. One is immediately struck by the contradiction of this whimsical piece and its sinister title, "Thanatos," which in Greek Mythology is the personification of death. For those unfamiliar with Cameron's work, the piece might be interpreted as a commentary on war — perhaps the poppies are a symbol of the soldiers overseas — and by extension a reflection on the current political turmoil. This hypothesis, however logical, would be incorrect. In his own words, Cameron asserts his work has never been about external reconciliation, but rather a meditative view on "human frailty, desire and dread and the transience of life."

A self-proclaimed obsessive personality, Cameron is best known for his *Thick Painting* series, which he persisted with for three decades. The series involved taking mundane household objects and systematically brushing them with layers upon layers of gesso, keeping detailed documentation each time he added a new layer. Although his works are as complex as the layers bestowed upon them, if you were forced to define them in a nutshell, they are about relinquishing control to the forces of nature.

“Nature has much more creative potential than my imagination. Nature can produce a range of forms, colours and patterns much more interesting than I could possibly contrive myself,” he says.

In the case of his *Thick Paintings*, it was the chemical process of drying gesso and the mechanical process of brushing the paint that ultimately determined the final shape. His new series keeps to that tradition, but rather than brushing the objects with gesso, he has dipped them in layers of paint. Unlike his previous series, he has let go of the strenuous record keeping.

“There was an aspect of trying to free myself from the arduousness of that.”

Equally uninterested in expression, Christian Eckart employs a rigorously impersonal approach. The most seductive of the three artists, he uses contemporary industrial materials such as Plexiglas, Formica and industrial paint to create pristine finishes (the paint process was developed by Rolls Royce and is based on Chinese lacquer ware techniques).

Eckart’s multiple series all have one thing in common — they are hypnotic in their immaculate craftsmanship. Exhibiting no signs of the artist’s “hand” at work, they in fact have an almost factory-like, mass-produced flawlessness to them. Unlike Cameron, he seems to be in control of his works from start to finish, but similar to Cameron, he does not start with an idea at the epicentre. In fact, he is at once fascinated and troubled by the inherent problems in representing abstract ideas like beauty, calm, sensuality and simplicity in a visual form. Rather than attempting to represent what he deems ineffable, he produces works that embody these characteristics. Eckart’s ability to transform an industrial material into a slick and beautifully finished product challenges our arbitrary definitions of beauty.

The lack of interest in painting an image without representation also extends to Montreal artist Stéphane La Rue, who similarly to Cameron and Eckart, is preoccupied with making space in his paintings and bringing the material to the forefront. In fact, this is not the first time his work has been exhibited alongside Cameron’s, although the first time it was more because of their mutual interest in white — Cameron’s use of white through gesso, and La Rue through his monochrome paintings, one of which is featured in this show.

Conceptual art is not for everybody and certainly not for those who enjoy art that reveals itself instantaneously. But for those who are up to the challenge, there’s a lot to be gained from thought-provoking artists like those in *The Durable Idiom*.