

Exhibition Guide

Roy Arden

1 February – 19 March 2006

First & Second Floor Galleries

This is the first major solo exhibition of work by Canadian artist Roy Arden in Europe. Born in 1957 in Vancouver, Arden has been a key member of a generation of artists who established the city as an important centre for contemporary art, exhibiting internationally for over twenty years. Working in Vancouver, Arden primarily focuses on the city, its social history and development, which he depicts with a deadpan matter-of-factness. Arden is a 'Realist', meaning that he presents real life as he sees it, exploring world issues and their impact on the local environment. He is specifically interested in how larger meanings and issues can emerge when we pay careful attention to the everyday world. This exhibition features a selection of photograph and video pieces from 1985–2005. The images that Arden creates are usually devoid of people, yet their presence is registered in the buildings and land pictured, revealing the notions of value and consumption.

The early multi-panel works in the First Floor Galleries, *Rupture* and *Abjection*, use documentary photographs sourced from local archives. *Rupture*, (1985) centres on Vancouver's forgotten political street riot 'Bloody Sunday' in 1938. The gritty realism of the black and white shots depict clashes between unemployed men and armed police, and the aftermath of the protest. These photographs of social unrest are paired with details of blue skies that represent a 'nature' or natural time, contrasting with the historical time in the pictures below.

Similarly, in *Abjection*, (1985), Arden uses historic images combined with his own monochromes. This time, the images focus on people from a community that helped to build and shape Vancouver during the 1920s and 30s. These Japanese-Canadians found themselves segregated and imprisoned, their vehicles impounded amidst the hysteria of the Second World War. The black squares of exposed photographic paper that the artist has placed above each image, are used symbolically to represent history – photographic paper can only be exposed once and, like history, cannot be rewritten. These two archive-based works can be seen as a new, complicated kind of

history painting. Whilst they commemorate past events, they also invite thoughtful re-interpretation.

In Arden's work from the 1990s he extends his interest in local history, by charting the development of Vancouver as it expands and encroaches upon the surrounding countryside. Images from this period depict the edges of urban areas, the spaces where dereliction meets regeneration and where the new is overtaking the old in every sense. *House in Strathcona Alley, Vancouver, B.C.*, (1996) reveals the historic, local architecture of Vancouver. Once the home of workers in the early twentieth century, they are now empty, abandoned and dilapidated. Yet they stand still, registering both the lives of their inhabitants and the history of the place. This becomes especially poignant when contrasted with Arden's images of the oversized 'balloon frame' houses which appear as private temples to consumption. Through *'Monster House', Coquitlam, B.C.*, (1996), the artist conveys the values of real estate, property development and wealth that drive and govern contemporary development.

Again we see evidence of humanity's hasty exploitation of the land in the photographs *Landfill, Richmond B.C.*, (1991) and *Pump Mill Dump (#1) and (#2) Nanaimo, B.C.*, (1992). Environmental concerns are raised as we see remnants of economic 'progress'. What was perhaps once an unspoilt and natural landscape is now tainted with by-products of human activity. In *Tree Stump, Nanaimo, B.C.*, (1991), a tree has been felled to make way for future development and a new school building appears in the background. It is one of a number of works in which the artist makes subtle reference to a tradition of landscape painting. The artist refers specifically to seventeenth century Dutch landscape painting, famous for its meticulous naturalism – an approach which is derived from the direct observation of nature, resulting in a factual representation.

The evidence of human presence is central to Arden's work, although actual people rarely feature. In the series *Terminal City*, (1999), the artist focuses on the urban wilderness of Vancouver, locations he is very familiar with. In *South Vancouver (#1)*, (1997) and *Terminal City (#4)*, (1999), we see nature reclaiming the city with vines and creepers, effortlessly engulfing man-made structures. Photographs like *Terminal City (#6)*, (1999) show the makeshift settlements of people on the periphery of society.

Terminal City (#15), (1999) and *Terminal City (#16)*, (1999) continue the theme of 'outsiders' and their traces in the urban environment. We confront the grim reality of condoms, syringes and other items that have been left and compressed into the ground. These images are almost abstract, composed of shapes and textures which are not immediately recognisable, however, they remain anchored in the real, social world.

The artist focuses on the commonplace in his more recent photographic work. He uses road-kill, *Crow*, (2002) and 'rubbish' found in gutters, *Plastic*, (2002) as inspiration for these finely detailed black and white images which possess a strange and compelling beauty. Arden questions the values that create a category like 'rubbish' – a term we use to describe something that we do not want anymore. An object that we reject might be of value to someone else, and vice versa.

Arden's images *Wal-Mart Store (Tide)*, *Burnaby, B.C.*, (1996) and *Wal-Mart Store (Applejacks)*, *Burnaby, B.C.*, (1996) are reflections on consumption. We see large stacks of items piled high in a supermarket aisle – a block of gaudy graphics and packaging, prompting questions about the relation between supply and demand in consumer capitalism. These goods, destined for the consumption of the 'haves' – are invariably produced through the efforts of the 'have-nots'. In contrast to these bold, brash photographs, Arden's *Basement*, (1996) focuses on a range of objects abandoned in the cellar of the artist's apartment block. The intimate shots of personal belongings, once perhaps bought from enticing shop displays, now semi-redundant clutter, conjure up fragments of the lives of previous, unknown inhabitants.

In Arden's video piece, *Juggernaut*, (2000), we see and hear the workings of an idling car engine. As it sputters, hacks and coughs, this mechanical device begins to remind us of now commonly seen surgery footage of beating hearts and pulsing lungs in open chest cavities. The artist is also showing two new video works in this exhibition including *Supernatural*, (2005), based on news footage of a riot in the main shopping centre of Vancouver, following a hockey game. The title ironically refers to a slogan taken from a local tourism campaign – 'Supernatural British Columbia' – meant to promote the spectacular natural scenery and the rich native culture of the area. There is a clear link between Arden's early archival works and this video, demonstrating a remarkable consistency of approach in his artistic vision.

A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition, with text by Dieter Roelstraate, available for a special price of £12.95 throughout the exhibition, full price £15. Ikon is also offering a special student price of £9.95, valid on presentation of identification.