



ASSEMBLING ROOM

or EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE

Approximations
Duane Nickerson
The Little Gallery, University of Calgary
November, 1990

Paul Woodrow

Approximations is the title of a series of complex material constructions by Duane Nickerson which were displayed in Calgary at The Little Gallery, University of Calgary. The complexity arises from the variety of linguistic signs and codes which are incorporated with the materials. The work attempts to construct a critical position through the questioning of the authority of the institutions of religion, politics and government, and their representation. The work which poses questions also questions itself. There is no particular central theme or viewpoint that the viewer can identify as he or she moves from one piece to another. There is no grand narrative which legitimizes or justifies the pretext of the work. For the viewer who is in search of an exclusive coherence, it might be possible to admit that, in general, the work speaks metaphorically to the notion of prison, prisoners and victims. When it comes to traditionally



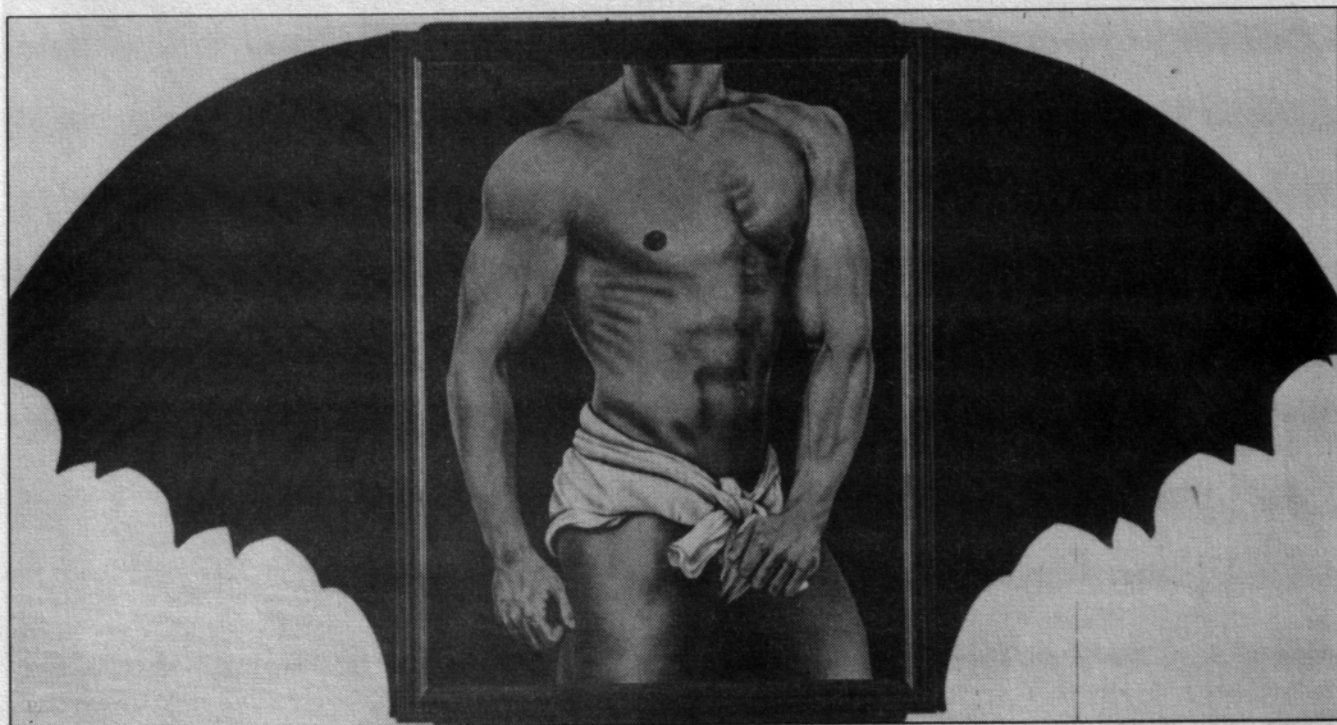
Asylum in the Days of Prime-Time Colour,
oil on mixed materials

constructed responses, the viewer is often a prisoner of his or her mind. The world of art and its assumed universality is often a mental prison from which the artist attempts to escape. Art as an institution is very similar to those other social institutions which employ the strategy of the spectacle, illusionistic projection and mystery. This is not to say that one type of fiction can claim superiority over another; however, one can evaluate the contextual efficiency of different fictions.

The presupposition that single works are grounded in a central issue corresponds to a viewing subject who finds himself or herself centrally positioned. Consequently the construction of a work of art by a viewer is simultaneously a construction of the awareness, or of the status quo, of the subject position. Due to the apparent fluctuations in constructive methodology, results tend to be *a p p r o x i m a t i o n s*. Approximations usually act as a

sign of lack or difference. The margins of difference are precariously balanced, and with viewers who are in search of the absolute, approximation ends up as logical contradiction. To the male viewer, a work of art can be a battlefield where lines of conventional authoritative reading confront the regiments of shifting incongruity. When homogeneous language is employed in the construction, the debate is confined to a clarification of the niceties of stylistic exactitude. Where the work utilizes the mixed language of incompatibility, new meaning arises at every turn.

painting itself. It is painting which aspires. The painted disembodied trunk of the idealized body with hand in masturbatory gesture refers directly to the act of painting, the action of the hand produces both figure painting and physical pleasure which can be viewed as a form of self-manipulation. The gilded frame surrounds the painting with wealth, precious in its isolation. Titled and ironic, the brass name plate identifies what this specific painted image does not. The painted body has no identity except as a fragment of the "ideological ancestor", the body of ideology is simultaneously



Portrait of the Artist as a Strong Man, oil on canvas

In *Portrait of the Artist as a Strong Man* the simulated wings are unable to perform as in actual flight, yet they speak of the aspiration of all classical male dominant figure painting to assume the position of a higher reality, the metaphysical ideal. The static wings ironically reinforce the notion of the painting's incapacity to leave the wall. The only motion to which painting can allude is in itself an illusory arrested motion, a motion confined to the limits of the frame. Any evidence of movement in painting is fossilized in the indexical traces of the pigments. Traces that are imbued with presence or laced with energy may be of interest to the archaeologists of expressionism who amuse themselves in the search for the artistic Yeti, or for the signs of the original author, or for the physical residence of the mysterious other. The fake wings are also placed on the outside of the frame indicating that their meaning resides in the broader issue of

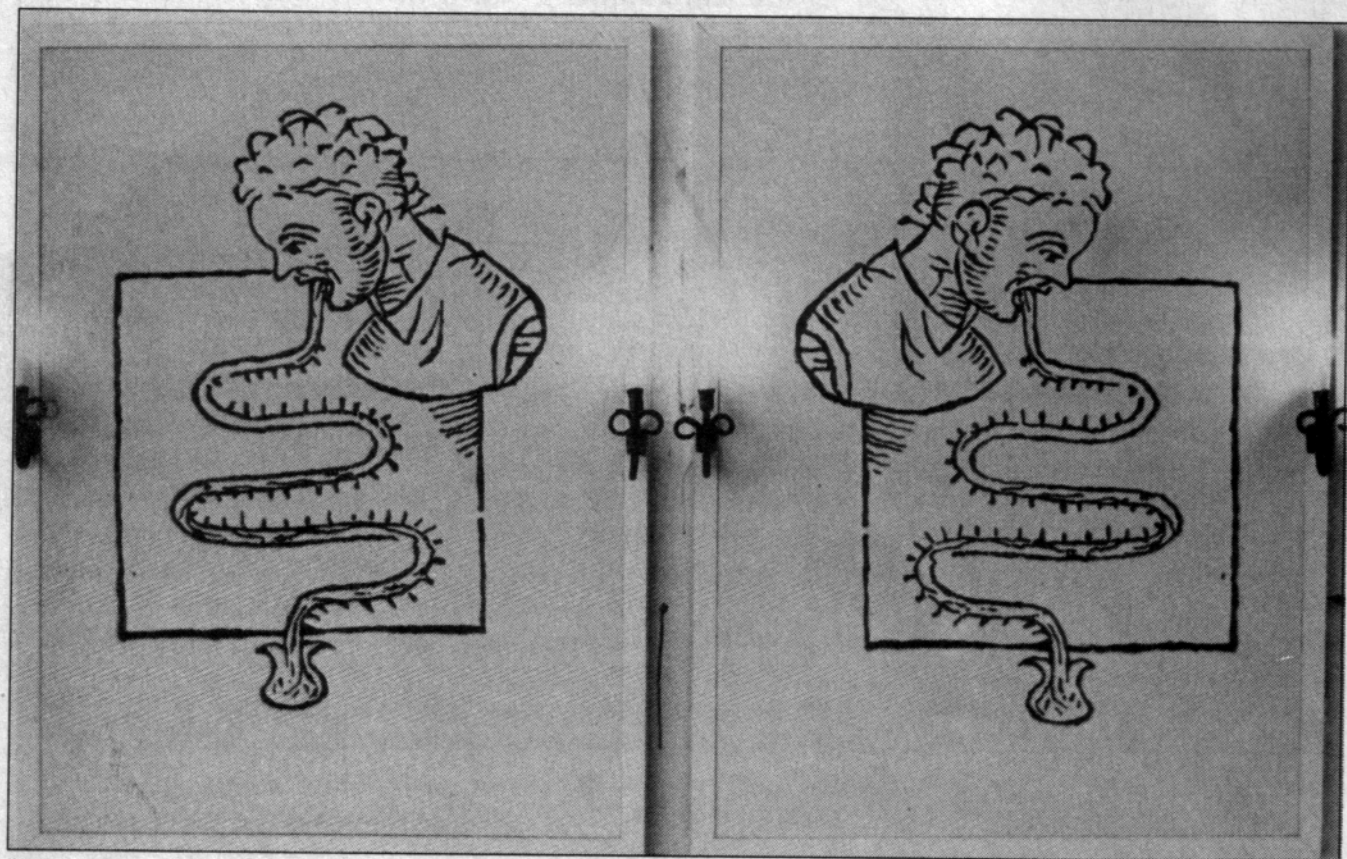
both faceless and headless. In terms of meaning, it is not just a question of being able to distinguish the differences between the real and the fictive, the true and the false, the model and the copy.

The interplay of signs, from the representative image (synecdoche/icon), a real brass plaque (symbol), simulated wings, to the artificially gilded frame, create a wave of possible meanings which can only be collapsed by the viewer. In this particular form of representation, binary opposition becomes irrelevant, even to the extent of hindering the construction or meaning. The majority of the works in the exhibition employ the play of sign in the fabrication of ironic and parodic messages.

Lost Inertia is a diptych whose two surface panels are identical rather than disparate in the traditional historic stylistic format. The central image in each panel consists of a painted

reproduction of a 16th century print. The subject matter, somewhat ambiguous, is a truncated male body caught in the act of engorging or disgorging a substance. The brown figure is reproduced on untreated canvas framed by acrid yellow Formica. On both frame edges a candlestick has been mounted. The candles have evidently been used to illuminate the scene, but now they suggest the absence of illumination as well as its possibility. Through the presence of static repetition the likelihood of dynamism is noticeably absent. The work

There is no alchemical process for the purification of the vacant figure. There is no secret place to conduct obscure experiments. In *Lost Inertia* the reconstitution of the old (historic print) is framed by the new (Formica frame). The past is referred to by a "real" object (candle holders) which are also faked to appear old. The present is referred to through the image of man (as a product of historic past). The interplay of the variety of worlds signified by the "real", simulacrum, the fake, the reproduced, produce a vertiginous effect; a tower of



Lost Inertia, oil on mixed materials

insinuates that lost inertia is a necessary outcome of the construction of a world in which duplication assumes the dominant impulse. In other words, duplication limits the capacity to devise alternatives. The ironic representation of the incomplete, unsophisticated and transparent male confined to a world whose intention is the reproduction of his own image is consequently a world without illumination. The possibility of illumination in *Lost Inertia* is located on the periphery. The concept of illumination is historic and ultimately couched in traditional materials, terminology and systems of representation. The Formica frame articulates the intimate and domestic context which now becomes the venue for self-questioning. The method is laid bare. There is no ideal source.

Babel.

In *Four Static Depictions of a Victim*, four identical images of a female figure are framed in conventional wood. The negative space between the framed likeness produces an image of a Greek cross. The framing device subtly entraps the figures who become incarcerated in a symbolic prison. The construction of awareness results in an awareness of the construction as a strategic device. The quarternary cross is a simple primordial figure with no particular emphasis on either the vertical (spiritual/idealized) or its horizontal (earthy/material). The conjunction of the opposing forces confine the figures within these parameters. The female form is depicted as being both submissive and static, caught in the

act of paying homage to the projected immaterial cross, which, from her viewpoint, appears above. The scale of the work acknowledges the intimate and meditative capabilities of the viewer as well as the portrayed figure. Both the silence and quietude of the work concedes an absence of movement throughout the centuries by the church (as a representation of

they speak a physical language.

In *Asylum*, the long wooden trunks, the bars, the black painted surface, the crudeness of the color, the crudeness of the representation, the physical space, seem to suggest other things. The work appears unclear and precarious and it is this precariousness on which the work hinges; very much like the



P.P.P.: A Still Life Production, oil on canvas

male authority) on the position of women. The placement of the work below eye level places the viewer in a position where the projected cross is half way in between the figures and the viewer, thus directly implicating the viewer as part of the problem.

There are less obvious meanings in Nickerson's work which cannot be approached directly and are not yet clear, or even meant to be clear. There is a sense in which the material addresses the viewer, the cloth wings, the redness of the material, the arch of the construction, the faked gold of the frame, the technical incompleteness of the painting, the finality and newness of the brass plaque. There is also a sense in which the differences in material constitute a meaning; that

way in which the wings are attached to the frame in *Portrait of the Artist as a Strong Man*, or like the precariousness of the candlesticks in *Lost Inertia*. One could easily imagine that, after a while, certain parts of the works might begin to fall off; wings first, candlesticks next. Possibly the frame might begin to tilt. The materials appear fragile, like the figures inside these borders. In *P.P.P.: A Still Life Production*, a process has begun of the eventuality of the already grey image beginning to fade. All that we will be left with is a bleak grey screen, surrounded by flashing lights, as the fading spectacle. ●

Paul Woodrow, a professor at the University of Calgary, is an active visual artist and musician.