

## Plastic Shit

*Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit . . .*

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1984

On the face of it, Milan Kundera's declaration that kitsch is the denial of shit appears wrong. Kitsch, after all, **IS** shit. It's all that cloying, mewling, cutesie crap found in gift shops and tourist strolls, visual gags of dogs playing cards and mechanical singing fish for sale at the hardware store, those maudlin Elvis busts and Diana icons and acres of knick-knacks on the shelves at Value Village. For Kundera, what makes all that stuff kitsch, and not art (or at least not art with a capital "A") is that it is missing a vital organic element. Kitsch, for Kundera, is art removed of life's messy bits: pain and suffering, hunger and sorrow, decay and waste. Kundera's kitsch is a sanitized art of Pollyannaish desire that wants nothing to do with the more disturbing parts of our existence. It just wants to be liked. Excessively needy and too willing to please, its lack of shit overwhelms it, and it becomes what it lacks. Kitsch becomes shit.

In recent years, Toronto-based artist Katharine Harvey has been creating sculptural installations using plastic packaging and cheap dollar store items – materials and merchandise which are intended only for a single or limited use or for the stimulation of momentary sentiment – things which, having passed only briefly through the stage of utility, are destined to quickly become refuse, stuff we tend to call shit. Harvey's fascination with this material came from her experience as a painter trying to capture the fleeting reflections and refractions of water. Her investigations into water's infinitely variegated visual qualities led her to a remarkably similar phenomenon found in the reflections of store windows. She was drawn to those curious, older, family-operated stores whose windows display an accumulation of dusty unsold gift items and *bric-à-brac*. Viewed from different angles, the windows feature a parade of curios suspended between the reflections of the activity on the street and glimpses into the store's interior. Flattened first through the working photograph and secondly through painting and glazing, Harvey's Storefront paintings became liquid spaces in which inside and outside flowed into each other, punctuated by a dream-world of floating Venetian gondolas, ballerinas on point, elaborate clocks and fancy vases.

Harvey's Storefront paintings were elaborations on water as a metaphor of the subconscious – a diorama of submerged desires and stunted fantasies. They were also the basis for installations that used existing art gallery vitrines to assemble fantastic versions of the vernacular (*Seasick*,

YYZ Artists Outlet, 2003; *Storefront*, Stride Gallery window, Calgary, 2001; *To the Depths , Parts I & II*, Solo Exhibition, Toronto, 2001-02). In these installations Harvey organized by tone and hue dense collections of giftware and costume jewellery, and in the process created a series of impressionistic tableaux that deflected attention from the individual objects. The collections of spectrally shifting coloured objects seemed to strike a familiar but minor chord, evoking those dyspeptic feelings of detachment and alienation we often experience during the Christmas season in face of a sea of pointless merchandise and hollow commercial sentiment.

During 2006 and 2007, Harvey's media migrated from glass and ceramic gift ware to plastic packaging and mass-produced dollar store items. She continued her colouristic approach to assemblage, prismatically organizing the recyclable blister packing and muffin containers as a clear spray at the top of *Waterfall*, (Rodman Hall, 2006-07) down to the deep pools of translucent greens and deep blues of the plastic waste baskets, water bottles, dish racks and other seemingly limitless blue-green coloured plastic dollar-store ephemera. In the installations *Fountain* (Making Room, 2006), and *Waterfall*, (Service Canada, Harbourfront, 2007), Harvey left behind her dollar store merchandise to create impressionistic assemblages made entirely of transparent packing material – works of pure plastic froth.

On the face of it, one would be hard pressed to find two things materially more opposite than plastic and shit. Plastic is organically inert and chemical – a product of industry. Shit is fetidly natural, organic and very personal. Shit belongs to each of us individually. Plastic comes from somewhere else. Plastics are associated with cheapness and disposability. They can be easily moulded and mass-produced. They can be made flexible, elastic and paper thin or rigid and sturdy in proportion to their light weight. Plastic can be transparent or opaque and is highly prized as an impermeable moisture barrier. All this makes plastics cheaper and more adaptable than similar uses for wood, leather, cloth, ceramic, glass and metal.

We know, however, that plastics are not as durable as organic materials and we know damn well that plastics do not decompose. Moving plastic parts break and wear out all the time and many plastic objects are just a waste – designed for limited or single usages, rendering their active life cycle shorter than that of many insects. And the passive life cycle – life after disposal – is immeasurable. While many plastics can be vaporized with intense heat, most often they avoid decomposition and continue to exist somewhere in the world: in a landfill, at the bottom of a lake or ocean, or ground up and melted down to be made into more plastic. Plastic is two times shit:

once because it so often fails us and once because we are continuously in the process of disposing it.

That is the existential reality that Harvey's work probes. As we find ourselves drowning in our own refuse, we are forced to examine our habits of consumption and production. In any dollar store, Wal Mart, Zellers, Canadian Tire or Best Buy we can see our own infantile and narcissistic desires reflected in the row upon row of cheap merchandise and the mountain of plastic garbage which they generate. This stuff will never die. We will.

By representing and including kitsch, plastic merchandise and disposable plastic packaging in her work, Katharine Harvey ensures that romantic sparkle and liquid shimmer are not merely vehicles of escape, but *memento mori* of our embodied subjectivity. Harvey's work is notable for the parallel investigations she pursues into both the optical and metaphorical qualities of her subjects and her chosen media. Her open process of free association allows her to move from a study of the optical effects of water, to water as a metaphorical container of submerged consciousness, from an investigation into the attractions of kitsch back to the optical possibilities of colour-classified junk, and from the foamy optical character of a dense mass of polyethylene packing, back to the existential reality of a mountain of plastic shit.

Gordon Hatt, 2009