

Remarks on *Following Gravity's Rainbow*

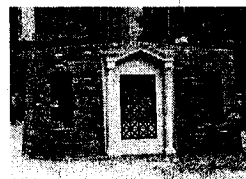
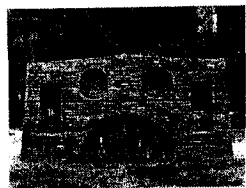
Brit Bunkley

The comments below are excerpted and slightly revised from an interview conducted by Joanne Drayton and published in *Brit Bunkley: Critical Illusions*, catalogue for the exhibition *Following Gravity's Rainbow*, Pelorus Trust Mediagallery, New Zealand Film Archive Mediaplex, Wellington, NZ, 2005.

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Because of my relative isolation from sources of commissioned public work after moving from New York to New Zealand, I jumped head first into the 3D digital world. This change of medium has not only proven to be a technical challenge but also opened up unforeseen creative possibilities. Using 3D software, I discovered I was creating what resembled constructed or staged photography (like that of Boyd Webb, James Casebere, Sandy Skogland or Thomas Demand), but with a virtual camera and within a virtual set. In the sense that the computer models resembled my public art, they approached a sort of virtual public art. When I began exploring the animation capabilities of the software in the late nineties, I created photorealistic 3D dreamlike animated videos spliced with real footage. Most were short, intuitively rendered at the length of advertisements. Recently I have been stringing these short animations together into suites of vignettes with a loosely unified theme (for example, my most recent animation: *Vignettes of War and Business*).

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I am as interested in the subversion of monuments as I was in the eighties. By "subversion of monuments," I mean designing structures with exaggerated traditional and constructivist features, using heavy monumental materials (brick and other masonry) and also investigating contemporary options for the Western tradition of architectural monumental ornamentation. This architectural basis for some past work has now become the subject of 2D and 3D prints and scenes for video vignettes.

So, for instance, the brick chimney-like structure used in the video installation *Following Gravity's Rainbow* is obliquely based on earlier brick works such as *Gate Mask*, a faux brick wall in a public park. However, the intent is quite different. This brick structure is a prop for



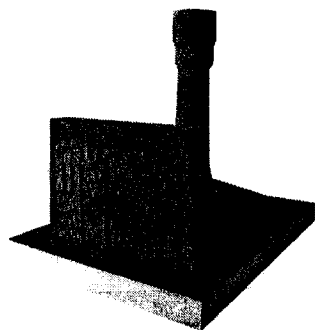
Gate Mask

the video installation and houses the vertical projection of an animation video. The structure is a conduit between real and virtual space in that it appears historical (almost as if the gallery were built around it) and also has a great deal of mass (heavy and gravity-bound), the opposite of the digitally-produced, ethereal video projection (which includes a photograph of the structure's bricks mapped onto a virtual chimney in the 3D software).

Gate Mask, by contrast, was originally designed for a bridge project —as the opposite of a bridge: an

obstruction. It was meant to force pedestrians to choose a path around it, creating new paths. The structure was a composite of generic and specific elements of the architecture of powerful institutions, reflecting the aggressive content of a threatening but also decorative obstruction. One side was modeled on a Brooklyn armory whose façade resembled a face. Another side had a blocked entrance covered with reflecting gold Mylar that mimicked a Roman temple entrance.

In addition to *Following Gravity's Rainbow*, several of my early pieces were also influenced by Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, including *Monument to "Death the Impersonator"* (the phrase "Death the Impersonator" comes from a passage on the structure of the chimney as able to withstand an atomic blast). Another nod to Pynchon was an unbuilt theme park, ironically called a *Peace Park* (based also on the Italian Mannerist and proto-surreal park of Bomarzo), conceptualized in collaboration with University of California Landscape Architecture professor Chip Sullivan. The model *Peace Monument*, one element designed for the *Peace Park*, satirized the tendency of the Reagan administration to use ludicrous euphemisms for military projects, such as "Peacekeeper" for an ICBM with multiple nuclear warheads.



Monument to "Death the Impersonator"

Gravity's Rainbow, winner of the National Book Award in the U.S. for 1973, is regarded by many as one of the great works of twentieth-century literature. Richard Locke, editor of the

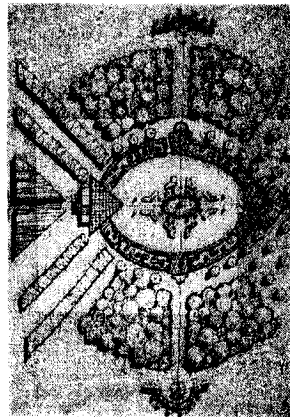
New York Times Book Review, described the novel as “a work of paranoid genius . . . bonecrushingly dense, compulsively elaborate, silly, obscene, funny, tragic, pastoral, historical, philosophical, poetic, grindingly dull, inspired, horrific, cold, bloated, beached and blasted.” Bill Bollinger, a sculpture teacher, cited it in the late seventies as “all about sculpture.” Although I never did figure out how the novel was all about sculpture, reading it was an enlightening experience at the time.

Other interests that have remained consistent within my artwork over the last twenty years include a fascination with sinister social-political content. One embodiment of this interest is the fool or clown, a character who has “a license to perform, cavort, and poke fun at his betters and employers, especially at court” (*Encarta*). So, for example, I used an imitation cast-iron bank of a clown/fool head for an electronic piece in the early nineties. A similar mechanical head now appears in a new video vignette, *Masquerade*.

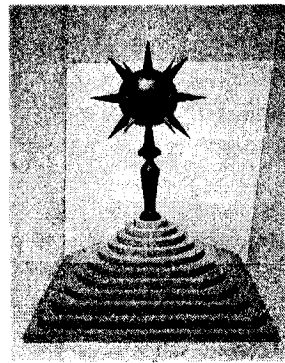
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As mentioned, I have been experimenting with converging real sculptural objects with digitally-produced virtual 3D projections, as in *Following Gravity's Rainbow*. My emphasis is on what Suzanne MacAulay (now chair of the Art and Performing Arts Department at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs) calls

a counter-perspective (illusionistic apertures in ceilings and walls that favor flatness yet admit a kind of trompe l'oeil fragmentation that virtual space encompasses). This is identified as a creative process where techniques, visual tropes and media are “refashioned” according to precedent and convention in order to achieve different and contemporary cultural significance.



Peace Park



Peace Monument

By “virtual reality” I mean simply the illusion of pictorial reality similar to trompe l’oeil, not the haptic (touch-sense) virtual reality of science fiction.

In other words, the software I use is capable of relative photorealism that allows me to create images and video vignettes that are strange but convincing on some levels. This level of distorted realism is why digital technology has recently been used as a vital tool by many artists. I find it useful in creating a wondrous but tense and bombastic world that reflects significant social and political phenomena.

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Regarding fear and paranoia? I lived for many years in the U.S., at the potential receiving end of gravity’s rainbow (the trajectory of a ground-to-ground missile). MAD, or “mutually assured destruction” in a nuclear war, was the stated policy of the U.S. military. The U.S. and U.S.S.R. came far too close for comfort several times to starting a nuclear war. For me, this real threat became a source of obsession. In addition, about twenty years ago it began to become clear to me that much of what passes for a free press in democracies does indeed (to a degree relative to power) “manage consent,” in part to engender a perpetual war-economy. What initially seemed a paranoid proposition has become one of the most well-documented facts in the social sciences. In part these fixations compelled me to dwell on both the complex human condition and the concrete political models as spelled out by such luminaries as Noam Chomsky and Ed Herman.

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Political art may not change the world, but overtly psychologically disturbing and unsettling art (occasionally with political overtones) has been quite potent in recent years. Examples include the work of the Chapman Brothers, Paul McCarthy, L. Budd, Sara Lucas, Tracy Emin and Matthew Barney.

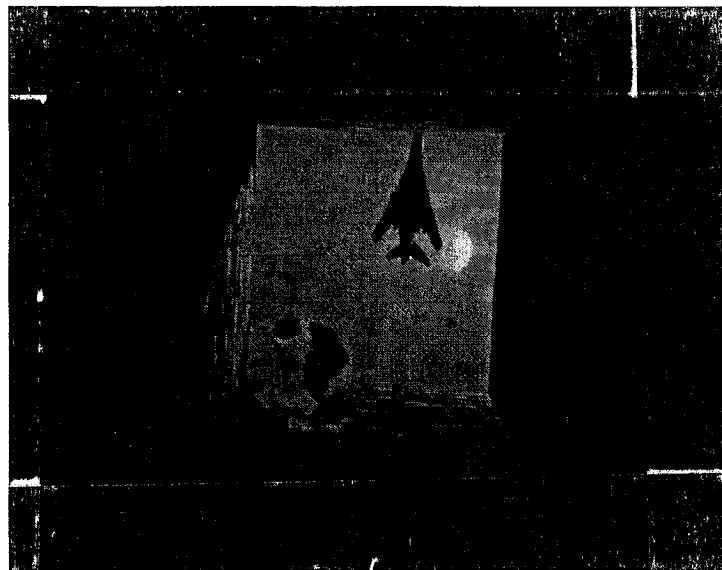
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Regarding the ubiquitous use of Santa Claus in my recent work, terrorist Mid-Easterners have now replaced reds under the bed as official symbols of irrational, paranoid fear in much of the West (what in their seminal *Manufacturing Consent* Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky call a media “filter,” “a national religion and control mechanism”). I find it ironic that the kind bishop St. Nicholas, originally from the Middle East (the south of Turkey), evolved into a quite ominous mythical figure during the European late Middle Ages—flying around in a black robe accompanied by a somewhat sinister elf with a whip, Black Peter. He was later resurrected as an updated version of the Dutch St. Nick (Sinter Claus) in one of the major commercial capitals of the late nineteenth century, New York City. Having earlier

been transformed from swarthy Mid-Easterner to stern Teuton, he finally became St. Nicholas, a ruddy jolly fat man in red. His new persona and de facto branding managed to dramatically increase retail sales.

... *Gravity's Rainbow* has been an important book for me in influencing my artwork through its wackily whimsical but horrifying symbolic reference to nuclear war. Since paranoia has been a consistent theme in my artwork, this book has been a perfect vehicle. My latest installation, *Following Gravity's Rainbow*, not only borrowed text from this book and maintained a conceptual affinity but also took its title directly from the colloquial use of the phrase "following gravity's rainbow" by the U.S. military. Indeed, I originally found this phrase on the internet, where a military pilot wrote, "Following gravity's rainbow, the nuke kept climbing, reaching the top of its arc 16.1 seconds later, at an altitude of 4,240 feet" (<<http://www.warbirdforum.com/toss2.htm>>). Although nuclear warfare is now a dormant threat, with ICBMs replaced by rouge asteroids, tsunamis and box cutters, it still lies sleeping in the background, and remains a poignant symbol of fear and paranoia.

—Quay School of the Arts, Wanganui Polytechnic



Lost

Image References

Following Gravity's Rainbow: veneer brick on wood; 1.5m x 1.5m x 2m structure; video projection, smoke machine; 2003-2005.

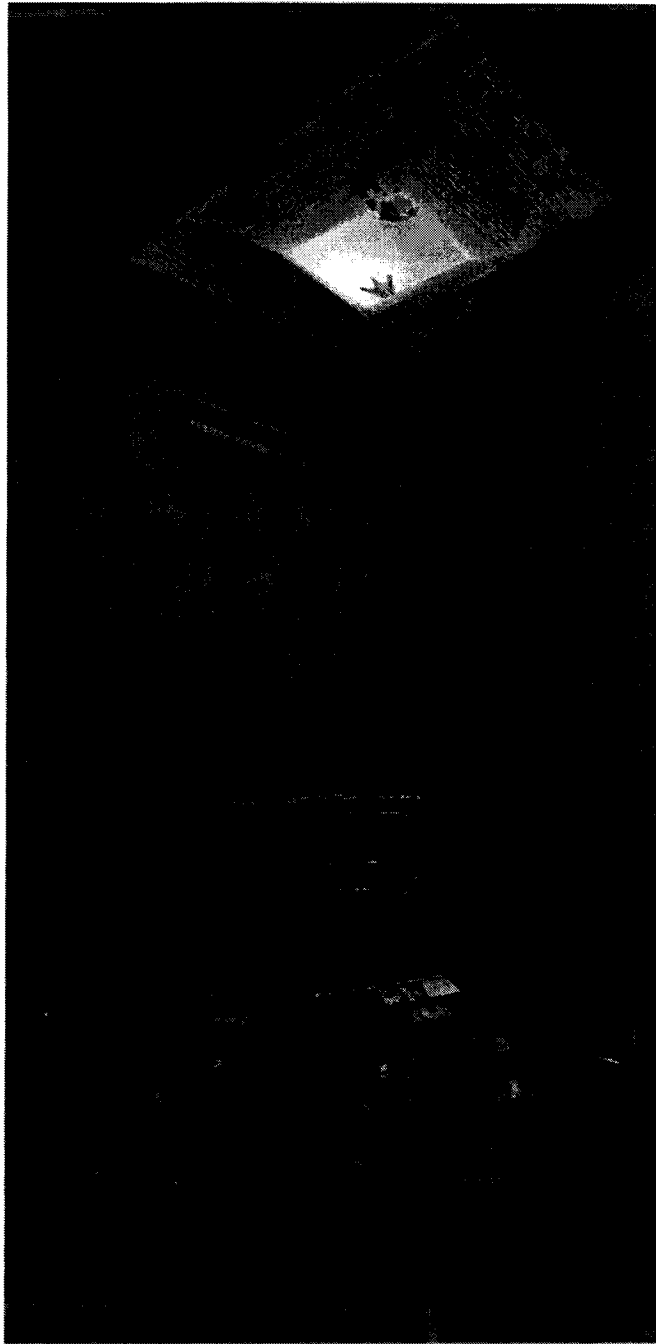
Gate Mask: New York City; wood, veneer brick, Mylar; 6.5m x 3.3m x 1.4m; 1984.

Lost: video-animation still projected on the ceiling in the installation *Following Gravity's Rainbow*; 2002-2005.

Monument to "Death the Impersonator": mini-brick on wood and Plexiglas; 75cm x 76cm x 102cm; 1985.

Peace Park and *Peace Monument*: drawing by Chip Sullivan; model: wood and vinyl; 97cm x 64cm x 64cm; 1986.

<http://www.britbunkley.com>



Following Gravity's Rainbow