

Accumulation, sedimentation, fracture and reconfiguration — these are the operations to which David Merritt subjects his themes and materials. They are operations that allow his images to mutate across inherited structures of meaning. And they are the procedures from which we can compose new models of expression.

These operations are known to us from a wide range of contemporary art. We see them at work in the endlessly variable collections of Allan McCollum's *Surrogates*, or in the meticulous documentation that accompanies Eric Cameron's *Thick Paintings*, or in the immeasurable gap between the familiar and fantasy in Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. What links these diverse practices to Merritt's is the artists' overture to the viewer, inviting them to construct a meaning for the work out of their own experiences and imaginative associations.

Merritt's work originates in his interest in language and the arbitrariness of sign systems. His early public works focused on the role that language plays in sustaining social and cultural conventions. His aim, both then and now, is to undo the boundaries between categories of experience, and to play with the instability of symbolic systems. Rather than producing independent objects, he works with a variety of media in site-dependent installations, a contemporary practice in which the meaning of the work is subject to the contingencies of architecture and institutional context. In the fine art gallery such installation work has the capacity to disrupt viewers' expectations and to make them more acutely conscious of the habits and conventions they bring to the process of experiencing a work of art.

One of the issues of language that particularly preoccupies Merritt's work is the discontinuity between written text and the speaking voice. In a work from 1988, *Magic Voice*, two Cricket dolls, arranged as if they are having a conversation, are each equipped with a pre-recorded sound track of a stereotypical exchange. Listening to the voices one realizes that they are hilariously out of synch. A more recent work, *Talking Hole Burning* (1993), incorporates a recording of a chorus of children quietly reciting phonemes. In the current installation his concern for voice is made manifest in the subtle abstract drawing, *glot'l* (1996). An oval shape composed of faded plastic flower petals represents the glottis — the opening that allows air to pass through the vocal chords. Twining through and around this opening, an upward-billowing shape drawn with twigs describes

the movement of a volume of air. If breath is “a special effect of the body,” as the French theorist Michel de Certeau has described it, *glot’’l* captures this effect in the supple and fugitive form of the twigs.

The artist has traced his use of twigs as a drawing medium to an incident that occurred when walking with his young daughter in the early spring, while the branches of the trees were still bare. His daughter was just learning to read, and as they walked along she associated the configurations of the branches with the shapes of letters. Adopting the child's insight, Merritt began to use the twigs in his drawings and tableaux to allude to the interrelationships between language and the body and to patterns of growth and decay.

In the second work in this exhibition, *Moritat*, (1995-96), the twigs suggest the everyday duality between culture and nature. As the elements of writing, they become stand-ins for the speaker's body, a rustic rubric for the relationship between writing and speech. The source material for this piece is a Cold War era chart-busting recording from 1959, Bobby Darin's "*Mack the Knife*." The immense popularity of the recording richly qualifies the mass-cultural space into which David Merritt (and roughly one third of the present population Canada was born. This was an era that fostered rock and roll, B movies, and other forms of American pop culture and mass consumerism.

A short time ago, on one of his regular forays through the secondhand stores that have furnished him with much of his materials over the years, Merritt found a gilt-framed, typewritten transcript of the lyrics to this song. In this humble object — the product of dedicated listening, now discarded — Merritt recognized the repressiveness and anxiety of that moment in our recent history. The Bobby Darin song, however, did not originate in that moment; rather, it was adapted from the “*Moritat*” theme in the Kurt Weill/Bertolt Brecht 1928 production, *The Threepenny Opera*. This opens onto another intersection of Merritt's artistic development, one to which the plastic flower petals also allude, and this is his conviction that everyday objects are reservoirs of cultural history. By stressing its references to the Weimar period in Germany and the epic theatre of Brecht, *Moritat* suggests that there is a continuum between those earlier moments of great social upheaval — Europe between the wars and Cold War America — and the social transformations of our own time. It optimistically addresses a larger Utopian project, one that operates on the imperative to resist the totalizing impulses of mass culture. This

resistance in part lies in seizing an image of the past which, according to the German critic Walter Benjamin, “flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.”

Transformed by time, geopolitics and material form, *Moritat* is still recognizable but eludes a fixed meaning. Its overall appearance is fragmentary and drifting. Because the twigs are incomplete as letter forms, parts of the text may be revised by incomplete memories, raising the issue of the performance of the viewer. This performance may resonate with the voice of Bobby Darin, or some young Berlin thug, or one's own.

*Moritat* returns us to the voice. Alongside the allusion to breath in *glot'l*, these two works underline the role the body plays in providing the framework for the construction of meaning. If the artist's intentions are realized, the work becomes part inheritance, part unanticipated invention.

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