

And Now
We Begin...

The Circus & the Pimp's Jalopy: Part II

There is a certain point for the mind at which life and death, the real and imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low cease being perceived as contradictions. - André Breton¹

I think that you can't have much art without play;...I believe that without a sense of play there's not much curiosity either....People tend to forget that play is serious, but I know that of course it is. - David Hockney²

The concept of the circus has long fascinated me. I view it as a site of inclusion and empowerment for those socially marginalized, where perfection is the bizarre, the odd, the death defying. It is a world reeking of humanity, embracing all aspects: the chaotic, the ridiculous, the divine, the contrary, the sensual. A celebration of life through a proximity to impermanence. In this installation I use the carnival theme to explore notions of spectacle, including its use to differentiate the ordinary from the extraordinary. I am examining ideas of watching and being watched, the role of street culture, language and meaning making.

Looking at circus history through the ages we can chart societal shifts in attitudes and exposure to new ideas and technologies. Like many cultural diversions, the circus functions not only as entertainment but as allegory. The circus acts as a fun-house mirror, throwing back an exaggerated reflection of societal values. Clowns, as trickster characters, skirt across the liminal zone between good and bad behaviour, reinforcing the distinctions between the two. Trapezists perform, flying wordlessly above the audience, demonstrating that to have extraordinary physical ability can also marginalize. Roles are generally divided into speaking and non-speaking. Those demonstrating physical prowess or peculiarities are rendered mute.

¹ André Breton. *Le Manifeste du Surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985) p.72-3 [Manifestoes, 123-4].

² David Hockney. *That's The Way I See It*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), p. 133.

What does this say about language and silence in the circus? What does it say about our perceptions of power? How are relationships formed between the audience and performer? What is the quality of this relationship?

There is no single circus that I am referencing. The concept is by now an amalgam of many sources. My childhood memories, to street performers of Covent Garden in London, Alexander Calder's *Cirque Calder*, Federico Fellini's *La Strada*, Tod Browning's *Freaks* and Wim Wender's *Wings of Desire* have all blended together. What is common to them all though is that through a few props, a paltry costume and a lot of energy a spectacle, oscillating between being both boring and mesmerizing, is created. The acts play on our species' tendency towards optimism. We watch because we are not only curious and visual, but also because we might miss something *really* phenomenal.

And so, *The Circus & the Pimp's Jalopy*, is an environment designed for the adult imagination, created along similar philosophical lines as the Japanese puppet theatre tradition, Bunraku. In Bunraku the puppeteers remain visible to the audience, resulting in a somewhat Brechtian effect. The audience is *always* aware of watching a fabricated scenario. Through popcorn smells, carnival crowd sounds, circus waltzes, glitter, debris and colourful bunting I hint that the installation is a circus site. The viewer upon entering and looking up, down, right, left is completely immersed. I engage the audience from afar using cheap tactics of intrigue, glitter or movement to entice a longer, closer viewing. The all female cast when on duty do not interact with audience. They flit in and out of character, while retaining their costumes, forcing confusion in terms of when and where the performance begins and ends. In character they are

wordless. Their personal soundscapes are augmented through tools. Three masked figures operate whirling androgynous daredevils made of wood. The rather underwhelming feat is punctuated by distributing confetti at the performance cycle's end.

There are two ringmasters. One tall, one small. The short one follows his own course and schedule, physically weaving the acts together by his persistent tinkling presence. The taller one has a more complex routine and operates the acrobatic adding machine, reinforcing her efforts with the odd exclamation. She cannot see the outcome of her labour and is facing an imagined Tobagonian tropical rainforest with a blackboard night sky depicting star constellations in May. When not on acrobat duty, the ringmaster practices her accordion. On the other hand, the audience is facing an off-white cupboard back with 10 mounted wooden acrobats arranged in a very simple tessellation formation. When activated they quiver and leap in a predictable fashion. The painted surface of this cupboard is intentionally cracked into a texture lightly suggesting designs inspired by William Morris.

I selected the materials for this circus very intentionally. The bunting is from Exeter in Devon, England. The carnival crowd sounds from the LP hail from the BBC library via Finland. The whistles are those used to referee soccer games. The cupboard hardware was purchased in person from Lee Valley in Burlington, Ontario, near my parent's home. The wheels of the acrobat cupboard are from my old pram and so on. By being exacting in my material choice I feel I can subtly acknowledge disparate tangents of my family history, and enable more complexity and layers. The objects in novel juxtaposition tally new equations. I want the references to become muddy and unclear. Perhaps I wish to be surprised by the outcome. *Too*

much control doesn't excite me. It doesn't allow for artistic chemistry. I'm describing the excitement akin to that of seeing your drawing composition reversed when it's printed for the first time. It looks awkward and one realizes that we are culturally conditioned to read images and that nothing is neutral. There is symbolism within the use of space. In Latin language cultures we read from left to right, and so it is the same with images. With more details gleaned from the greater culture the work becomes less obviously self-referential and generous to those who see it, allowing them a greater chance for inclusion and crafting their own relationships. With atypical juxtapositions I have the chance to see the culture anew.

The title for this exhibition came about years ago as I was watching the film *Wings of Desire*. The term “pimp’s jalopy” is from dialogue used to describe the convertible from which the two angel characters are observing humanity. During the picture the angel Daniel, falls in love with a struggling circus's trapeze artist, Marion. He relinquishes his immortality to become human. So perhaps my title is a love story. But also I relish the initial incongruity of “circus” and “pimp’s jalopy”. It delights me. I like that I am immediately confronted with the images, trying to put them together like two mismatched puzzle pieces that *almost* fit. I like the resulting “third thing” chemistry. It feels like magic. I enjoy the sound of the language, without needing to completely understand the meaning. But it is also practical. Similar to using the smell of popcorn to instantly conjure the atmosphere of the carnival fairway, “pimp’s jalopy” for me describes the con men, the flickering fluorescents, the cheap temporary structures, the dodgy rides, the artifice, the sweaty money, in short the piss stained, seedy sides of the circus.

The Circus & the Pimp's Jalopy is a lifetime project. In the future it will include more electronic acts. Eventually, I wish to travel with it to small communities around Canada. This is its first incarnation and an experiment with my new fascination in movement and visual acting.