

Surface Narratives | Rhonda Wepler & Trevor Mahovsky

In the final months of Italo Calvino's life, he wrote: "the moment an object appears in a narrative, it is charged with a special force and becomes like the pole of a magnetic field, a knot in the network of invisible relationships... We might even say that in a narrative any object is always magic."¹ Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky, collaborative artists since 2004, have intellectual pursuits and formal concerns in common but they also share a proclivity for and love of objects—whether elevated, banal, or disposable. Their works are rich and diverse, comprising photography and installation work as well as sculpture, and their practice is unified by the proposition that the meaning of everything lies on the surface. The act of shaving ever closer to the surface has resulted in astonishingly light works that have some of the magic that Calvino describes: they have a gravitational pull and seem to anchor a story, but their invisible relationships and subtle narrative cues do not reveal themselves easily.

The photographs in *Walks* are influenced by the surface narratives of still life. Wepler and Mahovsky undertake a set itinerary of city streets during their travels together, buying and scavenging objects. The objects are collected and numbered, and later laid out in a circle on the artists' hotel room floor. They are shot with only available light, and up to forty images are then digitally stitched

together to create the final image. Glitches and artefacts from this digital process reveal themselves under close inspection, troubling the fixed identity of photography as a spontaneous medium. Brightly coloured and captivating, the arrangements collectively give form to Michel de Certeau's observation that "stories about place are makeshift things. They are composed with the world's debris."²

At the heart of *Walks* is a question about the nature of place and the ability of objects to describe its specificity. To this end, Wepler and Mahovsky cite Marco Polo's descriptions of cities in Calvino's *Invisible Cities* as an inspiration. Initially, Polo struggles with the Mongol language and uses objects to portray the far reaches of Kublai Khan's empire. Calvino writes, "Marco Polo could express himself only by drawing objects from his baggage—drums, salt fish, necklaces of wart hogs' teeth—and pointing to them with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder or of horror, imitating the bay of the jackal, the hoot of the owl... The descriptions of cities Marco Polo visited had this virtue: you could wander through them in thought, become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off."³ The items in *Walks* are arranged and opened for the camera in much the same way that a city presents itself to a tourist with full pockets; there is material excess, but also a kind of regional



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specificity. We note which items are unique to a place, and which are ubiquitous. Exposed to multiple photographs we begin to notice items that reappear: fried eggs, syringes, violins. Do these repetitive items describe a city or reference the genre of still life? Or, perhaps more tantalizingly, in which objects are the artists revealed? Just as Kublai disappears in Polo's descriptions of faraway cities, we too wander through *Walks* in thought, become lost, stop.

In contrast to the photographs in *Walks*, the works in *Veneers* are examples of what the artists call continuous-surface sculptures: complex, interconnected shells with no substrate or internal armature. While the photographs in *Walks* are stitched together from multiple layers of images, the sculptures of *Veneers* are composed of a single plane stretched thin and brittle. Wepler and Mahovsky take ordinary objects (a fence, a door, work boots, a kitchen garden) and reimagine them as pure surface vacuumed clean of content. The artists deploy two types of materials for these works: metal foil (copper, brass and aluminum) and wood veneer (oak, pine, fir and birch). In their choice of materials, the artists are driven by formal concerns. Copper foil is used to cast patinated metals and organic objects, while brass and foil aluminums are used to cast metallic objects with industrial finishes. They exclusively use wood veneer to recreate wood surfaces; all steel and wire hardware is notably absent. The resulting veneer sculptures are left exposed to gravity and struggling under their own weight. Similarly vulnerable are

the foil works: air currents from passing visitors can rustle and rattle *Hanging up my Boots* (2014) on its single nail, and the artists produced *Rotting Squashes (Living Inside this Shell)* (2014) in the gallery itself as the piece is too delicate to easily move. Their fragility and distressed finishes are deliberately staged, an exaggeration of the entropic tendencies of the material world. Their making is fraught, and the materials are pushed to their limits. This tension is captured in and communicated by the imperfections that mar their surface. Those same marks, taken together with their antiqued surface treatments, also imply backstory and invite imagination. *Bad Neighbour* (2014), with its stained dresser and kicked-through hollow core door, immediately brings to mind examples of aggressive and slovenly neighbours we might have had in the past. Simultaneously, the dresser and door buttress the attenuated surface of *Bad Neighbour*, keeping it upright while drawing our attention to the sculpture as an object inhabiting the gallery space. The artists privilege neither interpretation, nor do they suggest that viewers choose one. Instead, they allow our perception to oscillate between these two parallel narratives.

Many of the works in *Veneers* incorporate allegorical cues about material excess from still life painting, although in these works the cues maintain an inward, material focus. The mating moths in *From Whichever Side One Approaches Things* (2014) could refer to mortality and the evanescence of youth but also the practice of “butterflying,” or splitting a piece of hardwood to create two mirrored slices of wood veneer for decorative marquetry. The snails in *Rotting Squashes* are uncomfortably reproduced

in copper, a material famous among gardeners for its mollusc-repelling properties. While the snails could refer to rot and decay, this inherent tension between copper and snail also points to some of the internal inconsistencies and anachronisms of still life—particularly Dutch Renaissance still lifes depicting fruit and flowers from all seasons before the advent of refrigeration. Much like *Rotting Squashes*, many still lifes are impossible fantasies.

Wepler and Mahovsky’s first collaborative works were in foil and they see the photographs in *Walks* as a natural extension of this body of work. Specifically, they reference the idea of indexicality or the theory that all photographs contain a unique photochemical trace of their subjects. The foil works are a variant of *repoussage*, made by forming a malleable metal over an object and embossing its shape and imperfections. Like photography, there is an indelible connection between the foil works and their subjects. Photographs and foil works presume to tell the truth and, if nothing else, we are assured that the subjects of both existed in real life. However, this indexical trace references a schism: the squash, fresh when used to cast *Rotting Squashes*, will itself rot long before *Veneers* closes; the objects in *Walks* were returned, eaten or discarded after the photograph was taken. The object narratives multiply.

There is, however, another way to connect the works in *Walks* and *Veneers*. Photography captures the most attenuated surface of all, recording only the thinnest, light-reflecting membrane of an object. Wepler and Mahovsky have, in their fruitful collaboration,



sliced closer and closer to surfaces in their efforts to excise them from their substrates. Calvino, again at the end of his life, writes: “my working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language.”⁴ Wepler and Mahovsky’s works in *Veneers* and *Walks* seem to follow the same strategy: the surfaces of everyday objects are peeled from their structures, and despite being vulnerable and lightweight they are nonetheless liberated from utility. Rather than objects within a narrative, they are objects that anchor many competing and parallel narratives. As Wepler and Mahovsky note, “the surface is a sensitive place, where everything is constantly changing.”

by EMILY McKIBBON

RHONDA WEPPLER (MFA, University of British Columbia, 1998) and TREVOR MAHOVSKY (MFA, University of British Columbia, 1998) have worked in collaboration since 2004. Their projects have been featured in solo exhibitions at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge; Liane and Danny Taran Gallery, Montréal; Rodman Hall, St. Catherines; Doris McCarthy Gallery, Scarborough; Orange Coast Photography Gallery, Costa Mesa, California; Acme Project Space, London, UK; the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton; Pari Nadimi, Toronto; and the Kelowna Art Gallery, Kelowna. Their work is held in numerous public collections, including the Vancouver Art Gallery, the National Gallery, and the Musée d’art Contemporain de Montréal.

¹ Italo Calvino, “Quickness,” in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988): 33.

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 107.

³ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1979): 32.

⁴ Italo Calvino, “Lightness” in *Six Memos*, p. 3.



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Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky, *Minneapolis – Downtown West (South 8th St, Skyway, Marquette Ave South, S10th St, Nicollet Mall), Dec. 17, 2012* (detail), 2012, digital chromogenic print (Cover)

Installation view of *Walks: Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky*, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario (Page 2)

Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky, *Hanging up my Boots*, 2014, unbroken sheet of patinated copper foil (Page 3)

Installation view of *Veneers: Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky*, MacLaren Art Centre, Barrie, Ontario (Page 5)

Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky, *The Visitors*, 2014, veneer sawn from faces of oak whisky casks, glue, brick (Page 7)

Photography: Pages 2, 3, 5, 7, André Beneteau; Cover, Courtesy the artists.

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37 Mulcaster Street
Barrie, ON L4M 3M2
www.maclarenart.com