

One New Work

Kent Merriman Jr.
Remnants





Above: Kent Merriman Jr., *Tears and love are rained with joy, a kiss from the sun*, 2019
Cover: Kent Merriman Jr., *Deplorable Armour*, 2015

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Kent Merriman Jr. and the Thingness of Objects

by Nancy Tousley

“If I could paint, I would want to paint things. I love the thingness of things.”¹

— Sylvia Plath

Debris blown up against a cyclone fence has caught in the metal web attached to a dirty wall. Among these random scraps of everyday life are a blue rubber band, a couple of lunch bags, a wad of brown paper napkins, foil from a tossed cigarette pack, and a patch of frayed burlap. They suggest a scene we wouldn't look at twice if it were not for this: The rectangle of fencing is real, but the urban trash is not — it is made entirely of paint — and this is hard to discern. These overlooked objects insist on being seen. But just what is it that we are looking at?

Kent Merriman Jr.'s paintings have startlingly real presence. They inhabit our space exuding confidence that they are more than mere illusions. They are physically assertive objects in the world. The shadows they cast are real shadows; the light that shines on them is real light. As objects of similar character, size and outward appearance, the rubber band, the paper napkins and the other things suspended in the fencing of *Deplorable Armour* (2015) are the uncanny doubles of what they depict.

Merriman pushes against the boundaries of traditional realist painting and window-on-the-world illusionism. To break the tyranny of the picture plane

he removes the frame from painting as a shallow, two-dimensional illusion rendered on a flat surface and opens it up to the air. To bring in the third dimension he concocts a form of *trompe l'oeil* that weds painting to sculpture. His paintings are not only three-dimensional; they are hyper-realistic. Layering, modeling and carving paint as if it were intended to be a multidimensional material, Merriman makes objects that challenge both the limits of painting and the viewer's grasp of reality. He pushes representation into the realm of the actual.

His flattened cardboard boxes are size-as-painting-objects that lie on the floor, the place where you might find a flattened cardboard box, lying singly or stacked and overlapping. The effect of the work is almost hallucinatory. Viewers are taken in, shocked, delighted, amazed by the deception. But by definition, *realism* is not reality; *trompe l'oeil* is optical illusion. What is real is their unreality and it is a tour de force. In the painting-objects that simulate sections of walls, outward appearance is supplemented by the presence of real objects: the swatch of cyclone fencing covering *Deplorable Armour*; the short, vertical piece of rebar at the top of *Simulated Doubt* (2016);



Kent Merriman Jr., *Deplorable Armour* (details), 2015

a working red neon sign that spells out the eponymous title *Peepshow* (2015). Making an assemblage of found objects was never enough for Merriman. To relate to an object, he says, he must paint it or, in other words, re-form and transform it.² His new painting-objects are made entirely of paint.

Merriman locates his work in a space between reality and fiction. His strategy is similar to that of the American sculptor Claes Oldenburg who, with other artists of his generation, such as Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, looked to ordinary objects to bring the everyday into their work. For Oldenburg, “What I want to do is to create an independent object which has its existence in a world outside of both the real world as we know it and

the world of art.”³ No one would mistake objects like Oldenburg’s painted plaster pies, cheeseburgers, cigarettes or shoes from *The Store* (1961), for the real thing. But both he and Merriman address the familiar in order to create alternate worlds parallel to our own. They flesh out these worlds, albeit with different intentions and results, by making concrete representations of things.

Merriman’s *Sus Bag* (2019) is a wholly independent object, a clear bag with a “zipper” closing that looks for all the world like an ordinary plastic sandwich bag with a torn-out corner. Merriman draws upon general categories of things, such as walls, rubber bands, cardboard boxes, plastic baggies and poster boards, to give material form to unique, particular objects that nonetheless



Kent Merriman Jr., *Peepshow*, 2015

cannot be described as faithful copies of original models. His painting-objects embody composites of things he has seen and experienced. He is a close observer of the phenomenal world, one who stares at objects until he loses himself in looking, and a skilled realist painter. His painting-objects, which he reconstitutes from an almost photographic memory and the occasional aide of a photographed detail, obtain both thingness and objecthood.

To say thingness and objecthood is not to split hairs. Things and objects are tightly related; however, there are philosophical and semantic distinctions between them. Put most simply, a thing is an object or entity that is not precisely designated or capable of being designated, like a whatchamacallit or a thingamajig. A thing can be an idea and needn't even exist materially. An object,

although its nature is a debated subject in philosophy, is always distinguished by its presence.

Bill Brown, the originator of Thing Theory, discusses differences between things and objects in his 2001 essay of the same name.⁴ He writes that “As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture — above all, what they disclose about us) because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.”⁵

Objects that become things fill Merriman's painter's inventory. What he chooses to represent is broken-down, no longer functioning, battered, ruined or used up. Thingness thus comes to the fore, but paradoxically with a new symbolic function. As art objects Merriman's painting-objects form a special class of things in which the terms of the thing/object dialectic are joined inseparably and embodied. They are equally sign and symbol, and simulacrum. The thingness of objects in Merriman's work converts them into objective correlatives for subjective feelings such as failure, humiliation, worthlessness, despondency and other downcast states, of which the artist finds them to be emblematic. For Merriman, who recalls that his younger self once felt sympathy for castoffs — he perceived them as dead things — inanimate objects maintain their power to elicit and shape human emotions. By re-presenting

“dead” things, the artist gives them a second life. His painting-objects bring them to life vividly.

Merriman’s 3-D trompe l’oeil, the source of their persuasive presence, isolates them in their own space between fiction and fact and amplifies everything that can be said about traditional trompe l’oeil painting. Jean Baudrillard, who wrote an essay on “The Trompe l’Oeil” (1988), sees it as the domain of haunted, metaphysical objects. Freed from one-point perspective and the painter’s sovereign gaze, “the whole representative space elaborated by the Renaissance,” they are objects that look back at the spectator.⁶ In his book, this is anti-painting, with a “worrying strangeness.”⁷

Norman Bryson, author of *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, takes up the argument. “Normally, painting controls the contents of the visual field by means

of a sovereign gaze that subordinates everything in the scene to the human observer,” Bryson writes. “But in *trompe l’oeil* it is as if the gaze had been removed, or had never been present: what we see are objects on their own, not as they are when people are around, but as they *really* are, left to their own devices. . . . instead of the objects’ obeying the subject’s sovereign gaze, they slip out beyond it and usurp the visual field: they “look back” on the observer, as though there were no right by which human observation takes command of its surrounding world and imposes its own order upon it from a position of visual centre.”⁸ Moreover, because still-life objects address the generic body, “The very place where personal being takes its stand is overturned, in a radical decentering that demolishes the idea of a world convergent on the person as universal centre.”⁹

Kent Merriman Jr., *Box 1*, 2015





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The perspective from Merriman's 3-D trompe l'oeil painting-objects is more radical still. The hyperreal objects in the decentered spectator's own space are both more accessible and more remote, both more real and more unreal. Neutralizing the gaze of the painter, they decenter painting as well and open it to wider interpretation and to ideas of otherness. Lowly debris, the leitmotif of trompe l'oeil and the easy prey of entropy, the fate of all objects, is the very opposite of the precious object of high art with its mythic ability to last for eternity, as well as its status as property. With his box paintings, Merriman brings painting down from its pedestal and onto the floor. And yet the box paintings are sharply observed, richly detailed and compellingly beautiful. The other of art becomes art and thus otherness is embraced.

One reads these life size painting-objects for their histories, which lends them visual weight and urgency, and plants the seeds of narratives that reveal their allegorical potential. For Merriman gives them histories. He creates these fictions through the use of numerous signs that he inscribes on their all-important, closely observed surfaces. "When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation," novelist and poet Vladimir Nabokov writes, "the very act of attention may lead to our involuntary sinking into the history of the object."¹⁰ Nabokov's descriptive material was words. For his part, Merriman has become adept at painting dirt, stains, mold, rust, dust, scars, stickers, logos, tatters, scuff marks, shoe treads, printed numbers, bar codes, rivulets of condensation and other signs of passing time, atmospheric conditions and the large and small assaults that breakdown and degrade objects, leading to their disintegration.

The visual fictions are where the thingness of objects comes to the fore; it is the foundation of the poetics of

his work. Here we can think about Merriman's painting-objects in the terms of semiotics. A class of things can be equated with a mental signified, while a particular material object can operate as an optical signifier. We can consider when looking at or reading Merriman's painting-objects how things might perform a symbolic function and speak of the life and history of things. For example, *Box I* (2016) is a cardboard carton that is flattened and disused. Stickers denote that it was used to carry something fragile. It might have been reused: this is suggested by soiled flaps and tape that held it together at the sides when it was carrying something. *Box I* is a representation of an object whose function is to hold and protect other objects and move them place to place. Clearly, it has been marked by traces of experience. One could go on: the box is a kind of meta-object.

Merriman's new work, *Tears and love are rained with joy, a kiss from the sun* (2019), represents a poster board thick with layer upon layer of posters and notices stapled to its surface. It has been drenched by rain and dried and faded by the sun. Fissures filled with staples appear in its vertical topography. The whole is the colour of old paper. Its curls and tatters appear brittle to touch. A poster board holds a history of ephemeral events, the social life of a community. Merriman describes the histories it alludes to as there and not there; in memory, perhaps, but no longer as material facts.

Tears and love are rained with joy, a kiss from the sun, a splendidly baroque ruin, itself becomes a metaphor for memory and a reminder of death and the ambiguities of an individual's place in the world. Like objects, human bodies are vulnerable to age, lost vitality and the unexpected blows of time and fate. "... every composition in trompe l'oeil contributes to the effect of loss, a sense



Kent Merriman Jr., *Tears and love are rained with joy, a kiss from the sun* (detail), 2019

of losing hold on the real through the very excess of its appearances,” writes Baudrillard. “In trompe l’oeil objects are too much like the things they are: this close resemblance is like a second state, and their true relief, through this allegorical resemblance . . . is that of death.”¹¹ Bryson observes that “It is subject to a law of entropy that no form can survive. In the fate of objects around the body is read the body’s own creatural frailty and imminent demise.

And even before entropy gets to the objects and destroys them, they threaten the uniqueness of the individual and the distinctness of a personal outline.”¹²

The potency of objects and the roles they play in human lives is thus a subject for painters, poets, philosophers, art historians and theorists alike. The thing about Thing Theory is that it posits a subject-object relationship in which things actively “organize our private and

public affection” and can confront and challenge us and offer the possibility of social transformation. Brown points to the direction this transformation might take, deferring to Theodor Adorno’s belief that “accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such.”¹³ What Merriman, as painter and poet, shows us in his trompe l’oeil object-paintings is this: by acknowledging the thingness of objects and accepting their otherness, we can come to know empathy for others, as well as for things.

Notes

1. Quoted in Taussig, Michael. “Dying is an Art, Like Everything Else.” *Critical Inquiry* 28/1 (Autumn, 2001): 316. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344270>
2. All quotations attributed to the artist are from conversations with the author in Spring, 2019.

3. Quoted in Ebert-Schifferer, Sybille. *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l’Oeil Painting*. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2002): 103.

4. Brown, Bill, “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry* 28/1, (Autumn, 2001): 1-22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1344270>

5. *Ibid*, 4.

6. Baudrillard, Jean, “The Trompe l’Oeil,” in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, ed. Norman Bryson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 54.

7. *Ibid*, 57.

8. Bryson, Norman, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990): 143.

9. *Ibid*, 145.

10. Quoted in Brown: 4.

11. Baudrillard, 56.

12. Bryson, 145.

13. Brown, 12.

Kent Merriman Jr., *Box 2* (detail), 2017



List of Works

Peepshow, 2015

oil, acrylic, neon and grommet on canvas;
acrylic cover
144.7 x 108 x 12 cm
Courtesy of Bel Ami, Los Angeles, California

Deplorable Armour, 2015

oil, acrylic, loose wire, metal brackets, burlap
and chain-link fencing on canvas
144.7 x 108 x 11.4 cm
Courtesy of Bel Ami, Los Angeles, California

Box 1, 2015

oil and acrylic on canvas
143.5 x 106.6 cm
Courtesy of Bel Ami, Los Angeles, California

Simulated Doubt, 2016

oil, acrylic and rebar on canvas|
149.8 x 106.6 x 3.8 cm
Courtesy of Bel Ami, Los Angeles, California

Box 2, 2017

oil and acrylic on canvas
186.6 x 134.6 cm
Courtesy of Bel Ami, Los Angeles, California

Box 3, 2017

oil and acrylic on canvas
143.5 x 106.6 cm
Courtesy of Bel Ami, Los Angeles, California

Untitled, 2017

oil, acrylic, spray paint on acrylic mirror on
canvas
143.5 x 106.6 cm
Courtesy of Bel Ami, Los Angeles, California

Sus Bag #7, 2019

oil on acrylic
15.2 x 17.7 cm
Collection of the Artist, Calgary

Tears and love are rained with joy, a kiss from the sun, 2019

oil, acrylic and staples on canvas
106 x 99 x 6.3 cm
Collection of the Artist, Calgary



One New Work

One New Work is an ongoing series of small, focused exhibitions, curated by Nancy Tousley, which began at Glenbow in 2016.

Each exhibition features a new work by an artist shown with other works or objects that were selected to set the new artwork within a context. This can take many different directions. It might be provided by an artist's earlier, related works; preparatory sketches or maquettes for the new artwork; art, artifacts or archival material from Glenbow's collection; art or artifacts from the artist's collection; and so on. At times, it will simply be one new work that illuminates a new direction in an artist's practice.

Kent Merriman Jr.: Remnants is on view in the One New Work gallery from June 29 to September 15, 2019 and is the ninth exhibition in the series.

Bios

Kent Merriman Jr., who lives and works in Calgary, received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting from the Alberta College of Art + Design (now the Alberta University for the Arts) in 2013. Since then he has exhibited across Canada and in the United States. His first solo exhibition in the U.S. was held in 2017 at the Los Angeles art gallery, Bel Ami. His work is represented in Calgary by TrepanierBaer, which debuted his work in a solo exhibition last year.

Nancy Tousley, winner of the Governor General's Award for significant contributions in the arts, is a nationally known senior art critic, arts journalist and independent curator. A graduate of Vassar College, she was art critic of the *Calgary Herald* for more than 30 years and the first Critic-in-Residence at the Alberta College of Art + Design. Her writing has appeared in magazines in Canada and the United States since the early 1970s, and in more than 40 public art gallery and museum catalogues and books. *Kent Merriman Jr.: Remnants* is the eleventh exhibition she has curated for Glenbow.

Our thanks to Dell Pohlman and Lauren Raymore Pohlman for their support of this exhibition and the *One New Work* series.

Right: Kent Merriman Jr., *Box 2*, 2017
Back Cover: Kent Merriman Jr., *Deplorable Armour* (detail), 2015

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