

IAN CARR-HARRIS AT SUSAN HOBBS by Gary Michael Dault



Ian Carr-Harris is just back from a seven-week residency as a Studio Fellow at the Banff Centre for Continuing Education, where he was mentoring thirty-five artists through an autumn-long session titled *The Future of Idea Art*.

Who better? Carr-Harris has been teaching advanced art theory for years at the Ontario College of Art And Design, and, since 1970, has been making and exhibiting his art, both nationally and, more recently, internationally, to considerable acclaim. His current exhibition, at Toronto's Susan Hobbs Gallery, continues and amplifies a number of his recent aesthetic and philosophical concerns.

Central to the exhibition is a work called *Paradigm Series: "Tate Modern" [Survey]* from 2005, the third of a series of Carr-Harris's rather hermetic, apparently deadpan sculptures of major art museums (the first two were "models" of The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery and The Art Gallery of Ontario,

both in Toronto). I call them deadpan, and italicize the word "model," because all three of these museological constructions offer the viewer both less and more than conventional models might offer.

In the first place, and unlike an architectural model per se, the artist's Tate Modern is primarily an allusion to the museum than a recreation or compression of it. White, matte and chalky to the touch, and essentially approximate, in its proportions and its detailing, to the real thing, the Tate work represents a place with which the artist feels some sense of relationship (he has exhibited in both the Power Plant and the AGO and has "visited the Tate many times"). He hasn't built a miniscule Guggenheim Bilbao, for example, because, as he points out, his decision to construct a museum has to come from some feeling for its inhabitation, and a desire to incarnate within it a "sense of personal attachment."

At the very heart of Carr-Harris's little Tate Modern are the artist's convictions about our endlessly mediated relationships with time and with time's own personal theatre, space. In a lecture delivered at Banff last October 10, Carr-Harris noted that "while we are situated to a great degree by tense: past present and future", mostly we are "absorbed by the present." It is his contention, furthermore, that neither art nor we ourselves are "so stable that the present is uninflected".

And the present is indeed remarkably inflected by any attentive dialogue you enter into via Carr-Harris's Tate Modern model. The work, as the artist points out (in a ruminative note about it), is "at once both architectural model and peep show". As architectural model—or, more accurately, as an approach to an architectural model—the structure presents a whole which is, in fact, only a part: Carr-Harris's "model" is of only a section of the actual Tate Modern and even at that, things are deliberately awry: the size and placing of the windows, for example, and—when you look through them—the nature and the proportions of the interior spaces of the "building".

As peep show, the "Tate Modern" has been transformed by the artist into a kind of perceptual theatre where, by looking inside, we "relocate ourselves within the entirety of that space" (rather the way a child, in gazing upon a model car or model railroad coach, will transport itself into its interior and posit itself *looking out from its windows*). In gazing upon it, you become "both surveyor and voyeur."

The little Tate's program is complex, and there isn't space here to outline it fully: it reads like a script, its narrative moving us from left to right. If you look through the first window, you see a flickering rectangle of light, projected on a "wall," like a movie screen just before or just after the movie ("a moment of anticipation or release"). In the next window (of the next "room"), is a page from *Pierre Menard*, Borges's infamous story about authorship and authenticity. Next comes a view into a darkened library (unlikely, in the real Tate Modern), which offers Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (the wellsprings of the Borges story and an allusion to displaced time), and, finally, in the rest of the peep-show museum, an exceedingly subtle, multi-room reading of Velasquez's endlessly rich and ambiguous painting, *Las Meninas* or "The Royal Family" (1656-7)—which, by the way, is in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, and not in the Tate Modern.

Why *Las Meninas*? Because it offers us engagement in the machinations of encountering, of interrogation, of linguistic ambiguity and the questioning of a hundred other (un)certainities. Why the "Tate Modern"? Because it offers us a reflexive machine, an identity device, by which we are freed to mirror our own perceptions and newly confront ourselves. Both seem eminently worth having.

The Carr-Harris exhibition continues at Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto until December 2. 137 Tecumseth Street. 416-504-3699.