Ian Carr-Harris – Essay
Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts 2007

by Sarah Milroy

"What I do is invent artworks — which is a little like writing instructions for a better mousetrap. I work with students so they can make better mousetraps, and I write reviews and essays that theorize what an even better mousetrap might be."

Ian Carr-Harris began his intellectual life studying history and library science, and only came to the notion of being an artist once his sensibility was fully formed by those disciplines. Making art, he understood, was a way of keeping close to the things that fascinated him — the history of ideas, the problems of classification and categorization, the limitations of all systems of representation — without ending up, as he puts it, "locked away in the basement of a library re-reading the Admiralty papers for the tenth time." Instead, curiosity could be set loose to play in the stacks.

Given these roots, it is perhaps not surprising that his work has had a bookish tone — his references stretch from Plato through Nietzsche to contemporary post-structuralism — and he often borrows sculptural form from styles of library display: the vitrine, the filing cabinet, the model, the audio-visual carousels, and even the book itself. The seduction of knowledge, and its ultimate elusiveness, are constant themes.

His 1973 sculpture *A Section of Julius Caesar's Left Thigh* exemplifies the schoolhouse ethos of his early work, and its sensitivity to the dilemmas of historiography. On a plain wooden table sits a plaster mold of a section of a man's thigh (actually cast from the artist's own), accompanied by a framed text which reads: "A section of Julius Caesar's left thigh as it appeared when he mounted his horse to cross the Rubicon." But whose records could be relied upon to produce such a likeness? The proposition is wryly absurd.

In *after Dürer* (1989), Carr-Harris presents two illuminated views of a rhinoceros; the first a reproduced engraving of Dürer's famous print of an Indian rhinoceros, which is presented in a vitrine, and the second a black-and-white film clip of a rhinoceros at the Toronto zoo. We push a button on the vitrine's surface, and the image springs to life for a few moments on the screen, accompanied by the noise of school children, before the gallery again falls silent. Both representations are enchanting, but neither is definitive.

The choice of Dürer as a subject is significant; he was one of the first makers of mass-produced art objects (woodcut prints), and with his work arises the first, seismic shift in the notion of the original in European art. What is a *real* Dürer? Carr-Harris's use of the near-obsolete 16 mm film projector in *after Dürer* draws attention to another, more contemporary technology for disseminating imagery, but its clattering cadences remind us that the 16 mm film projection will soon also be obsolete.

Since the early nineties, Carr-Harris has been making illuminated books, concise responses to the works of literature and the reference books that have long captivated his imagination. The most emblematic of these is arguably *Narcissus* (1994), a work which combines the strategy of backlit illumination with the sculptural form of the vitrine. In a custom-designed, glass-topped cabinet, the artist presents what looks to be an opened dictionary, its pages parted to the definition of the plant colloquially known as a narcissus, its blossoms illuminated from beneath. Leaning over the cabinet, though, we find ourselves distracted by our own reflection,

and we’re reminded of the tale of Narcissus, a key myth in Western European culture. The work reads as an allegory of cultural solipsism. Can we ever look beyond our own cultural frame of reference? As viewers, we are always in the work.

By the nineties, Carr-Harris had undergone a shift in his thinking. His earlier work, he says, had depended on a notion of history as the testing of propositions. With his increased exposure to structuralist and post-structuralist thought in the eighties, however, he came increasingly to value Wittgenstein’s abandonment of the proposition in favour of the idea of the puzzle.

With this shift, Carr-Harris’s art took on a more poetic cast. Ambiguity comes to be understood, and relished, as a way of revealing the truth of things. The most poetic of all are his light installations, modelled on the windows of various exhibition spaces in Canada and Europe. Using a light projector and rotating disk, Carr-Harris is able to simulate the sweep of daylight across the walls of the gallery, replicating the configuration of the existing window panes of the building (usually sealed off in renovation) as if to reinstate the building’s memory. While site-specific in their inception, these pieces can later be installed anywhere.

Not surprisingly, given the artist’s many modes of engaging in the art world, some of his works appear to examine institutions and the authority vested in them. His stylized scale model of the Tate Modern in London, England — *Tate Modern [Survey]* (2005) — is a striking recent example. Circling the white, crisply constructed object, you feel compelled to investigate its interior, but, peering through the window openings, you can gather only a partial understanding of the space within.

One of the galleries is empty and illuminated by a cascade of white light, which spills through an opened doorway, recalling the spare detective offices of a Raymond Chandler movie. Through another window, though, Carr-Harris permits us a view of the section of Velazquez’s masterpiece *Las Meninas*, which includes the mysterious image of the king and queen, at the rear of the composition. Scholars have long argued whether Velazquez was here rendering another royal portrait, framed on the wall, or a mirror reflection of the royal couple posing for the painting on the artist’s easel (which is turned from our view). Here is a puzzle Wittgenstein might have relished, a puzzle nested within another puzzle, the work of art.

To compound the air of ambiguity, Carr-Harris fills a neighboring window with a page from a short story by Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” in which a fictitious author writing centuries after Cervantes replicates, with deliberation, the verbatim text of the Cervantes masterpiece. Yet he considers the resulting work his own. Can both works be understood as originals? In this construction, there is no solid ground.

Carr-Harris invites us to play within these delicious complexities. In this respect, particularly, *Tate Modern [Survey]* is the work of a fully-matured sensibility. It is one of the poignant ironies of our advancing years that the more we know, the more we know what we don’t know. But Carr-Harris has always cautioned us against our certainties, and it is in this brand of intellectual self-consciousness that his legacy resides. One of Canada’s most sophisticated artists and teachers, he has raised the bar for us all, and we have all benefited from his friendship and his careful scrutiny.

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