



Model (Interior) of Piet Munson House, Utrecht, 1922-24, 2010. Painted MDF, acrylic, and tape, 223 x 343 x 135 cm. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid, Courtesy the artist and Susan Hobbs Gallery.

The Order of Things

October 8, 2024 by John Gayer

For more than 40 years, Toronto-based Brian Groombridge has been making art that asks us to consider the world in which we live. Beginning with his early installations—like the magnificent *Architectural Targets Subway* (1979), a full-scale, slightly altered section of a subway station wall made of cardboard—to recent works that allude to measurement systems, tools, workshop furniture, or constitute signs, lists, and illustrative diagrams, his works appear to be exemplars of usefulness and clarity. But take another, longer look and, suddenly, things do not seem so clear. These works can tie up one’s thoughts by proposing multiple impressions or occlude

understanding altogether. Consider *Untitled* (2019), a list printed in upper case letters. It states: “PINOCCHIO, THE DUNCE AND THE SNOWMAN,” which instantly raises questions of relationship. A quick online search reveals that they are all movie titles, but is that the answer? Probably not. Additional factors include the spacing, which is a bit erratic, and the blocks of color that highlight parts of the text. Knowing that such marking serves as a memory aid, why are PINOCCHIO’s last four letters marked in blue, AND’s N and D in green, and parts of the other two names in yellow or pale orange? Is this a code? A matter of visual rhythm? Perhaps they negate the font’s uniformity as a way of un-acquainting us with the text?

Such is the character of Groombridge’s diverse practice. His exhibitions, known for their precise arrangements and austere air, come across as prototypes from an epistemic laboratory. Hence, these displays are forums for deep-thinking, and as such, they serve as conduits to entirely new viewpoints, relationships, meanings, and uses.

Groombridge’s investigations, though highly regarded and worthy of greater exposure, have received minimal attention outside of Canada. But right now, he is having a bit of moment. The publication of *Brian Groombridge WORKS 2010–2021* coincides with “*Work. No Narrative. No Symbols*,” his current show at Susan Hobbs Gallery (on view through October 12, 2024). In borrowing an aesthetic typically associated with user manuals, road atlases, and reports—complete with wire-o binding—the volume, which is printed on light card, is sturdy, comfortable to hold, and a pleasure to peruse. A collaboration with design studio Index, the book is expertly produced. Groombridge calls it a handbook, as opposed to a catalogue, though in my opinion, the tactility associated with its scrutiny is more akin to exploring an artist’s book. Its success derives from the image selection and the design, a convergence that, by simulating the kinds of proximities and perspectives encountered by gallery viewers, effectively conveys the characteristics of his exhibitions. Rather than present a compilation that merely documents the works of this period, the book not only strives to revive them, but also to unearth new information.



Photo: Dimitri Levanhoff, Courtesy the artist and Susan Hobbs Gallery

The latter idea is linked, in part, to the order, which is anti-chronological, somewhat fragmented, and enhanced by other elements, such as the absence of page numbers. While the multifarious works of Groombridge's solo shows tend to be grouped together—all of the Case Study pieces from 2021 (including two studio views of Case Study #4 in progress) are found near the front of the book, whereas dd/mm/yyyy pieces from 2016 are near the back—lone works, such as the meditative Lyric Technology (2015) and the intriguing A drawing tool (in collaboration with Joel Herman) (2011) seem to have been dropped in here and there. Changeability is another feature. Since the binding allows the pages to rotate freely, any pair of adjacent pages can temporarily serve as the book's front and back covers. The sole constant is the location and orientation of the titles and dates. These greatly scaled-down text elements, which follow the configuration of the cover's colossal text, have been squeezed into the top and bottom page corners alongside the binding.

While material, direction, space, and placement are critical elements in Groombridge's work, some titles propose time, even if ambiguous, as paramount—the dd/mm/yyyy pieces and A condition connected with what is happening or has happened (2019). But in the provocative Model (Interior) of Piet Munson House, Utrecht, 1922–24 (2010), shown in the window of Toronto's Convenience Gallery, time operates somewhat differently. This witty and enigmatic imaginary creation points to a future that is already part of the past and, via a series of contrasts and parallels, also refers to De Stijl, a more distant past. This is suggested through the oblique nod to Mondrian's name, as well as the colors, staggered planes, and corner windows that exemplify the exterior of Rietveld Schröder House. So, here we have an interior and an exterior of a pair of "houses" that stand well apart from the buildings that surround them. Both exist in closed environments—one is set in the front window of a former store; the other is hemmed in by four-lane highway built in the 1960s—at locations once situated at the outskirts of their respective cities. Time, it could be said, does not only march on, but also correlates to experiencing this book. As one flips through its pages, time slips back and forth.