

# EDDIE CLEMENS: POP-IN ROOM

October 2004

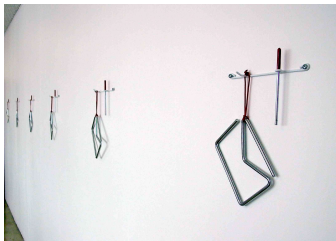
ARTSPACE

## Orchestrating the perverse

Leon Tan

Eddie Clemens' installation appears at first glance to be deceptively ordinary. His collection of objects emphasize how quotidian objects such as heaters, supermarket bags, calculators and wire racks can provide us with a deceptive sense of continuity over time (these forms and their normal functions tend to remain constant), acting as familiar affective cues within the larger landscape of cultural memory.

The works all share a heavily manufactured but effortlessly slick aesthetic. Staying within a conservative palette of white, black, red and chrome, the objects initially look *completely* machine made and finished. Having watched Clemens at work however, I realize they are far from being products of automated mechanical reproduction. True, Clemens utilizes industrial tools and machinery in manufacturing his objects. However, *Triangle* and *Prairie* have been painstakingly designed and produced primarily by hand. *Triangle* for instance features a series of six orchestral 'triangles' bent by hand with the help of a 'bender' machine into a form that instantly recalls New Zealand Post's logo. *Prairie* features a modified heater rack, with the calculator cradles welded and finished by the artist. In his practice, the artist approaches art-making by orchestrating unlikely coincidences - in *Triangle*, Clemens orchestrates the coincidence of an iconic commercial signifier with an orchestral instrument. In *Prairie*, the banal heater drying rack and oil heater (both purchased from The Warehouse) coincide with a set of three identical calculators (available only from Corporate gift wholesalers), each echoing a swan motif (a motif recurring through all the works) in the displays' curve upwards off the base.



*Triangle* (Installation)

What we have here are commercial forms (e.g. calculators, model car tyres, drying racks, plastic bags) subtly perverted by the artist towards a horizon of zero functionality and pure aesthetics. In late Capitalism where downsizing, automated manufacturing and e-commerce are standard practice, increased *surplus value* is 'extracted' by reducing the costs involved in human labour (machines don't need to be paid salaries). (This is mirrored also in the Pop-In Room - a small project space which has taken over half of the ARTSPACE office). Aesthetically, the result is precisely what we see in our local supermarkets, hardware stores and malls - sterile, slickly packaged, and boldly colourful products that look (and usually are) machine manufactured, processed and distributed. With these products, there is absolutely no 'mark' at all beyond the machinic sign of globalized commerce. Clemens' works share this 'look', but in fact involve an excessive (and obsessive) amount of physical labour and material engagement. In this way, he subverts the late Capitalist formula and it is in this subversion that one begins to detect what may come to be Clemens' signature strategy. Paradoxically, it is in these works where the mark of the hand is erased that one finds the 'signature' - a mark that is typically inscribed through the sweat of labour onto the objects themselves. Are Clemens' objects not eminently *auratic objects* as Walter Benjamin would say?



*Untitled*

A certain perversity is to be found in Clemens' untitled checkout bag work consisting of a supermarket bag dispenser and 3000 red plastic bags each marked with a modest text box *quoting* an Everywoman overheard in Rotorua shouting, "You bloody raped me and you think a trip to The Warehouse will make it better..." at a man following her in a car with the license plate 'SOLJAR'. Is it not a bizarre coincidence of notions - a violent 'bloody' scene of rape and a domestic scene of shopping for household requirements at The Warehouse? As though one can actually *make up* for such an intrusion (rape) into another's material subjectivity, this 'soldier' had the ludicrous thought that he would make up for it *at a bargain price!* Is The Warehouse / Whorehouse not constantly reminding us that at their stores, *everyone gets a bargain?* To shift to a different register, are we being bought at bargain price, with our complicity acting as an unspoken lever against us? Can art finally make up for all the traumatic incursions over time into our subjective experiences, at a bargain price?



*Love will tear us apart*

*Love will tear us apart* is the sentimentally titled last work in this suite, consisting of 35 white swans and 1 black one encased in vacuum formed high frequency welded blister packages. Visually, the eye is instantly drawn to difference, to the single black swan amidst the sea of white swans. Is the image and notion of the 'black sheep' not already over-determined? This artwork provides the perfect occasion to illustrate a key theoretical concept in psychoanalysis - that of projective identification. The idea is that sometimes we end up feeling or 'wearing' things for other people (for whom those feelings are so intolerable that they have to be projected out). The black sheep is the target of such projections, containing all that is socially repressed or disavowed. Installations and performances frequently perform a similar function - that of containing and mediating the 'spectres' of society, history and cultural memory, those disavowed and repressed affects and effects that always return to haunt the living in the present moment.

### Author:

Leon Tan

BA, MHS (Hons), PhD (enrolled)

Leon Tan is a doctoral candidate at Auckland University's Department of Art History. His research interests are contemporary performance and installation art, interactive games, and cultural theory. He is an artist and game designer as well as a lecturer and psychoanalytic clinician at the Auckland University of Technology.

### References:

Huysen, Andreas (2003). *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and The Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Huysen, Andreas (2000). *Present Pasts: Media, Politics, and Amnesia*. In *Public Culture*, Vol. 12, Iss. 1. Duke University Press.

Curated by Tessa Giblin