

Salvation
Colm MacCool and Peter McFarlane

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SALVATION:

GIL MCELROY

COLM MacCOOL and PETER McFARLANE

The problem with a lot of politically, environmentally, or socially focused art is that it takes itself too damn seriously, as if the issues it speaks to with such earnest fervour are beyond the purview of humour. The work of two Ontario-based artists is evidence otherwise, and while it may not be groundbreaking stuff they proffer, its humour (tending toward the black) and satiric edge (tending toward the gentle) are a welcome relief from the often overly shrill voice that can typify art of political/social and/or environmental bents, and so constitutes a meaningful contribution to their discourses in and of themselves. Sculptural works by Colm MacCool and Peter McFarlane have been given a curatorial locale by Virginia Eichhorn for the exhibition *Salvation*, co-organized and toured by The Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, and the Art Gallery of Peterborough.

Now, beyond the aforementioned factors, there is little that overtly connects, here, the work of MacCool and McFarlane. For *Salvation*, the former contributed objects of a sculpturally representational inclination, while the latter presented sculptural wall reliefs and a series of miniature landscapes constructed from the detritus and waste of consumer technology, ever-so-slightly reminiscent of some of Kim Adams's work. And yet, *Salvation* works. Here's why.

Of MacCool's four main floor-mounted works situated in the gallery space, two representationally referenced utilitarian artefacts, while the other two had right-wing politics cheekily set in their sights. *Rusty Bolt* (2004) and *Tractor* (2003) are, respectively, carved wooden representations of an oversized, waist-high bolt (its cherry wood threads pocked with wormholes), and a large tractor tire depicted as if squashed somewhat flat courtesy the effects of gravity and the lack of a supporting interior rim. But in *Fraser Institute* (2004) and *Dubya* (2004), MacCool dispenses with such narrow (albeit, quite lovely) representational

ends and enters the realm of the social and political. In taking aim at the Canadian right-wing think tank of the same name, MacCool proffers a shoulder-high section of tree trunk, the exterior of which has been debarked and its wooden surface polished to a high gloss. But it's a hollow thing, an empty vessel, a shell, for the interior has been burned away leaving behind a blackened and scorched internal wall. Point taken.

Dubya, on the other hand, isn't nearly so clear-cut. Here, MacCool situates a large wooden ball at eye level, suspending it from a large spring that is part of a weigh scale that includes a circular disk — painted half white, half black — and double-ended needle indicator pointing into both black and white areas of the disk. It's a take, obviously, on American president George W. Bush, and his simple-minded black-and-white view of the world and the devastating policies it has spawned. Okay. Point taken as well, but it's obvious and not nearly so smartly rendered as in its companion work.

Peter McFarlane's work, relief-like pieces dependent on walls for sculptural and narrative support, necessarily occupied the perimeter of the gallery space. In *Ram Dodge* (2003), for instance, a small portion of what resembles the hood of a car engine is seen set in profile on the wall. Attached to its front end and facing toward the left is a small metal relief of a ram's head — a hood ornament sliced in half, really. Facing it, as if prepared to charge and butt horns, and mounted flush against the wall, is a small wooden relief carving of another ram head, its dimensions corresponding exactly to that of the hood ornament. Narrative possibilities unfold.

Further along the wall, McFarlane employs but a single sculptural element for his storytelling purpose: a shoe. *My Father's Shoe* (2003) is just that: an old leather men's shoe (which presumably once belonged to the artist's father) that McFarlane has sliced longitudinally and half of which he has affixed to the wall in relief. He's trimmed the shoe's tongue to create a silhouette of two fishermen in a small boat. One of them is casting a line, and both it and the fishing rod from which it emanates are fashioned from one of the shoe's laces. It's a cleverly

wrought and even poignant work, one which we can safely assume honours both the artist's father and his passion while personalizing one of the more common pastimes through which we experience something even remotely resembling the natural world.

Elsewhere, however, McFarlane's work exhibits a decidedly satiric edge, taking dead aim on consumerism and our consequent devastation of the planet. In *My Dead Printer Factory* (2004), he's taken two computer printers and, with their plastic casing, interior electronics, printer cartridges and various and sundry other parts, cleverly constructed a set piece — a scale model — of a factory. The plastic shells of the devices easily adapt in conveying the spare utilitarian architecture of factory buildings, and a number of printed circuit boards, all painted the same bland shade of grey, do

double duty in replicating in miniature the elaborate and labyrinthine layout of such industrial complexes. McFarlane goes so far as to remove individual microchips from the very guts of the printers, paint them different colours, and use them here to represent automobiles parked in the plant lot. Witty stuff, and wholly lacking in the self-congratulatory satisfaction and smugness that mars the work of far too many artists working in the same vein. That can be said, too, of Colm MacCool's art, and while neither he nor Peter McFarlane may be at the cutting edge of things, this is work not so easily dismissed.

Salvation: Colm MacCool and Peter McFarlane
The Robert McLaughlin Gallery,
Oshawa, Ontario
April 22 – June 20, 2004

COLM MACCOOL and PETER MCFARLANE, *Salvation*, 2004. Detail: Peter McFarlane, *My Dead Printer Factory*. Photo: Dean Goorwin, XL The Lab, Toronto.

COLM MACCOOL and PETER MCFARLANE, *Salvation*, 2004. Detail: Colm MacCool, *Dubya*. Pine. 213.3 x 40.6 x 40.6 cm. Photo: Dean Goorwin, XL The Lab, Toronto.

