

## LYLA RYE

Robert Birch Gallery, Toronto, May 30 – June 28

For about five years, Lyla Rye has produced consistently thoughtful and resonant architecture-based installations around Toronto. In both solo and collective projects (Nethermind and Duke-u-menta), Rye has addressed space and site with high sensitivity. Her recent exhibition surprised viewers aware of her earlier calibrations and subtle peelings of the exhibition frame. Did this show, dedicated as it seemed to be to conventional art-for-sale, deny the cumulative insistence of Rye's practice? Perhaps not. The works played off a shift finessed by the artist with respect to the walls: the stable, sturdy, original plaster-and-lath structure removed during renovations and the ad hoc art-supporting drywall erected in its place in the newly-converted gallery space. The art objects penetrated and skimmed their "hanging" surfaces with an unusual push-pull reciprocity.

Robert Birch Gallery is located on east King Street, a solitary outpost for contemporary art within a district dominated by tony interior design houses. Although the gallery is not incompatible with its fashionable neighbours, it occupies only a minor storefront shoehorned into a block of spacious showrooms. Three small, identically-fabricated plaster-and-lath ellipses, hung side by side in the gallery's street-level window, announced Rye's exhibition to passersby. No more of the installation could be seen from outside. On this street, the works (half of an edition of six entitled *Vanity*) became viable artisanal goods, competing with the designer furnishings nearby. Given this premise, *Vanity*, both as a singular and a serial entity, issued peculiar enticements to the urban window shopper. First, the ellipses suggested mirrors (of the type hung for personal or decorative amusement rather than for function), nonreflecting surrogates with an inherent trace of material critique for the smart and sophisticated. Second, at eleven by eight inches, the small ovals of lath accentuated the variety of plaster forms oozed and slumped through its bands. This

extended incidental expressive character to the works (contrary to the inadvertent method with which the plaster was applied), offering



LYLA RYE, ANCESTRY, 1996, WOOD, PLASTER, DRYWALL PAPER REMOVAL; PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTIST.

difference, hence selection. Most jarring, however, was the orientation of these "mirrors." They hung smooth side, that is implicitly face, to the wall.

Architecture in self-regard was a recurring theme inside the exhibition. Immediately upon entry, one found oneself within the first section of Rye's site-specific two-part work, *Ancestry*. On the right was a traditionally framed plaster-and-lath wall, its materials salvaged by Rye during the gallery renovation. After an allowance to clear the open

door, this wall covered the actual west wall of the front gallery, again, like *Vanity*, face to face. To the left ran a parallel drywall, of corresponding length and height, also seen from behind, built on a frame of metal studs. It started at the front wall, stopped a yard or so short of

and stray shoe treads. The new wall felt violently pried away from the old and the corridor a breach, so freshly opened as to be raw and undominated psychological space, without history or scars, perhaps the biggest negation of all.

Rounding the corridor's exit, one confronted its second chamber and alter-ego, *Ancestry (Mirror)*. On this side, the same drywall panels had been finished in typical fashion, their seams and all evidence of assembly disguised behind a rolled-on coat of white paint. Into this membrane of paint, Rye cut and removed a head-high, head-sized oval, in front of which she placed a tall elliptical free-standing "mirror," about the height of a person. The "mirror" had an quizzical anthropomorphic attitude and poise (although, at this scale, the physiognomy of plaster was minimal) and seemed to regard the enigmatic removal it faced. The cut asserted its primacy over the upright sculpture. Its absorbing darkness and its fibrous texture emphatically dematerialized the wall and directed further attention to the blankness of a non-functioning mirror. The cut was the consuming reality because it was the starkest void in the room.

The gallery's back room displayed only autonomous artworks, linked thematically to *Ancestry* as had been the *Vanity* edition. Plaster-and-lath became a design motif. Rye used it most effectively in a small fabric diptych called *Matriarch/Patriarch*. On each of two matching elliptical embroidery hoops the artist stretched a piece of linen, white on the left and unbleached brown on the right. Into the white she stitched horizontal bands of brownish threads (chestnut, walnut, rust and green) emulating the grain of wooden lath strips seen through plaster and into the brown cloth she stitched the plaster form in white and light grey floss. The two embroidery panels oscillated a beautiful reversal between each other. Rye simultaneously showed her care for the handmade in art and her sympathy towards bygone handcrafted building skills, so simple and effective.

It is doubtful whether the walls of the gallery will retain the imprint of Rye's interventions past the close of this exhibition. However, it

seemed important that the dealer understood the implications of the *Ancestry* installation. Unlike excavations of gallery and institutional infrastructure executed by an earlier generation (think of Michael Asher) which revealed the wielding of power in the art world, Rye's

work in this instance commented on the ordinariness of most art transactions, the shallowness of its business trappings, and the expediency, frugality and outright penury forced in the name of commerce.

– BEN PORTIS