

Drinking Gold in Brooklyn

By Russell Keziere

THE AGE OF THE SIGN IS ESSENTIALLY THEOLOGICAL –Jacques Derrida

Bill Jones and I were discussing whether or not Moses actually made the Israelites drink the gold melted down from the golden calf they worshiped in the desert during Moses' prolonged absence on Mount Sinai. I wasn't sure they had, based on Deuteronomy 9:21 where, yes, Moses grinds up the calf, but scatters the gold dust into the stream coming down from Mount Horeh. Bill consulting Exodus 32:19, proved the opposite. He had in fact quoted the passage in his article *Graven Images*. Also, I had just seen a picture in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* of the recent discovery of what archeologists thought to be an original golden calf. It was an innocuous looking toy-sized fertility totem rather cute really, with its own little cow shed suitable for home veneration, convenient idol worship (why bother with long queues at the temple?). Aaron, true leader that he was, whipped one of these up, desperate for a stop-gap marketing ploy given Moses' absence and generally intolerable inarticulateness. (Hey, it was a desert, people need a little entertaining, they need to envision their hearts desire, give it shape.)

I was mostly interested in Bill's own exodus, through the thickets of a self-perpetuating, self-referential and self-justifying mega-world of signs which we venerate as reality. Bill, like Moses, proposes, in his art and writings, that we should grind this idol down and drink it: "If we can share our knowledge, art will once again become integrated with life in the community at large," he writes. "The bonding of the giver and receiver, artist and beholder...enables the return to light." But this penance and this unfathomable idea of community, can only take effect through a radical humility that would do any nihilist proud: "As Duchamp told us and as the ancient mystics warned, it requires skill and knowledge to turn the spheres from good to evil." I Bill and I talked a lot about idolatry, looked at some of his recent work, and then went out for a walk to rent videotapes.

Bill Jones has written elsewhere in this catalogue of the evolution of his work. My task is to trace what I see to be a series of moments in his art over the past 20 years and to offer a commentary on these moments. There are from my perspective four moments: Street; Window; Denial; Light. The first moment is the confidence of the plenitude of things expressed in collage; the second moment is the occasion of skepticism and choice of a framed perspective; in the third, representation is forced into a discipline of asceticism, turning the photographic method in upon itself in ritualistic scrutiny and emptying; and the fourth moment is the dangerous acceptance of the immanent image, the non-mediated photograph in which the sign and thing signified are made intimate, the fine line between "sacrament and idol" threatened by a thousand lies but which the artist, given the nature of our world, must now follow.

The Street

Jones' work in the early to mid-seventies is based in a confident questioning of materiality and perception. Photography acts as both a source of multiple conflicting private opinions (snapshots) and overviews (photographs are rephotographed, collaged into individual pictures, a disparate and disjointed totality). Jones' objects are found objects, clustered in a generous and encompassing collage. Perception winds around corners only to rest on people places things or simple facts as in the two dimensional/three dimensional play of *Twice Folded*. The perception games (colour photographs of black and white photographs, mirrors, three dimensional table settings rendered in two dimensions) are an elaborate game of three card monty in which we guess the outcome; but in playing the game of chance we in fact enter the open ended narrative. There is a place setting for each of us. In *Casino Royale* the invitations are laid out like table settings, a stacked deck of images. The still-life collages are fresh frozen into flatness,

Documentation as in *Landscape #1*, is representation. The artist is bricoleur and trickster, the totems and trinkets and traces of people, in short things in themselves.

There is a lot to say about Jones' work from the early to mid-seventies. It made for example, a seminal contribution to the renaissance of Vancouver photo art together with Iain Baxter, Michael DeCourcy, Christos Dikeakos, and later Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall. Jones was distinguished from his peers in that his narrative is trusted, the personal is respected, and a single-issue conceptualism is eschewed for something more unwieldy, many more loose ends, rough edges, surprises and contradictions.

The Window

Bill Jones moved to New York, specifically Manhattan, in the late 70s, during the waning days of post-minimalist and conceptualist rigor. New York had become smitten with pattern & decoration, with its fast fading semblance to and justification in feminism. And when no one was looking, painting returned with a cruel vengeance turning the conceptualist card tables upside down. Neo-expressionism succeeded in shifting attention to Europe (Penck, Kiefer, Clemente, Cucci) or to Europeans living in New York. As a kind of parallel event, photography became re-ghettoized either in the Metro Picture epiphenomenon or as reclaimed territory of Marxist integrity, with a shared strategy of appropriation (Sherman, Levine, Longo, Salle).

Slowly intellectual fashion shifted from new Marxism, feminism, ecology, underwritten by phenomenological hermeneutics, to a post-structuralist modernism, also called post-modernism, derived from literary theories based on Derridean deconstruction and American advocates such as Paul De Man and Craig Owens.

Jones' multipartite gaze, ironically, could not find tolerance within this context. Jones' work from this period is represented by a series of melancholic framed views of garden or natural exteriors, from behind windows. Black and white diptychs and triptychs traditionally framed retain the comfort of perspective. Instead of the busy tables, the framing conventions of the camera allows for the privacy of a window, the option to look out and engage, but to do so from within, from a secure vantage point.

Denial

Ascesis is abstraction. To represent something we show what it is not, and how it both is and is not. Things are both present and absent. We can neither prove nor disprove the existence of things; we cannot use an All-Thing or God to premise our knowledge of things. A true mystical *Via Negativa* approaches God by disclaiming that which God is not. In effect this can be seen as a deconstruction of the theological metaphysics.

Bill Jones' cliché verres, dating from 1986 and simultaneous with the move to Brooklyn mark the beginning of a period of ascesis. The cliché verres are particularly hermetic—photographs laboriously integrated with drawing, worked at over hours in the darkroom, ritualistically moving back and forth between the photographs and the markings, and in so doing mediating the relationship between things and their images. Icon painters would labour intensely denying their choice of God-image by abandoning interpretive style in slavish tutelage to an icon-master. And the iconoclasts would later plate the image entirely, leaving only space for the hands and the face. The cliché verres have a similarly complex relationship to representation: the tangled knot of vegetation, rock shapes, that could both be and not be things, are strengthened not by ambiguity but by a tension of affirming-negating, accepting-denying. We are not meant to be mystified or to doubt but to hold the difference between the two gently. The net effect

could be called abstracted realism, but the turning of the photographic method in on itself is a practice, not a technique.

An additional series of works include photo-enlargements of what might best be called detritus rubbings, Crumpled cigarette packages, erasotape, miscellaneous and indecipherable bits and pieces, lose their particularity by being contact printed, rendered negative and enlarged.. Their shapes are familiar and inaccessible, mundane and mystical, both present and absent. There is something unsettling about them. The series was expanded to include body detritus, the final form of ascesis being mortification of the flesh. For Jones this could be reclaiming hair caught up in the bathroom drains or things indescribable that the cat would bring in. These works were also enlarged into indeterminate and elegant black and white drawing/photos.

Other works returned to the tableau of people objects, in shadowy portraits of history, previous generations allowed a voice, the present tinged with layers as the body allows itself to age, as we examine the detritus for signs.

Light

The cycle is completed in what I will call the gold works. The illuminationist rewarded after discipline, denial, ascesis, with suddenness, illumination, immediacy. The trickster riding high on the visual puns returns to things, to objects. The mediation of the camera and the critical hinge of idolatry short-circuited by allowing things to make immediate impressions. These images are made without mediation, light source acting on light sensitive paper. As I mentioned earlier, the camera is made ego-less, and the artist demonstrates a way of speaking from within non-speaking, the camera obscura is the cloud of unknowing, a place and not a place, a word and not a word, and image and not an image. We can assert without certitude and without attaching importance to it, trust, and engage. In engaging the other, showing the line between art and the beholder to be the true illusion, Jones celebrates the muck of reality and offers not a program or an ideology, but a witness and example, offered in humility.

Sign of Angels reveals the structure of the image making process, a glass globe hanging from the ceiling, hovering over a circular steel table, like the patient, photography, anesthetized. The image and its origin are one the mediation is chance, chaos, the moment the light is turned on in the darkened room, the image appears, There is no magic, no alchemy, but simple immediacy and the direct connection between agent and object.

In revealing all aspects of agency and involvement, Jones is demystifying or humbling the author, reminiscent of the truth-to-materials dictum of post-minimalism but with key differences. The post-minimalists were looking for the clarified pivotal function, the a priori principles which made art art, inheriting in their reaction to Greenbergian formalism the same addiction to principles. The uncontrolled nature of Jones' image is more clearly related to the dada-ist injunction to destroy-create simultaneously. To accept the anti-image and the image while declaring one's role, agency, and, now, accountability.

Jones' images are resplendent, accessible, and carry a dangerous aura. The choice of gold betrays a faith, and a willingness to marvel, and the associations to the sacred are too obvious to overlook. His humour and craftsmanship tells us that, in spite of the arcane and mystical titles, he is not proposing that we accept these images as acheiropoeta. They are instead neither icons nor images. They are both sacred and secular, images emptied and glorious at the same time.