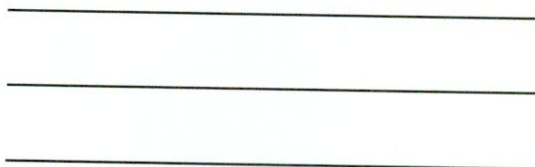
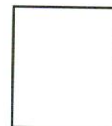


Sean Alward Ryan Taber

Sean Alward and Ryan Taber
September 10 to October 1 2005
Curated by Philip Martin & Sydney Hermant
Opening Friday, September 9 at 8pm
SWARM 2005
Or Gallery



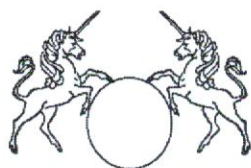
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The Or Gallery gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the BC Gaming Commission, the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council, the City of Vancouver, and all our members and volunteers. The Or Gallery is a member of the Pacific Association of Artist Run Centres.



AUTUMN QUARTERLY

- 02 **Sean Alward and Ryan Taber:**
 A Conversation
 Introduction by Philip Martin
- 08 **Glide Step**
 Jane Curtis
- 10 **An Explanation, Sort Of**
 Jane Lee

IMAGES

- COVER Ryan Taber, *November 1, 1755 9:20 AM*
- 04 Sean Alward, *eBay (item#6122849412)*
- 06 Ryan Taber, *Tomb of the Brother's Curaci after d'Annunzio's Puglia*
- 12 Sean Alward, *eBay (item #6124973848)*

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Sean Alward and Ryan Taber: A Conversation

Introduction by Philip Martin

The seed for an exhibition of works by Sean Alward and Ryan Taber was planted by my co-curator, Sydney Hermant, in a conversation we had in Los Angeles last year. Recognizing Alward and Taber's mutual interest in the taxonomy of images and their figuring power, Sydney suggested bringing the two artists' work together in dialogue at the Or. One thing that emerged in the course of the Or Gallery exhibition was both artists' pursuit of a kind of "natural order" in the formalisms and methodologies of contemporary and historical visual culture. Alward and Taber pay close attention to such diverse sources as discarded Polaroid snapshots, and eighteenth and nineteenth century mass culture imagery. In the context of this exhibition, these sources appear almost uncanny: the former strange and unintelligible without the normative codes of personal consumption; the latter floundering, its intended audience now long dead, looking totally unmoored, if not totally unhinged, to our modern eyes.

Given the complexity of the work in this exhibition, we are fortunate to have an email conversation that touches on Sean Alward and Ryan Taber's individual artistic practices and the similarities and differences in their ways of working. You will note that one key for Ryan Taber is his fascination for intellectual follies that, like their architectural cousins, contain within them the building blocks for often-fantastic interpretive and formal understandings. A key for Sean Alward, on the other hand, is the resistance of objects, which he confronts through *trompe l'oeil*, a painting technique that utilizes the viewer's uncertainty about what is real to assert the physicality of painting and the viewer's relation to it in literal space. Alward's evocation of the High Modernist colour field and an interest in the integrity of the picture plane only adds to the physical experience of painting suggested by his *trompe l'oeil* passages.

One artist buys his snapshots in eBay auctions; the other finds his material in eighteenth and nineteenth century classifications, scientific explorations, and lithographs of imagined world events by such figures as Piranesi. Together, Alward and Taber look into the ruins. What emerges is resistance—a resistance that sheds as much light on us as it does on the intellectual and artistic objects they find.

SEAN ALWARD What's going on with that giant bat thing in your sculpture by the door? What is it?

RYAN TABER Hey Sean, yeah, the bat thing. It's a restoration of a nineteenth century classificatory etching. The original etching was a restoration done by an obscure and otherwise unaccomplished natural philosopher called Newman, in 1843. It seems that Newman found a young Pterosaur skeleton that was being passed around by his contemporaries and decided to take a crack at a restoration. At this point natural philosophers were resistant to any sort of deviation from the determined natural order. Their strategy was to consider the physiological characteristics of the animal and to determine which family it was least unlike.

While everyone else was trying to position the animal based on the characteristics of its internal bone structure or the shape of its femur, Newman decides to take it to crazy town with a series of giant, abyssal vampire bats. These draw on Eurocentric mythology and folklore and in some cases ignore the physiological evidence in favour of a restoration that looks more similar to a Muppet than to anything produced by his contemporaries. This character manages to land in a widely distributed illustrated journal, maybe as an illustration of farce and maybe as a miscalculated specimen of a revolutionary taxonomic shift. Either way the presence of the image reverberates throughout the scientific community, having a dramatic affect on the articulation of wing structures in almost every restoration for the next 160 years. This physiological folly led to a chain of persistent taxonomic inconsistencies, demonstrating the inherent naturalizing power of pictorial representation.

SA I like this idea of the naturalizing power of pictorial representation. The picture plane has such an amazing ability to bend and shape our perception of the world outside itself. What I find even more interesting is how it is able to continue doing this even when we know rationally that it is a lie. So you have extruded this bat image from the picture plane of an old etching into a 3D model. How do you see the naturalizing power of representation functioning in your piece? How does the audience relate?

RT Well, I'm not sure if it actually produces the effect that we're talking about in a phenomenological sense, but the materiality and formal traits of the work are meant to suggest specific genres of hobbyist scale modeling that do. These languages of modeling (architectural, trains, military event, etc.) have grown from a lineage of scale representation that dates so far back in Western history that I think they're seen as a parallel and in some cases as an analogous structure to our pedagogic and historic agencies. Today, contemporary modeling languages are all about naturalization through projection, and in turn, compensation. In every culture that has a middle class, or an economy that allows for leisure activity, there's an endless string of niche hobbyist and reenactment pastimes. These seem to be based around exercising control and projecting responsibility for historicized events and

phenomenon on a scale we would be otherwise unable to effect. Each of these specializations has a complete vernacular of specific products attached, creating an economy based around not what we aspire to have, but rather, an economy of what we acknowledge we have no chance of ever effecting. This is really interesting to me because it generates a very literal model of the economic influences on the object of History. I imagine you must be considering this extensively in your eBay series. What role do you think the *trompe l'oeil* effect plays in your viewer's projection of the content, or the significance of each of your source photos to their original owners?

SA I guess, paradoxically, it's a reminder of their materiality, or presence in the world. I think the slightly clumsy lie of the *trompe l'oeil* technique does this better than if I'd painted them as larger images with "photographic sources" or even if I'd simply presented the actual photographs. The original artifacts are objects scaled for human hands to hold and pass around. A photograph is perhaps the ultimate device of compensation in that it allows an experience of a subject that is absent. Unlike some of the hobby



pastimes you allude to though, personal photographic snapshots serve to reify what their creators have actually experienced. For me this still works to some degree when I look at totally anonymous snapshots, like the ones I buy and collect from eBay. But even the idea of the "personal" nature of these things is very gray. It becomes apparent very quickly that the same tropes or image structures keep reappearing over and over: boy with girl, girl with dog, family gathering, man with fish, etc. They are like little dramas or plays we are all familiar with, so it's not difficult to empathize with the anonymous "actors." In terms of my translation of these things into paintings it comes back to my invocation of materiality. Paint represents an idea filtered through a human body that happens in the exact same space for both the painter and audience. When you stand in front of a Goya painting for example, the communication happens in the exact same space as it did for him—body-to-body. It's incredibly direct. The rootedness of painting increases the empathetic response. This transference and the ambiguity of subject and object positions in communication is what really interests me. It seems to me that your projects serve as a kind of vehicle for investigating historical modes of interpreting the world, such as Newman and his bat, etc. Perhaps they are also a way for you to experience things as filtered through an "other." Do you see it in this way at all?

RT I'm definitely interested in the filter you've mentioned. I'm not sure however if this filter is meant to be the experience of a specific historical persona, or more generally as the historical record as apparatus separate from the historian or the historian as subject. Either way, I guess it would be fair to say that I do glean some sort of personal enjoyment from reading about past events while considering all of the above. In this case however, I feel that my interest is in the latter two possibilities I've mentioned. I find the otherness assigned to the historical object an interesting placeholder in regard to psychological compensation. This otherness authenticates the proposed objectivity of the historians' perspective but is also constantly being redefined in accordance with new epistemic chapters. In other disciplines and at other times, the functionality of this philosophic other is less discrete moving from object to subject. One example of this may be early nineteenth century natural philosophy and the Kantian sublime. At this point in the development of contemporary scientific objectivity, aesthetics and reason were completely interdependent as a progressive machine. The languages of geology and romantic literature are an example of this symbiosis. In this case their synonymous development is due to economic, aesthetic, and geographic variables relating to tourism and leisure time. Here the construct of the sublime plays the role as mediator to this period's other, which would be naturally occurring geologic forms. While these two articulations (enlightenment reason and the sublime) may seem diametrically opposed, one being the assumption of reason and the other being assumed impervious to it, their formal similarities as consecutive languages of mediation tie them together when viewed through a historiographic lens. Finding instances in history where bodies of knowledge are only loosely developed or still being drafted creates a temporal chain of slippages which propose a flow that cyclically perpetuates itself as if it were an organism. I think that for the time being I'd consider this my other. In terms of your work, I'm interested in your reference to Goya. I immediately imagine Saturn and the physical relationship of the viewer to this aberrancy that has persisted through history. Do you have any interest in the way the materiality of the eBay series will relate to the viewer one hundred years from now? You've mentioned the subjects of your found photos form an index of typographic genres popular in a contemporary nostalgia. Do you see these having a capacity as a historical doctrine of your own?

SA "Contemporary Nostalgia" has a nice ring to it especially in regards to the temporal slippages you are referring to. I can't help but think that one of the reasons nostalgia and historiographic structures are so compelling is their ability to make things strange. They have the potential to make the banal bizarre and illuminate what may have seemed so ordinary it was invisible. The distance afforded by time, shifts in culture, economy etc. imply a separation of the viewer from what is being viewed, or enable the "proposed objectivity" of historic authentication you mention. Obviously my use of found photos plays on this, but I don't actually believe it. I think one of the reasons Goya's pictures still have the power to unnerve is their invocation of corporeal materiality, or the experience of our bodies in the world, that transcends the obscurities of their socio-historical context and trumps any kind of theoretical formulation. If I think how a lot of other visual art

that I like functions, it revolves around a similar dynamic. For example with Frank Stella or Barnett Newman, there is a mountain of art historical narrative that informs the work and is necessary to fully appreciate it. However, and for me this is a big “however,” there is also a lot about the work that lies outside of historical narrative and theory. Some of it is so visually self-evident in such a simple way that it can be a little hard to take. That is why it is so good. It is also one reason I used monochromes in my eBay paintings. They are the ground zero of pictorial perception and abstraction, both in formal and historical terms. Also, because of their blankness they can simultaneously function as art historical signifiers, spatial metaphors, and domestic interior decoration.

It seems to me that as much as your own work is packed with references and allusions to the research that compelled you to make it, it still turns on its physical manifestation and your ability to engage the viewer on those terms. For example, your Piranesi drawings are visually very dense and packed with a neurotic obsessiveness that pulls the viewer in and helps the work function in formal terms. After this, your specific narratives kick in and sustain it. How concerned are you that people understand those narratives?

RT This is a major consideration I take into account every time I begin a new body of research. I know that no matter what an artist provides as far as formal cues, it will rarely be compelling enough to motivate a viewer to look up the work’s references (if they exist). This is always a challenge, especially when the specificities of a period event, or in some cases, the period’s historical object, becomes a content provider for the work. One of the ways I’ve attempted to control this variable is working in formal practices with varying degrees of didacticism that have gone as far as docenting for a historical society. While this is an important part of the work, and a really weird experience for all involved parties, I also really enjoy making physical objects. A dialogue between the history of a specific articulation, such as scale model making, and the subject it’s representing, is also a way to allow the viewer to access the work through a corporeal experience on the object’s own terms. In all of the sculptures and drawings from the last year or two, the subjects are very specific, but they’re also picked because they’re more generally a sort of hegemon for their genus. I think this allows the piece to be read in a few different ways. First, through its materiality and aesthetic attributes. Secondly as symbol by relating the popular notions attached to each sign in the work, and finally through references to specific instances of historicization that create the narratives you mentioned. I think that even without



access to the third, the work is able to actuate a position that can be read by the viewer. In the Piranesi drawings, the viewer has immediate access to the attributes you formerly mentioned, density, aberration, mark making, etc. Next are the subjects, an architectural ruin and a shipwreck. Without knowing too much about architecture, one can tell that both the ship and the building are Eurocentric by their ornamentation and roughly date them to antiquity and the nineteenth or twentieth centuries by their designs. I think that just reading the two of these objects together creates a read for a viewer that is an essentialized model of the one produced from their content. Here the seamless collage of multiple, temporal image sources creates a slippage in the chain of signification from the original context.

I see this slippage as a cue that points to particularities surrounding the condition of the objects previous historicization. One of the reasons that I've used scale modeling in some of my recent work is the way in which this language functions for the viewer simultaneously as a reification of a space that the viewer can enter and as an abstract index or key to that space. One can adopt an omnipresent perspective or project their subjectivity to a specific position within the narrativized space. This seems to me to be very similar to the practice of collecting eBay images. Outside of the formal connotations that come with the images in your paintings having been purchased on eBay, how do you see the act of buying/collecting functioning in your practice?

SA Initially my collecting began as a sort of hobby. It was a visual activity that involved searching, selection, interpretation, speculation, etc., and I did it because it was fun. It was not consciously linked to my art practice exactly but it involved all of the same dynamics. Another element that I found intriguing was the voyeuristic aspect of it. There is some of that "omnipresent perspective" you mention, and the all seeing eye that observes and analyzes what is normally obscure. Complete strangers take the snapshots I'm collecting and some of them are quite personal and even embarrassing. With some of the weirder ones, I wonder why they were even taken, how did they end up in the hands of dealers, and what would the original owners think if they knew people were buying their personal mementos on eBay? Painting as a medium is also deeply voyeuristic. Arguably one of the primary forces behind the last five centuries of Western European painting has been the sublimation of this impulse through the motif of the nude. Historically, Western art has been concerned with observing human activity, and specifically the human figure. This has led to such bizarre situations as the visual landscape of the Vatican for example. It is an enclave of several thousand celibate men and women, the epicenter of Catholic moral dogma, and it is permeated by acres of writhing nude flesh in the form of frescoes, oil paintings, and sculpture. In the past, all of this was justified through elaboration in mythological and biblical narrative and further buttressed by liberal humanist notions concerning art's power to enlighten and uplift. What the priestly caretakers probably wouldn't have explicitly admitted was that these artifacts addressed the entire spectator, and not just their mind or some vague notion of "spirit." I like art that is able to integrate all of these things, and I also aspire to do that to some degree in my own practice. I try to think about how art can address the viewer in a holistic way.

Glide Step

Jane Curtis

If one thing were to sum up public celebration, something that stirs people to wave paper flags, cheer, and throw ticker tape at their hometown heroes, it could be the humble marching band—though the imaginary ego of a marching band would hardly be described as “humble.” The job of the marching band is to loudly announce with military show tunes that something is happening or about to happen, and draw the crowd reverently in, Pied Piper-style, to partake in group celebration.

Like the events they play in, marching bands are loud and flashy. Shiny buttons, spit-and-polish shoes, and brass instruments that gleam in the sun and blast their notes noisily over five blocks or so. Marching bands can be seen performing at military parades, football games, public street parades, and amusement parks. Spot the odd one out?

Marching bands at amusement parks are one of the inspirations behind *Glide Step*. In an amusement park at regular daily intervals, a marching band will trot out, march neatly up and down the main “street,” belt out some oldies-but-goodies, and trot back into those rarely seen parts, Backstage Land and Crappy Staff Accommodation Land. But what did the marching band celebrate? Nothing. They merely simulated celebration in a place dedicated to the reproduction of reality; one that is pristine, perfect and most important of all, fun. The purpose of *Glide Step* is precisely this—to provoke and examine reactions to reproductions of public celebration.

Reproductions also lie within the marching band itself—alas, marching bands do not actually “march.” *Glide step* is a step used by marching bands to mimic marching, so as not to disrupt the rhythm of their music. The heel is gently brought to the ground with the toe pointed, and then rolled forward onto the toes before the foot is lifted. The glide step is also used when the band is not moving but pretends to march on the spot, so creating the copy of a movement.

Just as simulacrum is a copy of a reality that has become a more realistic ver-

glide step : performance by biliana velkova



sion of the original, *Glide Step* is a copy of a copy. The highly choreographed foot movement that mimics marching and successfully convinces us of its authenticity despite its fakeness is a simulacrum of movement, and its performance within Velkova's performance is part of a larger deceptive reality—a celebration of nothing.

Seoul 2005

An Explanation, Sort Of

Jane Lee

The title, "Arm in Arm," came from Heather Docherty, I believe. It was a kind of joke that somehow stuck and I'm not exactly sure what she meant when she emailed it to me but it makes me think of two (or more) people, gaily skipping down a grassy hill on a summer afternoon. It also makes me think of the kind of familiarity that inevitably forms with people you've known for a long time.

Most of these people I have known for a long time, and these connections are what first brought me to thinking about these artists for an exhibition. The practices represented are all individual: some people make work that stems from theoretical and critical analyses of art and culture while others work more intuitively. The commonality, however, lies in the artists' interest in an outside world that provides a wealth of information to discover and re-present as photographs, drawings, video, sculpture, and so on. Another crucial similarity is the artists' consideration of the viewer: the work asks for one's interest and, in return, offers the viewer something new to contemplate.

The following is intended as a little introduction to the artists, some of their past work, and my relationship to each of them.

Kathleen Ritter and I have a long-standing collaborative project and though our methodologies are completely different – she works logically and with careful research while I work more intuitively and often without much planning – we are always able to reach compromises and continue on. Kathleen's *Docent Project* was a humorous reenactment of the role of a docent in a gallery – she herself played the docent (someone hired by a gallery to interpret artwork for a viewer) for an exhibition of work produced by her peers in the Masters of Fine Arts program at Western University, for which she convinced the university to pay her a small wage. A large body of Kathleen's past work is performance based, often resulting in work like the *Absolutely Free Advice Project* with the Ladies' Afternoon Art Society, in which the Ladies offer free advice to citizens across Canada.

Leslie Grant, who collaborates with **Al Bersch** on a photo-documentary project about Fernie BC, takes a similarly reasoned approach and shares with Kathleen an interest in ideas around community. Leslie and Al lived in Fernie during the summer of 2005 and asked for volunteers from the town to contribute to their project, thus forming relationships with their subjects, as opposed to the observational and removed positions of traditional documentary. I am interested in what will result from this collaboration and how much of their working relationship will be evident.

Allison Hrabluik and **Zin Taylor** are also working together, this time on a short animation in the style of Malcolm McLaren, based on a Heinrich Böll story. Allison's past animation work has included a study of an abattoir and what she imagined could be going on inside. These animations were composed of meticulously constructed 3D sets and hundreds of cutout photographs of people. Her fascination with the slightly morbid combined with her and Zin's humour are what I look forward to in their work.

Heather Docherty, Allison, and I created *Heavy Pets Presents: Petting Zoo* (2001), first for Market Gallery in Glasgow, and then for Stride Gallery in Calgary, as an offsite project. We painted, sewed, and glued what we felt were appropriate animals for a petting zoo, resulting in a strange menagerie that we encouraged children and their parents (among others) to pet. This aesthetic of the slightly pathetic and strange is what I imagine I'll see in Heather's new drawings. As she puts it, "Motivation tends to stem from philosophical thought and serious intent, which later manifests itself in ridiculous disguise."

Heather and Shireen Taylor suggested that **Kevin Pollock's** work would be a good fit for the exhibition. I immediately liked the images they sent me of his sculptures. They suggest homemade shelters, a hiding place from the world. They are melancholic and alluring at the same time, offering a refuge that can't really be taken.

Shireen Taylor's work varies from collaborative projects like the bookwork *Tutu*, with Heather Docherty, to her own practice, which is sculpture. She writes, "Circumstances, such as the pressures of full-time employment and developing a project as involved as the *Tutu* publication have had a significant effect on the ways in which I have approached and developed my individual practice. Relating more closely to the themes within much of my collaborative practice, I have produced sketches, diagrams and explanations of ideas, thoughts and dreams, which though clear and lucid in my mind, become fragmented and oblique in execution."

I am interested in how these various approaches will play off each other. I am interested in how the outside world will make itself apparent, whether through a photograph, the props in a film, the subject of a drawing, or the materials gathered for a sculpture. I am interested in how these choices will create meaning for the artists and the viewer, and how it will influence the relationships between the work when it all finally comes together. For me, this exhibition is the creation of a temporary community between the artists, the work, myself, and the viewer, based on the similarities and differences that are inherent to any gathering.



CONTRIBUTORS

Jane Curtis is a daily editor, irregular blog writer, and occasional crafter, photographer and gardener. Find out her star sign at <http://www.saucybeige.com>.

Sean Alward is a Vancouver based artist. He studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Cooper Union New York City, and completed his MFA at the University of British Columbia. He is currently forging psychic links with complete strangers.

Jane Lee is a Vancouver-based artist, writer, and curator.

Philip Martin is the co-owner of Cherry and Martin Gallery in Los Angeles. He has written for a number of international art publications and regularly curates exhibitions, including, most recently, "American Stars N' Bars" at Chapman College (CA). He loves Vancouver and cannot wait to come back.

Ryan Taber lives and works in Los Angeles and is represented by Mark Moore Gallery in Santa Monica. Taber recieved his BFA from the University of Hartford in 2000 and an MFA from Cal Arts in 2004.