

VANCOUVER
HOWARD MUSSELLS
"Caddis Case"
OR Gallery

From: C Magazine #12

Winter 1987

This is the first exhibition of sculpture from Quebec artist Howard Mussells that I have seen since his 1980 installation at Mercer Union. For the Toronto exhibition he transformed an entire gallery wall into a monumental concrete wasp's nest, similar in form to an oversized Pan's Pipe with body-sized holes piercing large vertical tunnels. The new work is similarly preoccupied with the human-insect metaphor and shares some formal characteristics as well, but is relatively modest by comparison: smaller in size and humble in the choice of materials. These characteristics are strangely appropriate, directly related in an inverse proportion to the modesty of the allegoric intention.

Mussells has suspended the single sculpture at the centre of the gallery, at approximately head level, hanging from one strand of monofilament fishing line that extends downward through a small circular hole cut in the ceiling like a puppet string or the more obvious fishing analogy. The suspended object itself is small, perhaps only a foot in length and three inches wide, a hollow cylindrical tube. The inner armature, a found cardboard tube, is surrounded by a thick richly textured surface built up from sticks, twine and other detritus, all bonded together in a syrupy looking, yet entirely rigid coating of translucent amber coloured epoxy resin. The frozen drips and runs of the epoxy resin evoke images of natural secretion, of biological process.

The intention of Mussells' work is broadly allegorical deriving from a metaphor that operates within the confines of the *Caddis Case* reference. The reference is not as obscure as it first seems, being a relatively familiar one outside the art context. To an urbanite art audience it may be necessary to explain that a Caddis Case is a dwelling built by a Caddis Fly during its aquatic larval period. In construction it employs any available material, cementing the whole together with a silken secretion (Mussells' epoxy resin). When the Caddis worm enters the pupal state it removes the ends from the case and takes flight as a winged fly. A representation of the Caddis Case is a well known bait used by fly fishermen.

The metaphor functioning here recalls to us the quasi-occult notion of creativity and hence art as the product of a period of incubation and personal metamorphosis and likens gallery activity to that of a fisherman. Within fly-fishing terminology the artificial flies, the bait, are divided into two categories: Attractors and Deceivers. Attractors can be likened to Abstract images, in that they are frankly Lures and not copied from a specific. Deceivers can be likened to conventional Representation in that they are patterned after nature. Mussells' sculpture functions as a Deceiver on several levels; representing the insect dwelling, although this may not be obvious to the typical spectator to whom the work may be more representative of a kind of Naturist



Howard Mussells: *Caddis Case*; 1986. Photo: Robin Peck.

art typical of the mid-1970s, derived from minimalist or Process art as in the work of Newton Harrison or Allan Sonfist. The work functions as an Attractor, a Lure, by presenting the spectator with a generalized impression of an art object, as bait. The audience for this work is effectively lured into the gallery which with its large street level glass window is temporarily transformed into the theatrical image of an aquarium. The metaphor of the fisherman allows one to critically estimate the respective roles of artist, gallery and spectator, accurately and with a sense of good humour.

ROBIN PECK