

city boy

Based on a True Story

Euan Macdonald

Curated by Christina Ritchie

Art Gallery of Ontario

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Euan Macdonald seems to have bypassed discussions of whether current culture is in a vacuum, and come to the happy conclusion that the overdetermined semiotic wasteland we inhabit is our culture. In *Based on a True Story*, a solo exhibition held last spring as part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's *Present Tense* series, Macdonald dealt with some quietly-lived boyhood experiences and the telling melodramatic marks of suburban delusions. And he was happy to slather around in the puddles of a positive attitude and the general fiction of a rosy utopia.

Coconut Trees was a painting that rippled with giddy happiness. Tiny palm trees were etched out in black across a plane of whiteness and in a pattern that looked like a rectangle of wallpaper in a home-decorating book. On the same wall was *Heap*, a painting that showed a stash of discarded objects piled up in the distance and floating in a sea of white. Both works emitted the subtle emotions of a material make-believe with just a whiff of disquieting irony.

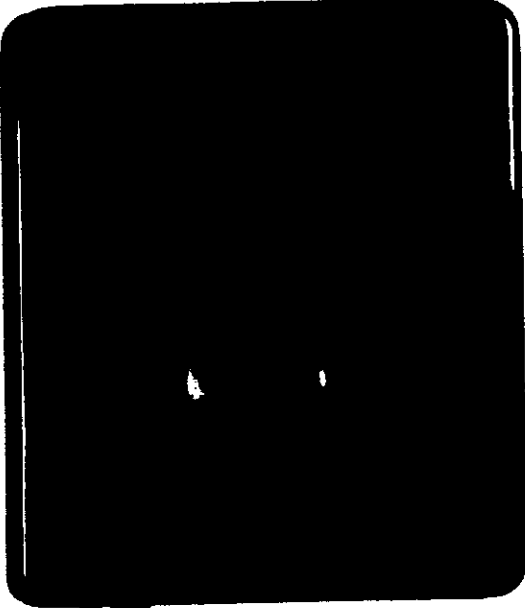
To know Macdonald's work is to know something about suburban existence and the stages of disenfranchising oneself from it with urban cynicism. Macdonald was born in 1965, two years after me, which makes me think whatever references I might think of when I see, for instance, his two model airplanes suspended, one on top of the other and hanging in a window, are very near to his childhood mem-

ories. In my case, *Land of the Giants* reminds me of the two taxidermied baby crocodiles my brother had from a family trip to Florida. He liked to set them up on his bookshelf in a similar 11-year-old boy's wet dream joke. Macdonald hones in on with his humping aircrafts; one toy saddling another like-toy.

It's that kind of thinking, of coming up with matched life experiences, that makes me wonder whether Macdonald's work is only readable to those with a similar background and time line. But he is also smack in the middle of the current, 90s art stream of work that delivers objects of deliberately modest and ephemeral proportions, work that is openly inane, mockish in its exaggerated anonymity, and filled with deadpan humour aimed pointedly at social ennui. I'm thinking of artists like Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler here. Or even more so, Steve Reinke, who like Macdonald is more inclined to pump up the happy side of suburban disillusionment rather than pick at its dysfunctional underbelly.

Banality and excess — both the loathsome and the glorious — provides Macdonald with a vast amount of junk to pilfer through as material for reimagination. The *Present Tense* exhibition seemed like only a small amount of what Macdonald must have stashed in his studio. Christina Ritchie wrote in her essay that everything in *Based on a True Story* was made by the artist in just a few months, a comment that suggests Macdonald is prolific, his poetic eye constantly matching form to content and that he works fast so as not to detach the work from his impulse to choreograph a constant stream of ideas, something like an endlessly bouncing yellow rubber ball — a metaphor of Macdonald's own design shown in a looped video titled *Ball*.

City Boy and the *Blockheads* are probably the best examples of how Macdonald twists his generational metaphors. In the most economic of materials, *City Boy* manages to find soft-lit emotion in vacuum packaging. A series of plastic rectangles hang on one wall, each painted on the inside in



City Boy, Euan Macdonald, 1996

maudlin, suburban living room tones — aqua, daisy yellow, pound cream, ivory — but with the exception of two spots on each rectangle that are left blank, like a pair of blockhead eyes. *City Boy* is slightly larger and hung on the facing wall as either authoritarian ring leader or over-sized outcast. There's a cunning subversion in these works, of taking such innocuous and unnameable trash objects that have since lost any functional purpose and turning them into sweet, loveable, symbolically-loaded readymades.

I liked *Based on a True Story* immediately. I like the way Macdonald treats garbage like loot. Garbage is to him an instantaneous universe of material called *Heap*, that unidentifiable stash he painted as flotsam. *Heap* sits there like Macdonald's dream pile of unpilfered goods just waiting for the taking.

Catherine Osborne