
**MICHAEL A. ROBINSON:
THROW GENRE**

*Quartier Éphémère: Fonderie
Darling, Montréal*

by PETER DUBÉ

In a sense, any experience of art is an experience of “doubleness”: you encounter both the object and the space containing it, and must process both the material and the marks of a consciousness that shaped it, the weight of art history, and the pressure of contemporaneity. While there are undoubtedly many other factors at play in viewing a work, this doubleness is heightened in a contemporary context where the bodily fact of some *thing* present before a viewer must, inevitably, wrestle with the triumphal power of the discursive “environment” that surrounds it. This situation can turn even very simple moments of observation into a kind of perpetual encounter with doppelgängers: every piece exhibited is simultaneously an uncanny echo of something almost but not quite itself and, though this is not, admittedly, an easy feeling, it is a rich and complex one. Moreover, it is a complexity that lends considerable lustre to the work of Michael A. Robinson—seen notably in his recent exhibition at the Darling Foundry, *Throw Genre*.

Throw Genre foregrounds a provocative concern with doublings of this sort, and a host of other dichotomies. The exhibited pieces resemble each other by being assemblages of the same object, brought together and entwined in various combinations. As a result, they are joined as if working towards, but not quite achieving, a hypothetical and synthetic unity that is resonant with subtle oppositions. Such twinned tension was palpable in the very placement of the work

within the main space of the Foundry: two large sculptural installations were sited at either end of the exhibition hall like a pair of terminals. And oppositional placement was only the beginning, since the artist's approach to accumulation is also particularly charged. The first piece, *Mise en scène* (2009), was built largely of wooden easels, stacked, leaned, piled one atop the other, and climbing toward the gallery's distant ceiling along a resolutely vertical axis. The second, presiding over the other end of the gallery, and set before a curtain, was titled *Opening Night* (2009). Here, an imposing collection of shimmering music stands was tangled together in an orgy of metallic arms and legs and panels, spread out along a horizontal plane and accompanied by a soundtrack taken from the Cassavetes film of the same name. The placement of these pieces and their opposing reaches worked to highlight both the relationship between the works and the dynamics of the expansive gallery space, and, given this set-up, there was little to discourage the viewer from reading them in tandem and wrestling with the push and pull they implied. Moreover, both installations seemed to embody contradictions in their very facture. In any spread-out mass lurks a fundamental question: is what one sees *expanding* (moving away from some hypothetical origin point) or *implosion* (being pulled towards some central point)?

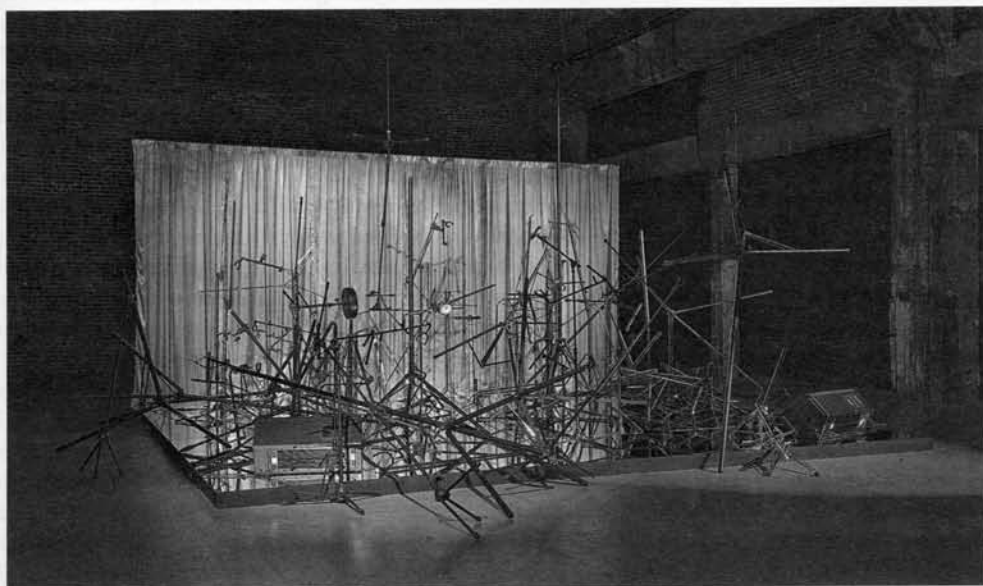
Similar concerns seem to operate, albeit in a different iteration, in the selection of

Robinson's Letraset drawings included in the show. Two large-scale series (one appropriately enough focused on circular figures, the other on more linear forms—creating yet another sort of dyad) were hung on facing walls, as if staring each other down and echoing the placement of the sculptures. Given the artist's use of Letraset as a drawing medium, they too become a kind of accumulation, of both a mass-marketed commercial product (albeit an increasingly obsolete one) and of tiny black marks on a white background.

As such, the show's materials stirred up additional questions, such as what to make of the wood of the easels versus the metal of the music stands? One is more "natural," one is "manufactured," but both are associated with "making" itself, specifically with the making of visual and musical art. Moreover, the material evocation of doubleness is taken to its limit by the large sculptural installations' incorporation of mirrors. In a number of places, *Mise en scène's* tower of easels rests on mirrored tiles, which reflect the bases of the apparatus and a number of small scenes peopled with wooden manikins fixed to its underside. Looking at them, one has the sense of peeking into a hidden, honeycombed parallel world of tiny, busy rooms, with all of the rich allusions that suggests presented front and centre. By contrast, *Opening Night* rests in its entirety atop a broad mirrored surface, reflecting the whole riotous body of the piece and creating a different percep-

tual game altogether. Rather than revealing a different world, the use of a mirror to extend, reproduce, and complicate a more familiar one, adds an illusion of a secondary space and plays against the cavernous vault of the Foundry's ceiling. The use of the same material to achieve quite different results turns the heat up on the thematic and formal stakes present everywhere in *Throw Genre*. Themes, one should recall, that are deadpanned and thrust forward by their titles (for example, both *Mise en scène* and *Opening Night* make overt reference to the theatre, the cinema, and other forms of performing arts) are explicit reminders of the show's implicit concern with representation, reflection and recreation.

So the question becomes, why this focus on the uncanny doubleness of art? Why build it so determinedly into the undeniably elegant matrix of *Throw Genre*? After all, there may well be no more venerable, not to mention hoary and overly investigated, trope in criticism than the notion that art holds up the mirror to life. However, Robinson's exploration does something different: it works to subvert the tautological strain in the cliché of nature and art as simple reflections of each other by underlining the perceptual apparatus behind it, by stressing that a mirror is only a mirror if someone looks into it. In doing so, the artist stresses, the most pragmatic (both philosophically and colloquially) of aesthetic values: that art, as a social practice, can only *mean* something when someone experiences it. And relational aesthetics aside, this is the way it has always been. The strategic placement of Robinson's installations and drawings serves to surround the viewer, placing him or her quite literally at the centre of things. Similarly, because the mirrors lie flat on the floor, they are only activated, as it were, by the viewer's approach, when he or she comes close enough to them to bend over and look. By so deliberately staging the rapport of one work to the other, or others, and highlighting the perceptual impact of this rapport, Robinson reminds us that reflection, both the kind that takes place in the mirror, and the kind that takes place in the mind, requires a presence, a relationship, a context—suggesting that behind all these "doubles" lies something else. If most encounters with contemporary art feel a little like run-ins with doppelgängers, a meeting with Robinson's work highlights to what a significant extent that uncanny little spectre might just be us. And that's enough to throw *any genre* a little off. ♦



Michael A. Robinson, *Opening Night*, 2009
PHOTO: RICHARD-MAX TREMBLAY