

ART

Reading Between the Signs

EXHIBITION REVISITS A NOW CLASSIC TEXT ABOUT HOW TO LOOK
BY DEBORAH MACLEOD

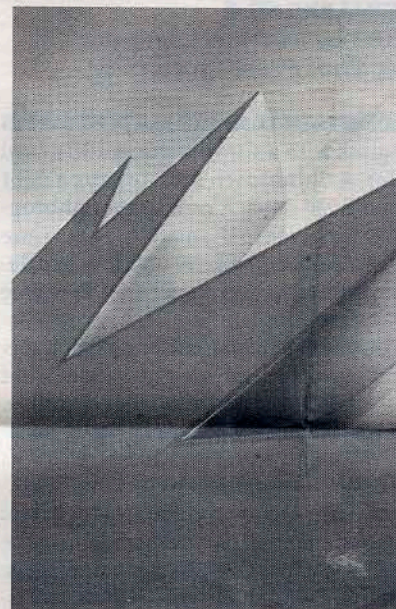
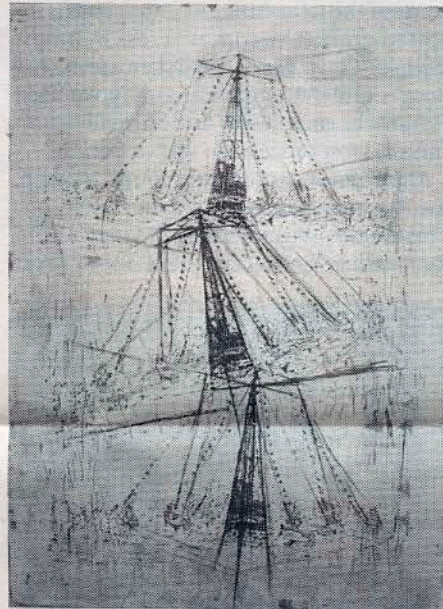
WAYS OF SEEING

At Maryland Art Place through Feb. 9

JOHN BERGER, THE KENNETH CLARK OF modern visual culture, created and narrated a series for BBC in the mid-'70s titled *Ways of Seeing*. The popular series eventually became an influential book, which soon became a canon for discussing the heterogeneous interpretations of Western art. Maryland Art Place draws the name of its current show from this source.

Whenever a show initiates from such specific reference material, organizers, visitors, and reviewers have some obligation to investigate and comprehend the source. MAP's *Ways of Seeing* is a satisfying presentation of art on its own. That should be said from the start. With three rooms of work by Jeremy Drummond, Rusty Wallace, and Tonia Matthews, its viewer contentment is well established. But you may feel slightly perplexed or dislocated by the truncated relationship of the show itself to its stated inspirational foundation. Perhaps everyone once had to read Berger's tome and is way past this near ancient matter of attribution. Still, any contemporary or historic art exhibition could hang with Berger's title. So why do these three artists do so, particularly in the curatorial mind that birthed this exhibition and borrowed the name?

Berger was fascinated by symbolic hierarchies: how primary images gain supremacy through authority, privilege, and the illusions of ownership. He was interested in the influences that periods of fashion and dominant politics play in the interpretation of scenery, ideology, and icon, and how time and modern point of view are incapable of maintaining the original milieu of response for which works were once made. He proposed that scholarly efforts to describe a painting meet with a romantic "mystification" of the work, which makes cognition, basically, an assumption. And assumption, he seemed to suggest, was always a life force in art. He emphasized the function of dominant class power on the art machine and marveled at the seductions of luxury and



ROADS TO SOMEWHERE: WORKS BY JEREMY DRUMMOND (TOP) AND RUSTY WALLACE (BOTTOM RIGHT) FEEL PART OF THE SAME DISCUSSION—TONIA MATTHEWS (BOTTOM LEFT) NOT SO MUCH.

glamour for whom few appeared imperious, determining that the popular patronage-maker convention was "You are what you have." From his time on, the convenience marriage of Western art/design/publicity offered providence for that. According to Berger, "When we see a landscape, we situate ourselves in it."

Drummond's smart, numbing landscapes are of exurbia. The ones he has in *Ways of Seeing* are in Brampton, Ontario, but they could be anywhere in North America. With their homogeneous vacuum vistas but earnest residents, these works manage to be entirely sublime and poignant. Drummond's unique auto paint on steel and photo-decal scenes often consist of nothing

more than a lone, towering street sign, announcing some intersection and violating the purity of a glaringly sunny or hazy sky. Creations of some developer mogul and his community planning committee, the street names are a bizarre collection of multicultural nomenclature. "Culture Crescent" and "Whitewash Way" are two such streets that collide at some questionably fortunate corner. Other nexuses of yearning-turned-address include "Honeymoon Dr." with "Fidelity Ave." and "El Camino" with "Crown Victoria Dr." These roads meet in the middle of nowhere—fallow fields that await future construction—or amid a phalanx of housing that never considered discrepancy to hold any virtue.

Drummond paints this anesthetized pastel environment in hues carefully selected from Martha Stewart's color charts. In his video installation the Canadian artist introduces some of the neighbors in this contrived community. They stand in a sterile plaza and attempt to look us straight in the eye for several uncomfortable minutes. Their

features disclose their humanity and hint at formerly rich cultures. Some appear Latino, others appear to have traditional European characteristics, a few look Middle Eastern. We meet them through Drummond's lens, knowing—because we situate ourselves in every landscape—their unmentioned hopes to live "the dream" in some measure: a package-deal dream that has been created for them, one that purposefully leaves little room for their own impact.

Where else is Berger in this? He's possibly crouched in the cramped aspiration that each individual might possess, in whatever might be purchased and taken home. You can't specifically spot Berger in Drummond's work, but you can sense him, implied in the minor poetry of a promising paint sample and the inherently vested status of a street sign. Are homeowners now Berger's dominant class, clustered in countless impacted warrens, who return from shopping trips with their parallel items of comfort, benign glamour, and sedation? Or is it instead the brokers who convince with and dispense the limited sets of choices?

Another manifestation of modern culture's iconography is revealed in Wallace's sets of ideograms and semiotics. Silhouetted cutouts and paintings offer graphic motifs that surface from the ground like the messages in a Magic 8-Ball window. They boast suspicious insights in their cryptic simplicity. Like Drummond, Wallace relies on flat planes of candy color to indicate vastness and temptation. Comic-book explosions, Rorschach-type compositions of faces and words, and punctuation marks leave their usual contexts and become portraiture. Wallace's agenda interfaces with Berger's ideas about assumption in a micro sense: How can one assume to comprehend the message in a complex work when even the simplest elements contain ambiguity? Wallace's elaborate wall installation "Dialogue" is a grouping of 45 13-by-18-inch drawings that depict a couple of opposing egg "heads." Rendered in complementary neon colors, the eggs banter through juxtaposition, surrounded by a variety of silhouetted art symbols. Most are familiar shapes—Duchamp's bicycle wheel and chocolate grinder, Brancusi's bird in space, some Giacometti figures, and Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona chair among them. Wallace sets up affinities and dualities in his placement of the subjects so that you may situate yourself in his cognitive landscape, re-enacting the eggs' dialogue.

Matthews' series of intaglio prints focusing on childhood experience are also presented. Inspired by a play about an amusement park experience the artist saw several years back, the works focus on little girls in roller coasters and birthday cakes. These are nicely worked images, with luscious, dynamic surfaces, but they do not mesh well with the ideological and semiotic arguments in this show, and perhaps should be considered more intimately and justly on another occasion. ★

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