



Brian Groombridge's untitled work is a sculpture captured on its way to becoming.

VISUAL ARTS: REVIEW: BRIAN GROOMBRIDGE

Could this be a radio? Maybe just for today

GARY MICHAEL DAULT, The Globe and Mail

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"It is best to reach Brian by e-mail," advised Susan Hobbs, whose Toronto gallery is currently showing new work by sculptor Brian Groombridge. Groombridge isn't the kind of guy you can just get on the phone. In that regard, he's rather like his work - which is both open and approachable, but also elusive.

In fact, it's probably not even desirable to try to pin it down, to whack away at it like a pinata, until it spills out all of its meanings. For a great part of the sensuous and intellectual engagement Groombridge's work quickens in the viewer lies, paradoxically, in the degree to which it withholds easy, obvious readings.

For years now Brian Groombridge has been making an enigmatic kind of art that cheerfully leads you toward its apparent "solution"—only to dance away again. I doubt, in fact, that the veteran Toronto-based artist believes in the desirability of the viewer's total and transparent penetration of any of his pieces. As Groombridge says in an essay (The Entropy of Art) by Siobhan Roberts written for the catalogue accompanying the current exhibition, if the viewer is somehow able to crack a work's total meaning, "it doesn't bloom any more."

There are three works in the Hobbs exhibition. Let's look at just one of them—the formally pleasing construction in painted aluminum that, while the work is officially untitled, everyone seems to refer to as "the radio." It's small— only 13 x 18.5 x 10.5 centimetres—but has as much sculptural presence and authority as a work 50 times its size. The piece consists of one vertical plane which is painted red on one side (the presumed "outside") and on its edges, and

yellow on the other (the presumed "inside). It has a big round hole in it. Abutted to it is a horizontal plane, which is slightly less wide than the vertical one and is painted blue.

It is also important—probably—to note that the piece has thus been painted entirely in the primary colours—red, yellow and blue—which, you may recall, are the only colours that Mondrian and the rigorously pure Dutch modernist De Stijl group ever allowed for their painting, sculpture and architectural projects. ("... Primary colour," they announced in their journal De Stijl in 1917, "simply means colour in its most basic aspect.") Clearly, for Groombridge too, colour is being used here, not as chromatic cosmeticism, not as decor, but, rather, as the idea of colour for its own sake: as a way of announcing, almost abstractly, that his little construction is indeed coloured, as opposed to not being so.

So what do we have? A small, elegantly proportioned structure which could be construed, if you wanted to see it as a kind of invitation to further speculation and rumination, as more than now meets the eye. You could see it as half of something, for example. Because the hole in the vertical plane is more or less dial-sized, I suppose you could fill the thing out in your mind until you finally had a little mantel radio sitting all bright and shiny before you. (But why would you want to do that? Is our rage for representation so insistent, so undeniable?)

It's no use asking Groombridge about it. "I really don't set out to be obscure," he told me when we finally connected by phone. But Groombridge sees perception as elastic, as allowing things to move, both physically and in meaning, depending on their setting, context, and the time you give them. He likes the idea of things being in flux, of their not being fixed. "I love the arrested moment," he says. Meaning that moment when just to look at something stops it in its tracks - like slicing one frame from a film.

Groombridge's tiny, shelf-like construction lives in one of those arrested moments. It exists in one of those spots of time when, even if it really is on its way to becoming a radio, it has paused for a bit in order to be two slabs of aluminum, screwed together and painted red, blue and yellow.

Brian Groombridge is at Susan Hobbs until Nov. 29.

Susan Hobbs Gallery