

## Scott Lyall

POWER PLANT, TORONTO  
Dan Adler



View of Scott Lyall, "The Color Ball," 2008, Power Plant, Toronto.

**"THE COLOR BALL"**—Scott Lyall's most ambitious exhibition to date—might be seen as a culminating event for a young conceptualist whose oeuvre has been increasingly recognized for its formally sophisticated resistance to the workings of the culture industry. Curated by the Power Plant's director, Gregory Burke, the show took the form of a single installation resembling an entertainment venue or stage set, seen before a performance or a fete of some kind. This condition of anticipation lent a feeling of temporal displacement to a display that did not contain "finished" products. Rotating party lights were positioned overhead on two huge metal armatures like those used in concert halls. A bunch of circular tabletops and trays were stacked up alongside a smoke machine, which spewed vapor that seemed to dance about in the movements of the lights above. Folded white linens, fine china encased in plastic, and oversize martini glasses awaited lipsticked mouths, hors d'oeuvres, and cocktails.

These ready-made objects competed compositionally with a centrally located series of low-slung, hard-edged rectangular sculptures with angled ends. Composed of alternating layers of raw MDF and pink Styrofoam, each of these striped units had been exactly cut with a laser; they were placed in a rough zigzag configuration. Too horizontally elongated to serve as conventional museum plinths and too low to the ground to function as buffet tables, the objects seemed akin to retail display platforms—maybe for shoes and clothing—or perhaps portions of unassembled stage sets. In recent months, at venues including New York's SculptureCenter and Ballroom Marfa in Marfa, Texas, Lyall has proved himself adept at employing these highly abstract shapes—which he calls "fills"—in ways that open them up to such varied identities. In Toronto, he has either left the platforms bare or adorned them with materials, often derived from the shipping and catering industries, that stray from the easy satisfactions of consumerist desire. On one of the largest fills, viewers encountered the reflective sheen and utterly mundane shape of some neatly folded black tablecloths as well as a few air-filled plastic bags used for packing the sort of sought-after luxury items that were pointedly absent from the installation. This sense of absence was further inflected by such details as a decomposing wreath of autumnal leaves propped against one of the fills. On the floor nearby stood a nearly depleted bottle of Gold Liqueur, a knockoff of Goldschläger, the schnapps known for its ostentatious inclusion of flakes of precious metal. Tableaux like this prompted one to read the installation as a decaying still life, its motifs

associated with the excesses of the wealthy and of art institutions—the likes of which have become familiar in recent years and, in our current moment, are bound to seem all the more provocative.

Indeed, the central group of fills recalled the monumental table featured in Judy Chicago's installation *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79—although, unlike Chicago's work, Lyall's did not seem particularly polemical, even as it appeared to suggest that the party is over, or perhaps never happened at all. Included with the supporting documentation provided by the artist—posted in a clerestory adjacent to the gallery—was a photograph showing the in-progress installation of *The Dinner Party*; the image depicted folded table linens and shipping containers and seemed a far more relevant source than Chicago's finished work. Lyall's project, after all, is in some sense about the process by which cultural products, like Chicago's, cohere as shape and ideology, and how they come into being in relation to changing minds, sexualities, and bodies. This theme of constant flux is in keeping with the artist's method of designing compositions on a computer screen. The technique ensures that the work exists in the first place as an immaterial signifier that is capable of inhabiting a wide range of sites and moments. For as long as they remain contained within digital plans, and perhaps beyond that point, Lyall's projects should thus be understood as only provisionally "filled" with content, in a manner recalling the strategies of Daniel Buren, whose (similarly striped) works suppress the desire to definitively assign aesthetic value or historical meaning.

And so one tentatively wandered about "The Color Ball," uneasily probing its components for signifiers that speak with aesthetic or semantic confidence. Situated atop a shipping crate were prints featuring converging stripes, but these were crumpled to the extent that they denied use value as framable commodities. Hanging on the wall was a beat-up circular wooden tabletop. Scanning the marks, scuffs, and scratches on its surface—features recalling similarly liminal gestures made by Daniel Spoerri, himself a visual artist, theater designer, and organizer of banquets who also was fond of reorienting furniture from floor to wall—one was led to speculate productively about the very notion of the pictorial. Such elements, however, seemed to exist in a semantic holding pattern, or in a state of anticipation, awaiting either coherent narrative or commodity status. Lyall's impressive project recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's characterization of the grotesque as a degradation of experience, a dynamic condition existing somewhere between the conditions of death and rebirth. The grotesque is a reality that is never permitted to fully form, that is always coming into being, and that therefore may serve as the basis of a critique of the relentless drive toward spectacle.

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