



ROULA PARTHENIOU

HOUSE &
HOME &
GARDEN

TONGUE AND GROOVE

JON DAVIES

As a child I endured myriad problems with my vision. Beyond having surgery on both eyes, and being forced to wear a bandage-style patch over one (making me appear more like a Cyclops than a pirate, sadly), I was subjected to numerous ophthalmological tests. One involved grabbing the wings of an oversize fly (a test for depth perception); another found me searching within circles of coloured dots for numbers (colour blindness). While the tests were oddly fun, they dramatically demonstrated the disorienting—even world-unravelling—effects of perception stubbornly refusing to line up with concrete reality. Anticipating the post-structuralist theory I would later absorb in university, I understood at a young age that each individual's unique eyes and brain afford a distinct point-of-view. A single objective reality seems as fleeting and ungraspable as those infernal fly's wings.

My first encounters with the work of Toronto-based artist Roula Partheniou brought to mind those optical games and the impact that simple shifts of perspective can have on one's outlook. Cannily manipulating colour and texture, form and scale, Partheniou's sculptural practice exploits how our brains make perceptual leaps based on limited visual cues: we learn and practise a kind of visual shorthand rather than really *looking*. Partheniou works with the most banal and everyday objects—the tools and utensils, household goods and consumer products, toys and food that are perpetually in our field of vision. From the humble toilet paper roll to the noble candlestick, these objects are so familiar that they become abstracted in our minds, reduced to broad strokes for the sake of efficient cerebral data storage. For example, in Partheniou's work any small flattish square of muted yellow can easily substitute for a pad of



Post-it Notes. Making use of both found objects and meticulous fabrication techniques—typically using simple materials like painted wood and medium-density fibreboard (MDF)—Partheniou encourages close critical examination not just of her own creations but of everything around us.

Moving beyond the visual qualities of an individual object, Partheniou introduces uncertainty about her objects' origins by blurring the boundaries between the readymade¹ and the handmade. She renders the seductive industrial gloss of the manufactured with the imperfect yet “authentic” aura of the artist's touch. Partheniou's sculptures run the gamut from found objects subtly transformed, to reductive replicas that mimic only the most essential characteristics of a thing, to highly detailed copies that maintain their “realness” even under the heightened scrutiny that her work invites. *Caution Yellow* (2009), her discarded banana peel made of Fimo, for



example, is so lifelike that janitors at the University of Toronto Mississauga attempted to throw it out after it was installed on the Blackwood Gallery floor, and likewise when it was installed on the ceiling of a campus building.

In an interview Partheniou noted, “This double-take moment is key to the work and demands that the viewer renegotiate the assumptions they bring to the objects as well as their relationship to them.”² Her varied conceptual and material approaches to sculpture making and to optical illusion sit cheek by jowl, as Partheniou typically exhibits her sculptures in nuanced “constellations.” Often arranged in faux-casual compositions, the constellations create dynamic juxtapositions of shape, line, colour, and texture between multiple objects. By engaging a wide spectrum of different qualities and quantities of verisimilitude within one display, Partheniou’s work adheres to no fixed standard operating procedure in terms of how it



will pique our curiosity and toy with our expectations. After we spend time with Partheniou's work, everything we see risks unfolding its perceptual and existential puzzles to our newly refined gaze.³ In her essay for a group exhibition featuring Partheniou's work, curator Corrie Jackson describes being "reminded of the experience of perception."⁴

Taking the lead from its inherent material qualities, Partheniou ascribes the direction a work takes to the will of the object itself: "I try to minimize my own æsthetic judgment and allow the material itself to determine any formal decisions such as colour, scale, etc. So for me, the more interesting transformation occurs at the point where the piece I'm working on takes on a life of its own."⁵ This way of working is a hallmark of conceptual and process-based art practices. However, while Partheniou is compelled by the logic and the systems that have typically animated conceptual and minimalist art, rules are meant to be broken —and Pop art offers itself



to the artist as both historical legacy and contemporary *lingua franca*. Her work makes reference to objects that are so common and mass-produced as to arguably have no original. Her strategic use of *trompe l'œil*, meanwhile, transports us to the realm of fantasy: each apparent repetition becomes emblematic of all the ways it is actually different than what we thought we knew. Each replica leads us further down the rabbit hole.

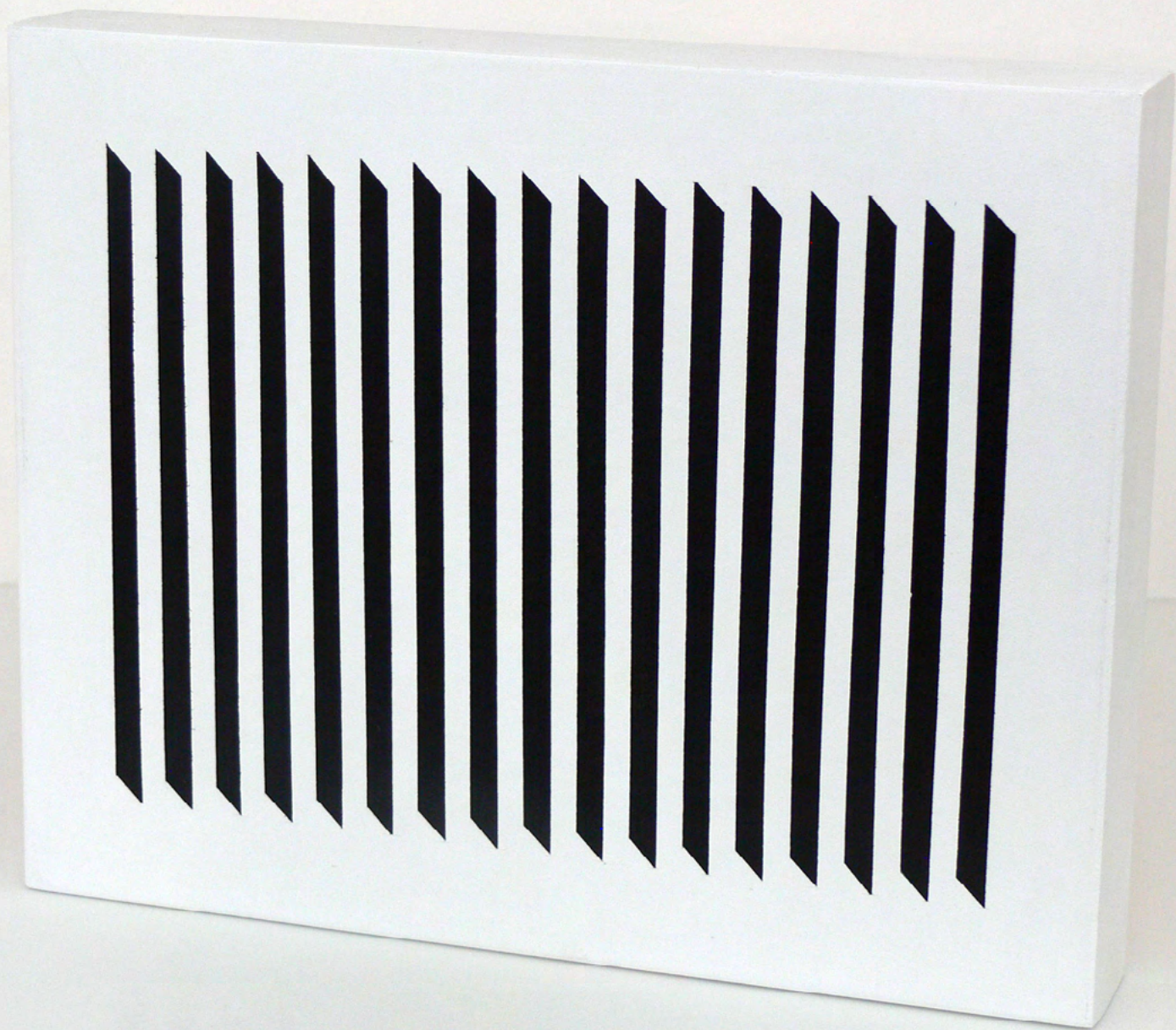
For several years Partheniou has been developing her practice on an intimate scale, working with objects that not only are close at hand but also fit in the palm of the hand. *House & Home & Garden*, Partheniou's first solo museum exhibition, at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, reflects the galleries' former life as a 1920s estate house, as she takes on the scale of entire rooms for the first time. Gairloch was once a private dwelling and was retrofitted into a public art museum. Inspired by its domestic

Roula Partheniou, *Dopplekopf* (detail), 2013. Acrylic on MDF and wood, found materials. Courtesy of the artist and MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



origins, Partheniou transformed the Gairloch estate house into a fictional construction site—a home in transition between a space of leisure and labour, comfort and chaos.

The first space that visitors encounter appears to be a room undergoing construction, with exposed copper pipes, drywall, plywood, and insulation. The room's material nature and status remain ambiguous: What was it? What will it become? Another fabricated room-under-construction is accessible only to our gaze through the west-facing window of the northernmost gallery. In this former living room, light sconces illuminate nothing



in particular, and the mantelpiece supports a selection of austere black and white forms that seem like shadows of familiar objects. Functional objects—like a magazine rack, firewood stack and fireplace tools—are visually abstracted to the point of being *dysfunctional*.

A stylized can of soda on the radiator draws attention to the view outside the window, where a new addition to the house is in progress. Provisionally lit by a bare light bulb, the addition holds an assortment of objects piled on cardboard boxes: a board game, a box of salt, a clock—all are gathered in a bright, surrealist tableau. This junk pile evokes the absent residents who hurriedly assembled these random objects.

Roula Partheniou, *Grate*, 2013. Acrylic on wood. Courtesy of the artist and MKG127, Toronto.



The quiet calm of Partheniou's construction zone suggests a moment frozen between day-to-day normality and stability and the buzz of upheaval that comes from change and renewal. As visitors navigate the other galleries, they discover spaces filled with objects evidencing a similar tension between order and disorder. Building materials and work tools rest in close proximity to what appear to be food containers and household products. It is as if the uncertain origins and materiality of the individual objects scattered throughout the site have suffused the very building itself, rendering it into a dazzling simulation that could collapse at any time.

Roula Partheniou, *Nook*, 2014. Acrylic and gouache on wood and MDF, jar, polymer clay. Collection of the Royal Bank of Canada. Image courtesy of the artist and MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

While her practice has always been playfully deconstructive, here Partheniou peels back yet another layer, showing us how rooms and entire buildings are constructed—or at least how we imagine they might be. Such a ficto-archeological unmasking builds on recent projects that found Partheniou placing cardboard boxes, pegboard and other forms of packing, storing and organizing objects under the spotlight. The seemingly haphazard arrangements that her constellations take on always return to the life of the home, as opposed to more formal or prescribed ways of looking at and interacting with objects. Here we have none of the rigid lines of store shelves—reminiscent of a modernist grid—or the fussy lighting and display plinths of the gallery space. For Partheniou, disorder goes hand in hand with the unpretentious and mundane ways we engage with things each day. Both her objects and her display strategies find their ideal home in Gairloch Gardens, a site marked by idiosyncratic ornamentation—friezes, panelling, stonework—and the variety of structural adjustments over the past century that have made it what it is today.

With its architectural scale, *House & Home & Garden* stands as a model for a resplendent Partheniou-designed home, a space where nothing is precisely as it seems, filled with, as she aptly calls them, “objects to be read and mis-read.”⁶

ESSAY NOTES

¹ The practice of recontextualizing a found object into the spaces where art is exhibited.

² Christos&Evelyn, “Roula Partheniou,” *Ozon Magazine*, 27 June 2011, <http://en.ozonweb.com/art/interview-roula-partheniou> (last accessed 26 March 2015).

³ A number of recent projects have also employed grey-scale to dazzling effect, fabricating objects as if they have had all the colour sucked from them and are being seen through the black-and-white mediation of a photographic or cinematic filter.

⁴ Corrie Jackson, *Communicating Vessels: IAIN BAXTER&, Luis Jacob, Roula Partheniou, Judy Radul*, Blackwood Gallery (16 April–11 May 2014), <http://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/Web%20Images/2014/Communicating%20Vessels/Communicating.Vessels.Brochure.pdf> (last accessed 26 March 2015).

⁵ Christos&Evelyn, “Roula Partheniou.” ⁶ Press release for *Roula Partheniou: Parts and Wholes*, MKG127 (23 March–20 April 2013), <http://www.mkg127.com/past/roulaPartheniou/parts-and-wholes/parts-and-wholes.html> (last accessed 26 March 2015).

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