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March 02 – April 13, 2003  
McMaster Museum of Art



# 2003 FACULTY EXHIBIT

## The Faculty Exhibit

An exhibition of the art of Faculty from the School of the Arts, McMaster University:

Graham Todd, Judy Major-Girardin, Don Carr, Liss Platt,  
Robert Hamilton, Alan Flint, Maria Whiteman

March 02 – April 13, 2003  
McMaster Museum of Art

Essay by: Alison McQueen

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# Introduction

## Alison McQueen

Assistant Professor of Art History  
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This exhibition offers a welcome occasion for the communities of McMaster, Hamilton and the surrounding region to experience the work of seven artists on faculty. They present us with the possibility of entering into their creative worlds, spheres of their lives that exist not as separate domains but rather entirely in conjunction with their daily practices. The works pose critiques of language, identity and the object-centered nature of art. They explore the fabric and nature of contemporary life in urban, suburban and rural locales. As physical forms, the works invite captivating aesthetic encounters, and some concurrently challenge the possibilities of visual experience.

Eight works by Don Carr serve as a testimony to the multi-faceted nature of his practice. The prints, electronic project and hologram all personify the contradictions and ambiguities of Carr's subject position as an observer. Grounded in his fascination with mythology, symbols and archetypes, **Goddess Gate** (1997), **Pagan Idol** (1997), **Wired Dionysus** (2000), **Dreaming Deity** (1999) and **Mad Buddha** (2001) exemplify the composite vocabulary Carr has developed since the late 1980s. In the letterpress relief prints of **Goddess Gate** and **Foliate Deity** (1997), fragments of ancient and medieval sculpture are set against discordant fields: Athena resolute before self-referential, vaulting, fragmentary fretwork and a map of Rome (c.1500), and a male wood deity descending from a 15th century choir stall apprehended by the minutiae of a nerve cell. Textural qualities are strongest in **Dreaming Deity** and **Pagan Idol** as papers mimic marble and stone. In the former, celestial bodies offer enveloping quietude; in the latter, bio-technology enfolds a distressed visage. **Mad Buddha** and Carr's most recent work **Heart of God** (2003) evince the combination of spontaneity and methodical processes that characterize his work as well as his struggle to apprehend the religious conflicts and confluences that he feels dominate contemporary experience. A video of **Some Uncertain Signs**, an electronic pixel board (1986), addresses issues around

multiculturalism and diversity that extend to our present time; the final text reads: "Unite -- Red, Brown, Black, White -- Share Power." This work, and Carr's hologram **Wired Dionysus** (2000), illustrate the experimental nature of his artistic production, in one instance layered with an activist undercurrent and more broadly bound by the illusion of presence. Whether in the immateriality or fractured nature of forms, for Carr there is something profoundly fragile in the attempts of humans to create art objects.

Alan Flint's installation **Constitution** (2003) flowed from his print media practice and his ongoing investigation of the limitations of textual language. The large-scale painted Styrofoam letters are set against an equally monochromatic field, denying colour value as an interpretive aesthetic and encouraging the viewer towards the personality of the gnarled Helvetica font letters as the nucleus of the work's meaning. Flint seeks to liberate letters from their commercial ties, and in his visual poetry he challenges the assumption that letters and words have a purity of form. The polyvalence of "constitution" directs viewers back onto themselves since notions of individuality are at the word's core. The word insinuates freedom. As a political entity, a Constitution is an organizational model promoting the rights of an individual before institutions and "others". As a personal phenomenon, constitution informs one's character and manner. The folio-like arrangement positions the observer as an active viewer such that the physicality of looking is analogous to the possibility of agency before a political concept. Staged before vertical, confining bars, language breaks with its history of confinement. The animated, playful qualities of the individual letters, which are turned, collapsed and subtly altered, disrupt expectations of order in the concretization of language. Through Flint's visual play, the physicality of language has become part of how meaning can be challenged.

Inspired by a suburb of Haarlem, The Netherlands, Robert Hamilton produced the video **Velserbroek** (2002) as a response to the psychological void such an environment evokes. Velserbroek exemplifies what the Dutch refer to as "Social Architecture" or "Phoenix" complexes. Counter to the intended social function of housing divisions and, the utopian vision of the function of "home" as psycho-physical pacifiers, Hamilton's experience at Velserbroek was one of alienation. Hamilton constructed this video from seamlessly linked digital stills and in the process, edited out the few references to human presence which he did experience. Emptying Velserbroek of all people, cars and bicycles, Hamilton created a lens through which our sense of social estrangement is magnified. We witness his dystopic vision of contemporary social practices situated on the



margins of urban experience. This translates to a surreal re-enactment of conflicting mental processes whereby the convention of "home," as familiar and welcoming, metamorphoses into a foreign construct in disarray. To emphasize the principles of binaries and human conflicts that underscore the work, Hamilton recorded the audio separately and utilized it to create a contrapuntal aural-visual exchange. Assuming the empowered scopic position of a modern *flâneur*, Hamilton situates himself as a witness to the failures of social policy and the incommensurate lure of commodity fetishism.

Judy Major-Girardin's two works **Counterpoint** (2002) and **Schema** (2003) explore geometric and organic systems. While the optical dynamics of Major-Girardin's works are strongest when seen from a distance, her surfaces invite closer analysis. With their emphasis on process rather than product, the works convey a love of craft and an exploration of the layers of communication. The heavily worked surface of **Counterpoint** attracts intimate contact and then elicits tactile sensations that resonate through the interstices of linoleum block prints, shellac, graphite, pencil crayon and gouache. For artist and viewer, experiencing these works is an investigative process informed by visual uncertainty. Dense, all-over patterns are set against areas of void, and dynamic spatial relationships are neither locked nor ground by gravity. The aesthetic fluidity and ambiguity within the works parallel Major-Girardin's treatment of her materials and her interrogation of the artificiality of hierarchies. In **Schema**, underpainting remains prominent and thin layers of shellac resonate against impastoed passages where paint rests, as applied directly from the tube. The weights of paints are in conflict comparable to the shifting values, as a neutral palette of ochre and Naples yellow balances against strong colours like Cadmium orange. Improvisation and intuition are in constant tension with analysis and order, and we are captivated by the visual complexity and rigour in deciphering the aesthetic and metaphorical possibilities of Major-Girardin's work.

Graceful markings seem to float across the wood surfaces of Liss Platt's series **Puck Paintings** (2000-2001), yet these are the products of forceful gestural actions. Interrogating the conventionally accepted heterosexual male discourse of "Action Painting", Platt investigates action and process art practices as a means of re-presenting the complexities of gender and sexual identity. She pushes the boundaries of process art to include physical experiences ascribed to sports, and offers a reevaluation of mark-making as products of encounters which are enacted and acted upon the self during physical activity. In a private art-making practice that intersects with the public activities of playing hockey and mountain biking, Platt

explores gender as an intersection of multi-faceted identities. In her large-scale ink-jet prints of the **Body Works** series (2000-2001), she challenges the traditional conflation of female/bruise/abuse/victim and heroizes bruises acquired by a physically active and adventurous female entity. The scale and heightened detail of these works examines the complex terrain of the battered body. These monumental female landscapes also critique the intersection of woman and/as nature in the history of art. Moving from object to subject, Platt's profound scrutiny of the position of female as director of bodily experience is reconstituted through her video installation **Five Trails** (2001). Before a dense ground of layered rasping breath and a weave of foliage, viewers can situate themselves to experience and consider the possibilities of the empowered female as an agent of change.

Graham Todd's four-part piece **A Song for Eve** (1998-2002) began as a series of drawing experiments; as his interest in tactility took over, he translated them to wall-relief assemblages although he still regards the work as a product of drawing. Starting with base components of wooden panels, Todd prepared the surfaces with gesso but then covered the geometric forms with textiles, including linen, lace, velvet, waffle-patterned and netting materials. Apart from the velvet, each of these signifies the absence of colour: the materials absorb light and lead the viewer into infinite space. As the number of panels grew, and the carefully wrapped layers of fabrics stretched around square, then elliptical, then octagonal shapes, the varied tactile surfaces became a well-considered ground for layers of ink, encaustic, house paint and lacquer. Todd added found objects in the form of pieces of Spanish furniture, as well as finely crafted cast bronze orchid roots and ceramic plates. He discreetly tucked exquisite Japanese obi material between several panels, furthering his reclamation of the language of textiles. Ethereal grounds and interior landscapes are set against personages – or the forms can be read in reverse – just as the play of negative and positive space is equally important to the aesthetics of this complex, mixed-media work. Todd's optically dynamic, Baroque-like configurations are the product of self-scrutiny. The work offers a considered analysis of the materiality of a sculptor's process and the compelling layers of glaze on Todd's ceramics embody the core of his praxis.

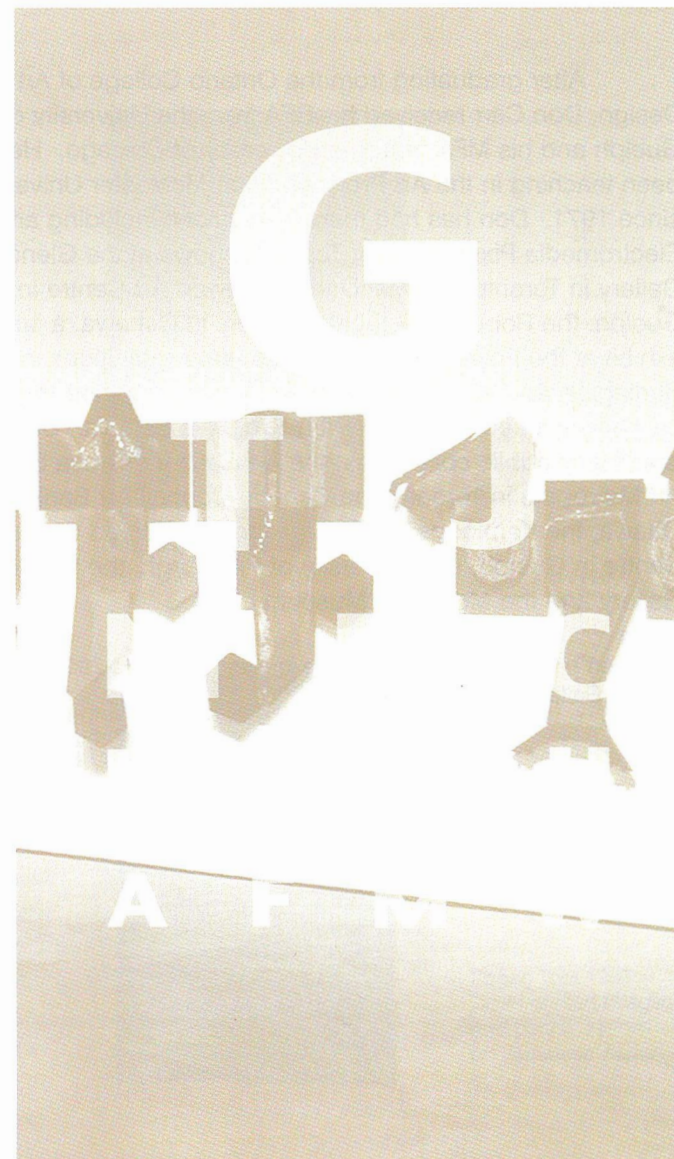
Responding to the hegemony of the industrial aesthetic in Hamilton, Maria Whiteman has incorporated her art-making into daily walks with her dog in the local natural environment. These forays into a sphere counter to her urban cultural dynamic culminate in Whiteman's installation **Irreversibility** (2002-2003), which includes large-format digital photographs and stuffed animals. Whiteman uses



digital imagery to move beyond technology and towards a utopian ideal of "natural" experience as the product of animality. She posits stuffed animals as significant mediators between humans and nature; they are often a child's first intimate contact with the idea of "animal" and thus inform expectations of natural environments and animal life as romantic, alternate realms. Animals figure prominently in early social practices and, for many adults, fulfill psycho-social functions. Informed by the historical duality of nature versus culture, Whiteman seeks to question the validity of this divide; however, she believes animals present the true "other" to human experience. Her photographs focus the viewer's attention on landscapes that are intentionally overlooked in mainstream cultural representations of the environment. By juxtaposing stuffed animals with these photographs Whiteman invites viewers to consider their own contradictory positions as mass consumers of natural resources and protectors of nature in its multi-faceted forms.

The works in this exhibition attest to the ongoing and powerful role of contemporary artworks as vehicles for social change and creative communication. Each artist suggests the potential for alternate discourses in the formation of visual, physical and psychological experiences. Possibilities extend within the viewer's field.

Alison McQueen is co-author of "Collecting in the Gilded Age: Art Patronage in Pittsburgh, 1890" (1997) and "Félix Buhot: peintre graveur entre romantisme et impressionisme, 1847-1898" (1998). Her book "The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt: Rembrandt and 19th-Century France" is forthcoming with Amsterdam University Press (Autumn 2003). McQueen is currently working on another book, "Genius has no sex": The Art Patronage and Collecting of Empress Eugénie."



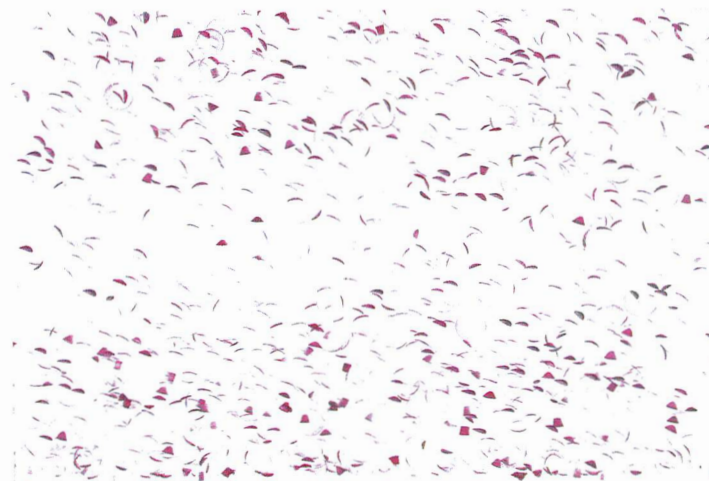
## Liss PLATT

Liss Platt is a media artist whose works take the form of videotapes, films, photographs, Web sites and installations. After receiving her MFA from the University of California, San Diego in 1992, she participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program in New York City.

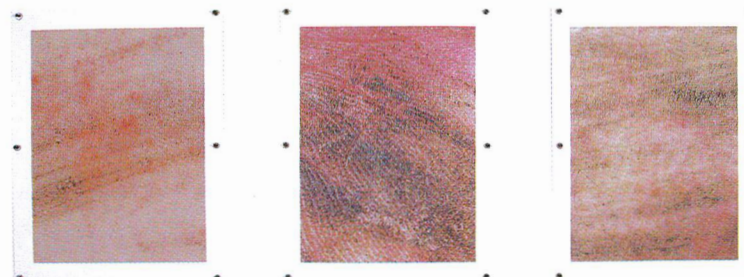
Liss Platt's video and film works have been exhibited throughout the United States, at such venues as The New Museum, The Whitney Museum and the Millennium Film Workshop in New York; the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Film Festival; Women in the Director's Chair in Chicago; The Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio; and Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center in Buffalo, New York. Her works have also screened in Canada in Toronto, Montreal and Calgary as well as internationally in England, Australia, Russia, Bratislava (Slovak Republic), Mexico, Cuba, Korea and Japan. She has received grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the Experimental Television Center in New York, as well as from the Arts Research Board at McMaster.

For the last 10 years, Liss Platt has worked and lived in Brooklyn, New York. She was an Assistant Professor in Film and Video at Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University for the past five years, and recently joined the faculty of McMaster University as an Assistant Professor in the Multimedia Programme. She now resides in Hamilton.

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**Puck painting 15:**  
Montreal Maroons 2000  
Puck rubber on wood  
4 x 6'



**Bodywork**  
17 - Ultimate 2002  
15 - Safe at second 2002  
18 - Slide tackle  
Giclee print  
3 x 4'