

# The Discomfort Zone

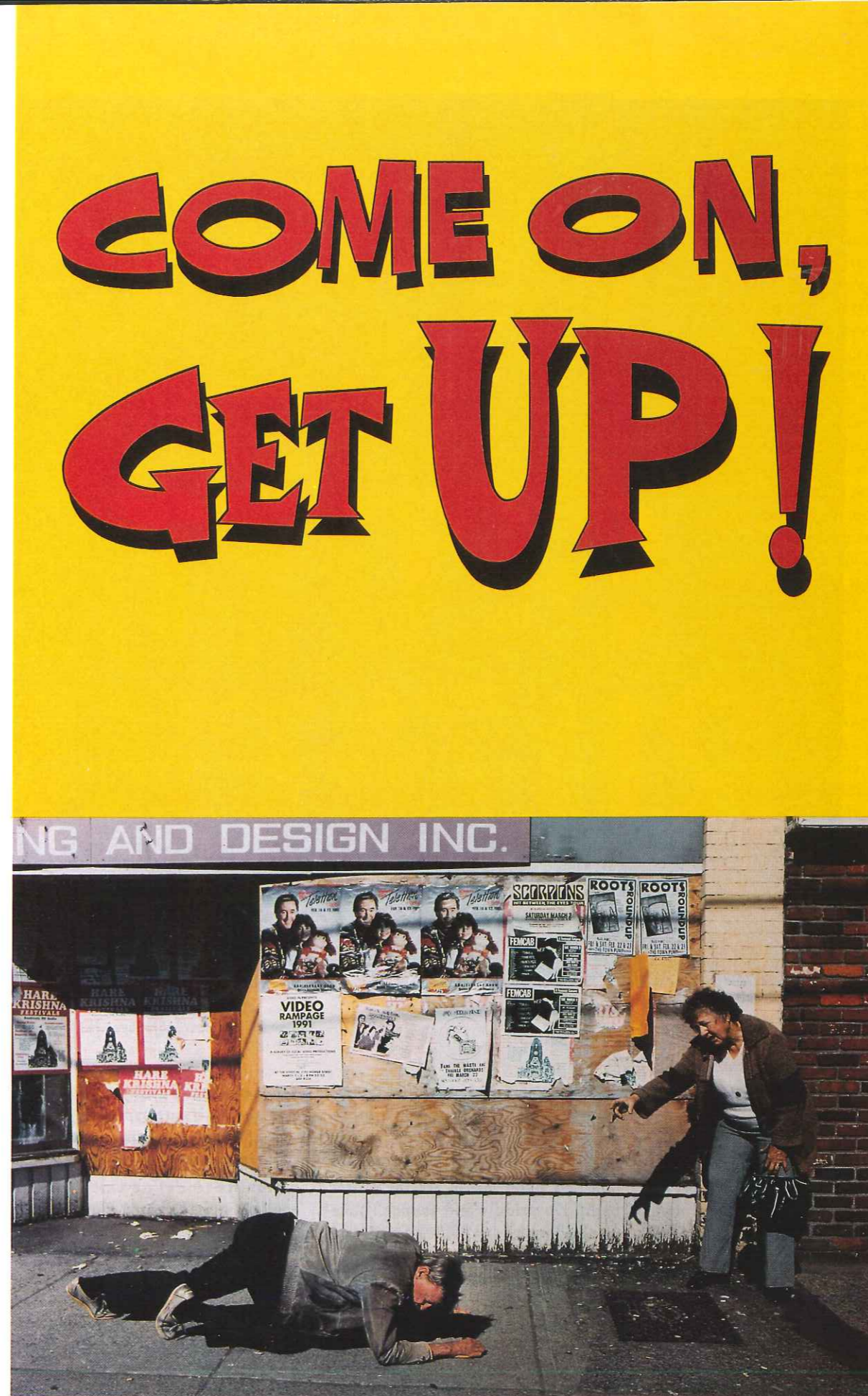
In his sculptures and photo-paintings, Ken Lum aims to displease

by Scott Watson

At the fairly young age of thirty-five, Vancouver artist Ken Lum has a solid international reputation. His first New York show was in a 1982 group exhibition at the artist-run gallery White Columns. Since 1987 he has been represented by the prestigious Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Cologne, since 1989 by Galerie Rudiger Schöttle in Paris and Munich, and by the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York since 1990. Also in 1990, the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam organised a touring mid-career retrospective of Lum's work. This year, he was one of only two Canadian artists included in the Carnegie International exhibition in Pittsburgh.

Although Lum's history includes an impressive list of exhibitions in the U.S. and Europe, his work has had less exposure at home in Canada. Currently he is not represented by any Canadian commercial dealer. In 1990, however, the Winnipeg Art Gallery staged a major exhibition of Lum's work. In the accompanying catalogue, Lum's friend and fellow Vancouver artist Jeff Wall made a point of relating Lum's background to his production as an artist. Lum's grandfather emigrated to Canada from China in the early years of this century to work on the railroad. Lum was raised in the working-class east end of Vancouver, a neighbourhood that still serves as the source for his art and whose tradespeople have often been

*Come On, Get Up!* 1991  
Laminated c-type print on sintra and painted aluminum  
115 x 70 x 2 in.  
All photos courtesy: Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York



# My Name is SCOTT RUZYCKI

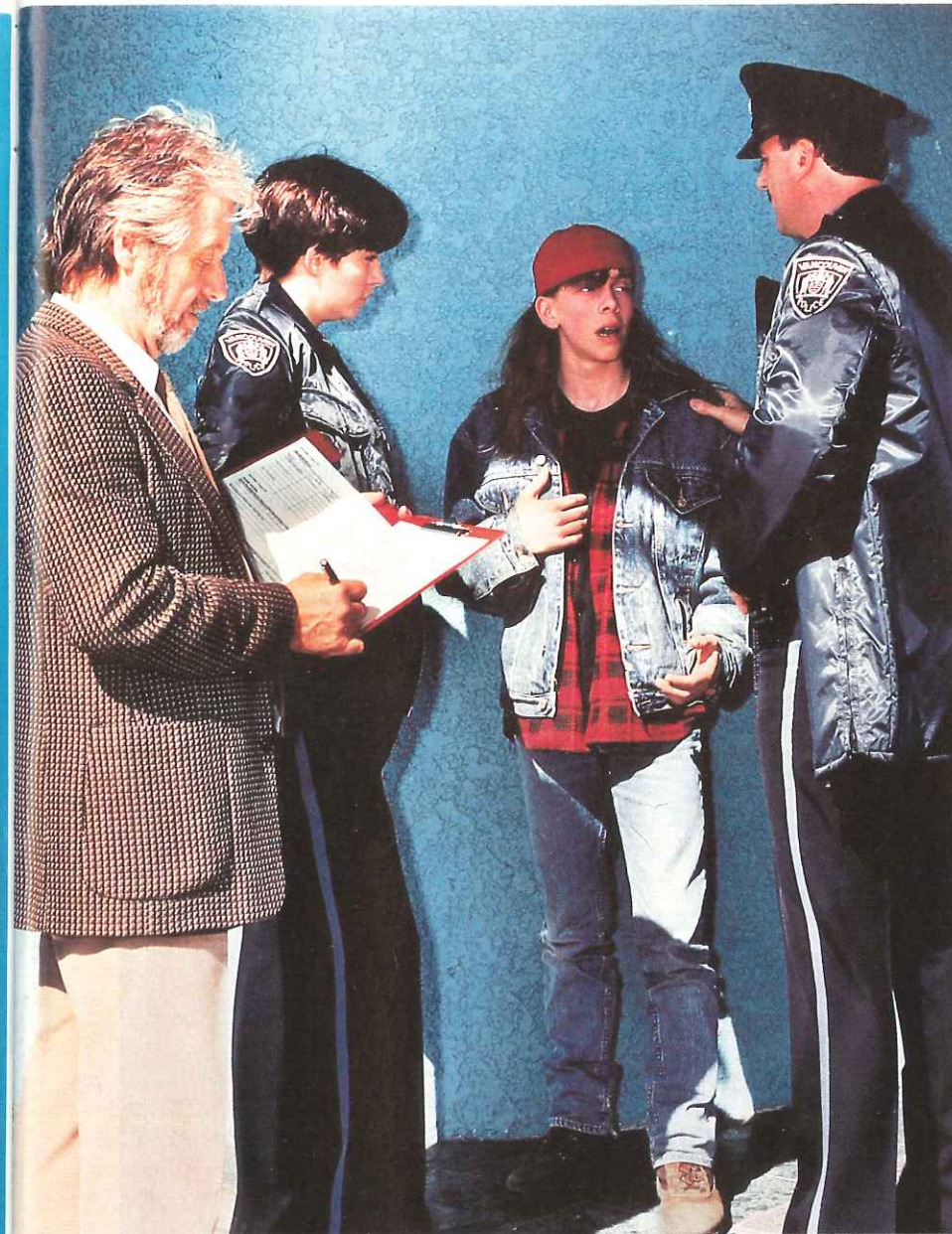
involved in the fabrication of his pieces. Like many children of immigrants, Lum was encouraged to better himself by making the jump from working in trades to having a career as a professional. He enrolled at Simon Fraser University hoping to become a scientist, but there he encountered Jeff Wall who suggested that he take his art seriously.

Lum has been making important work ever since. He is part of a milieu that is sometimes jokingly referred to as the "École de Vancouver." (The joke

began in the late eighties when the French curator Jean-François Chevrier pronounced Vancouver one of the three international centres for important new photo-based art, the others being Düsseldorf and France.) Joke or not, Lum's work, at least that part that involves photography, is part of a critical international dialogue on the potential of art to represent social issues which includes many colleagues in Vancouver who also work with photography, such as Ian Wallace, Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Roy Arden as

well as artists as diverse in their practice as Stan Douglas, Kati Campbell and Kevin Madill. The slight sneer implied in "École de Vancouver" attempts to define this group as regional in its thinking. But their area of concern, even though Vancouver appears often enough in their pictures, is modernity itself.

Lum's work is often aggressive both visually and intellectually. His recent productions are a case in point. Since 1984 he has been making what he calls portrait-logos. The first works in



*My Name is Scott Ruzycski* 1991  
Laminated c-type on painted aluminum  
60 x 116 x 2 in.

this series combined single or family portraits — sometimes portraits of his friends — with custom-designed corporate logos. The resulting pieces confused the friendliness of corporate imagery with the pathos of the popular studio-made family portrait to somewhat terrifying effect. Lately the portrait pieces have become larger in scale. In them Lum has elaborated his studies of individuals, families and couples to include stronger narrative elements suggesting social situations. These works consist of

photographs mounted on panels containing text. Boldly coloured, using the loud, attention-getting typographies of street-level advertising, the texts usually proclaim the identity and situation of the subject or subjects of the photograph.

Lum's portrait-logos attack the limits of the minimalist aesthetic and its notion of the autonomous art object. At the same time, they raise questions about stereotypes of representation. The simple shape, flat surface and fabricated look of the

objects come out of a consideration of works by Donald Judd. But while minimalist artists resisted a reading of their work in anything but formal terms, Lum's portraits stress the relation of the art object to the social sphere through their manipulation of representation and reference. Usually depicting the marginalised or disenfranchised, the portrait-logos cut to the core of our contemporary dilemma. Most of the crises that confront us have to do with the contradictions that arise when the rights of the individual are pitted against the rights of society. These works play those contradictions out. At first sight, Lum's photographs seem to be straightforward representations: their accompanying texts are terse and self-evident. But there is always something in these works that makes easy interpretation impossible. Take the recent *My Name is Scott Ruzycski*. A young man appears to be detained by two uniformed police officers, a man and a woman, while a fourth figure, in plain clothes, takes a statement. The figures are set in a shallow space before a brilliant blue wall. The text panel is the same Miami-Vice turquoise. This is a highly abstract, minimal gesture. Ultimately we don't know quite what is going on. But the declaration of identity, a declaration often felt as a sign of empowerment in Lum's earlier portrait works, is here just the opposite: identification for the purposes of investigation and possibly confinement. The picture focuses on something amiss, a youth in trouble with the law. But in our culture, depictions of "law and order" often have racist undertones. In Lum's picture, the kid is white, challenging the stereotypes of the popular media.

In another recent work, *Garbage Pickers*, a group poses around a garbage bin. It kind of looks like a family portrait. Three generations are present and they are arranged so that one can easily establish their relationship to each other. If they are garbage-pickers they are probably poor and perhaps homeless. Although they are posing for the photograph and therefore tacitly agree to be represented,

they appear defiant rather than passive. They challenge the viewer to think about his or her culpability in their situation. The garbage pickers are, after all, not outside our economic system, but integral to it, their plight the result of government-planned unemployment.

The most aggressive new portrait, *Come On, Get Up!*, depicts a man and a woman on a street. The man is crawling while the woman exhorts him to get up. The picture is brutal. As in other works from this series, the theme of upward mobility haunts the scene, and the Protestant ethic of self-reliance is mocked. Lum's picture tells us what it looks like to hold the poor responsible for their own predicament. In this drunken theatre, the

protagonists act out the ideology of corporate culture, having internalised the very system that oppresses them.

The portrait-logos have always been disturbing and the new ones are no exception. Not surprisingly, critical response to them is divided. Because they are works of art, the social issues they bring to the foreground are paradoxically both distanced and aestheticised. This distance is only exaggerated by the stiff artificiality of the pictures. These are not real people or real situations spied upon by the documentary camera; Lum's art is not the scalpel that bares the soul of the sitter and reveals society's ills. Instead, they are representations, pictures that don't let you forget you are looking at art, but at the same time bring forth

responses based on your own relation to society.

It is one thing to see Lum's works in the public space of a museum or gallery and another to imagine them in the private homes of collectors where, indeed, most of them end up. One imagines the subjects of the portraits, and their misery, as being somehow consumed by the owner, much in the same way that eighteenth-century genre paintings of the poor were consumed by an aristocratic class with a taste for the "naturalness" of the poor. At that time, and throughout the following century, paintings of the poor, especially those who worked the land, identified the poor with all those stable values — family, faith and soil — that capital was eroding.

The bourgeoisie took comfort in this illusion because it so blithely ignored class antagonisms.

Lum's scenarios, on the contrary, do not evoke naturalness but rather the contradictions of society. For some, Lum's treatment of the poor as spectacle is condemned as cynical. There is no doubt that the works are extremely harsh, not only in their use of bright colours and almost kitsch *verismo*, but also in their presentation of seemingly irreconcilable social ills to which they offer no solution. The slick fabrication of the portraits also seems untender. Lum's techniques can't register empathy; rather they suggest the commodification of our responses to human suffering. If Lum's photo-works serve as ethical witnesses, they also guard their privilege as art objects, as luxury goods. The dichotomy between what is represented and the status of the object that carries this representation agitates. But the more one looks for the source of this agitation, the more one must look to society.

Besides the portrait-logos, Lum's furniture sculptures are probably his best known works. These too are bound to disturb. Here, Lum usually uses ready-made furniture of a generic contemporary type. Frequently, he arranges the furniture in enclosed configurations. In his recent *Corner Bed*, two sofa-bed units face into a corner. If the viewer feels discomfort, it is because *Corner Bed* violates the way things ought to be. First, you can't sit or lie on the furniture which offers a back without a breach, leaving the interior space — the zone of relaxation and conversation — inaccessible. On top of this, there is the fact that useful objects are presented as art, as sculpture. People save up to buy these things; wrenched from their usual function they appear as waste.

The reference to minimalist sculpture is quite clear. With its self-evident structure and utterly direct dialogue between an interior and exterior space, the sculpture is a minimalist work. Yet unlike the works of Robert Morris or Donald Judd, it is not abstract, it is not a manipulation

of pure form. Instead it invites a social reading of minimalism. As a student, Lum became aware of the work of Dan Graham, an American artist who is important to many Vancouver artists. In *Homes for America* (1967), Graham photographed rows of cheap tract housing, bringing out their similarity to rows of Donald Judd boxes or Carl Andre bricks. This paradigmatic work demonstrated that minimalist strategies, even as they argued for an art that was completely and only about art, uncannily echoed contemporary convulsions in the built urban landscape. Regularity, logic and order in the art work were suddenly implicated in the conformist tendencies of society; the abstractions of pure form became ciphers for the abstractions of capital itself. As Jeff Wall wrote of one of Lum's furniture sculptures; "What the sculpture expresses is that the living room is empty; that it has been emptied by historical forces, the forces which created it as a special space, a room for 'living in.' It may go further, as I think it does, and suggest that the room was made to be empty, that the existence of the phenomenon called the 'living room' as an integral part of our culture's dwelling-form signifies not the continuity and survival of the interior world identified with the traditional concept of the biological 'nuclear'

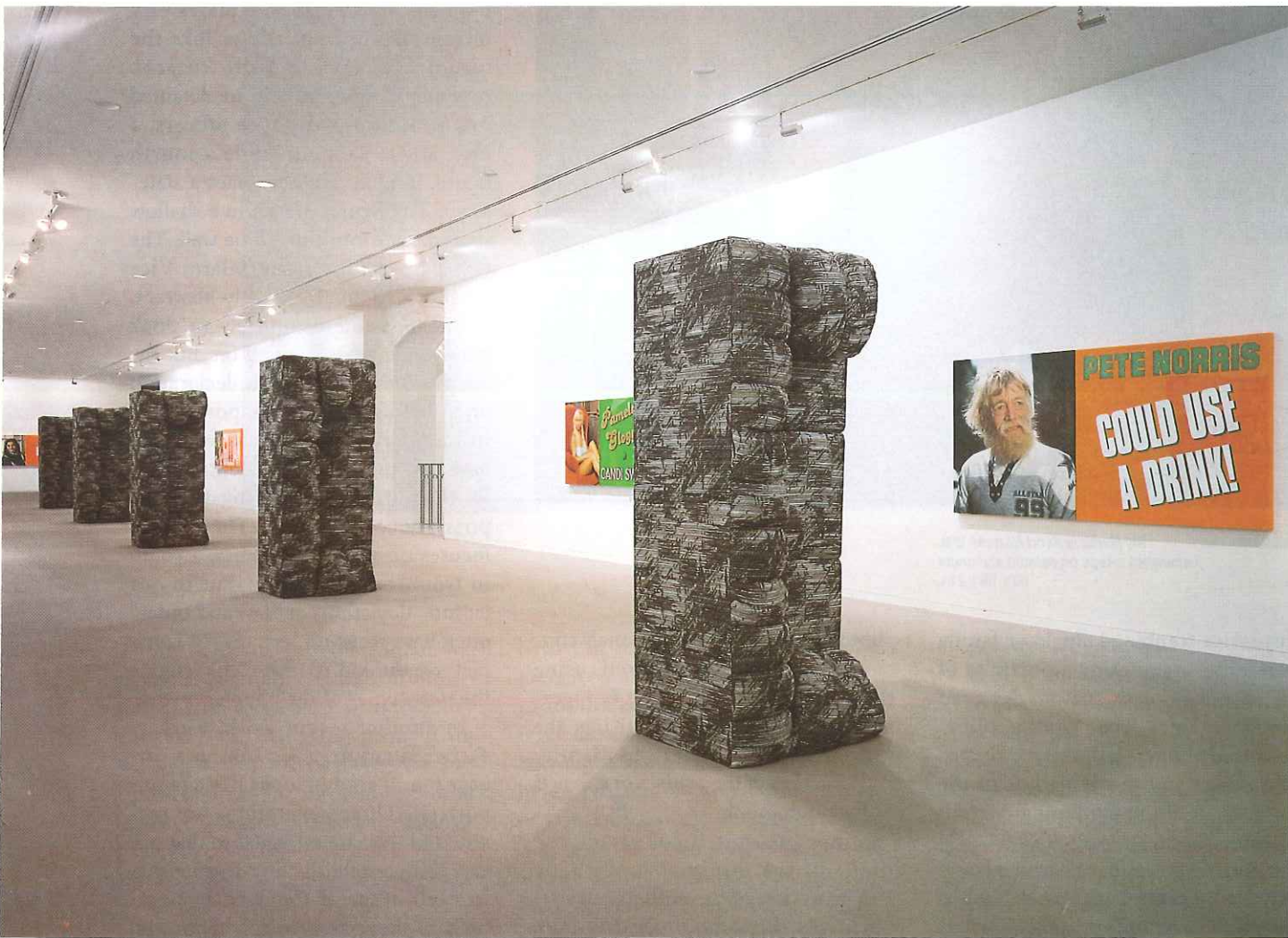
family, but rather its eclipse and disintegration."

Following from the furniture sculptures, Lum's recent cushion paintings are wry and outrageous. They are monochrome canvasses to which Lum attaches cushions. The cushions are readymades, bought from local department stores. They bring with them the world of overstuffed domestic environments, perhaps signifying the false comfort that is sought in plush brocades, buttons and twill. Cushions are absurd objects, psychologically and even sociologically loaded. They invite passive, infantile yearnings and serve as buffers between the body and furniture in the domestic setting, itself a buffer zone against the outside world. This security, as Wall has suggested, is in eclipse. One thinks also that in the cushion paintings the old modernist ideal of the integration of art and design in the interior of the private dwelling has been brought up to — and perhaps well past — the threshold of absurdity.

If the cushion paintings bring the relationship between high modernism and everyday living into question, Lum's recent large monochromes frame this question in terms of the urban rather than the domestic environment. Seen from a distance, they appear to be only uninflected monochromes punctuated by small



*Sculpture for Dream Home 1980*  
Lamps, tables, sofas



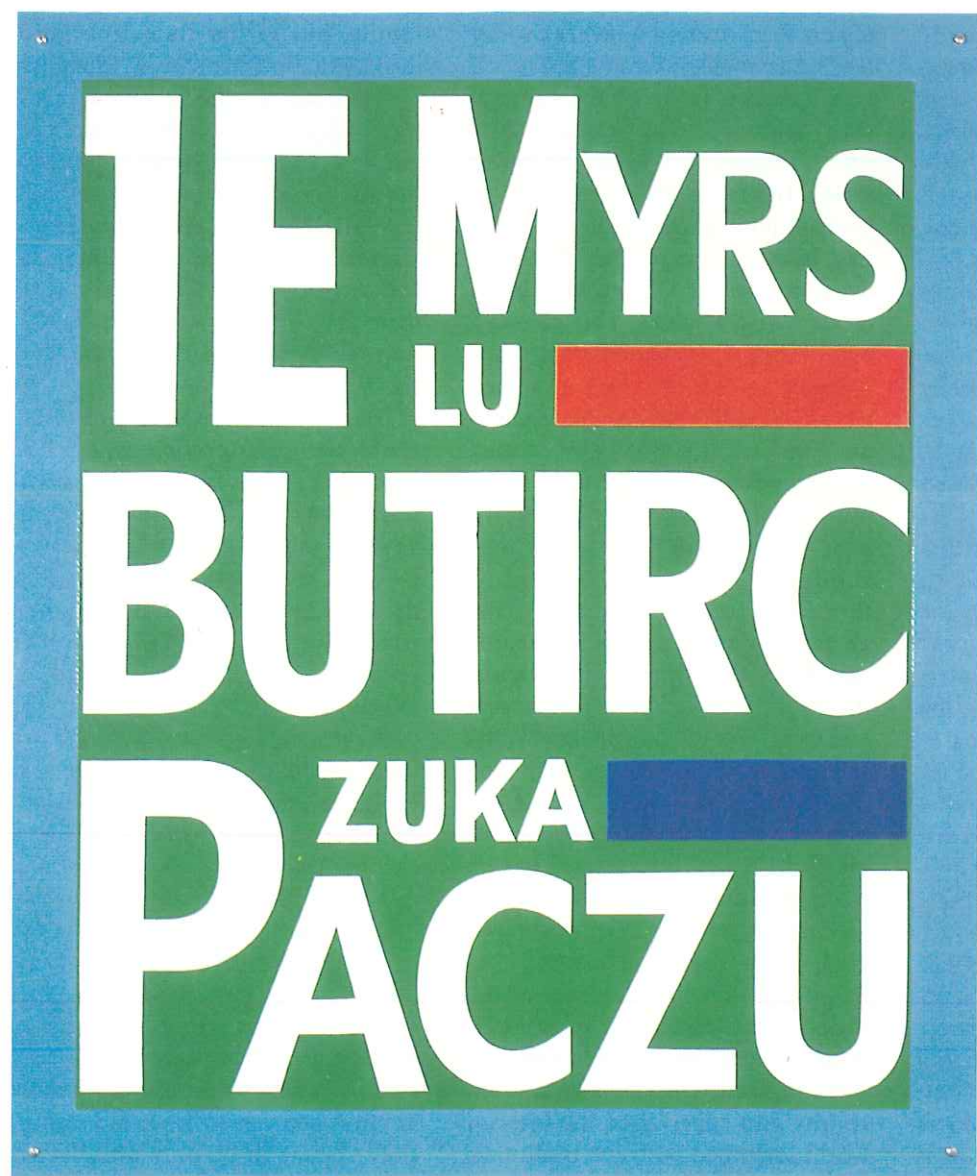
Installation view, Vancouver Art Gallery 1990

rectangles, variations on the standardised gestures of Daniel Buren or Niele Toroni. But as one approaches the paintings, one sees that the small rectangles are in fact pictures, ink-screened photographs in the urban present tense. Their subjects include police cars, prostitutes, Jehovah's Witnesses, skateboarders, isolated men, isolated women, beggars, birds, apartment windows and adults with children. One work, *Missing Child*, is a compilation of posters of Michael Dunahee, a boy who was abducted on Vancouver Island last year. Since his tragic disappearance, the child's picture has become a ubiquitous part of the urban landscape.

The painting raises anxiety, for it reminds the viewer of the way in which violence shatters the routines of the everyday. But while the image of the child has obvious emotional urgency, Lum's point is really not specific to the Dunahee case. Rather, Lum's interest lies in the intersection of urban space, a space of blank anonymity, with such a private, specific plea, and how that space fails to support the autonomous individual. In the end, it is how we are formed as social beings that is called into question.

Lum's word paintings pursue this same line of questioning. These are nonsense arrangements of letters that

make up shrill, nonsense words. Executed in large part by professional sign painters on plywood or vinyl from Lum's drawings, they refer to the culture of popular signage. But unlike many of his fellow artists on the international scene, Lum alludes not to the world of slick professional advertising but to the local-level supermarket and small business advertising found in working and middle-class shopping districts in every city in North America. While considerations of taste and the subtle projection of consumer lifestyle characterize mass-media advertising, these local signs convey information in a noisy, competitive space. Their



*Untitled (Language Painting) 1987*  
Enamel on plywood  
36 x 30 in.  
Private Collection, New York



Installation view, Carnegie International 1991  
*Selected Nepalese Poem, Selected Maltese Poem, Selected Japanese Poem, Selected Vietnamese Poem, Selected Inuit Poem 1991*  
Oil and acrylic on canvas, wooden dowels  
150 x 90 in. each  
Courtesy: The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

demographic dynamic is written all over them. In a city like Vancouver, where languages and cultures collide, neighbourhood advertising registers the social process, and it is this process that the word paintings address. As Lum describes them; "They blurt out in every language. Misspellings are common. Syntactic violations proliferate. Oftentimes, words are invented expressing convergences of thought between one's native and adopted cultures. They have the presence of discontinuous beings, transnational, transcultural, looking forward and backward at the same time, brimming with memories of ancient cultures and dead ancestors, suffused with anticipation and futurity. They are the

non-site markers of nomadic peoples."

Often compared to early avant-garde experiments with language or the Dada denunciation of conventional meaning, Lum's word paintings are in fact about another irreconcilability. Rather than being about the impossibility of expression, they expose identity as the product of often contradictory and conflicting constructions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual difference and so on. In this respect, the word paintings relate to Lum's poem paintings, which present real texts in non-Western languages using non-Roman scripts. The tenacity of these works depends on their refusal to accommodate — by means of a translation — the

dominant culture. Lum's canny strategy here is the blurring of what is nonsense, but comprehended aesthetically, and what is the poetry of others, only unintelligible due to our lack of knowledge.

Lum's works are not political in the ordinary sense. They don't offer stable readings that we can accept or reject. They affirm nothing, instead confronting the viewer with those very same contradictions that constitute his or her social and political identity. Like all important artists, Lum creates new propositions for a heightened awareness of reality. If we find his work alarming, it's because it penetrates so deeply into our contemporary condition. ■