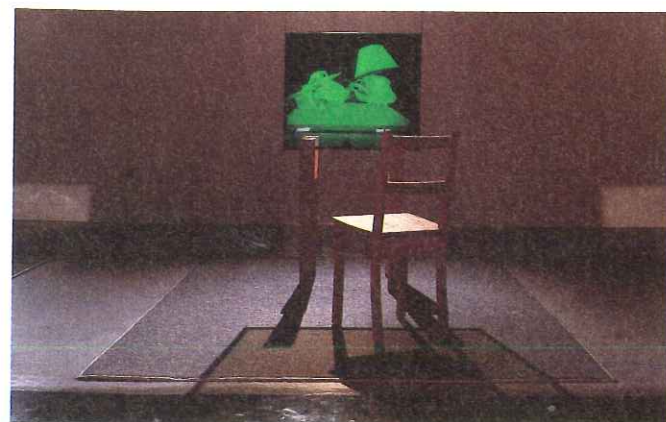


GHOST LUSTRES

Michael Snow's holographic visions at Expo 86

By RENÉ BLOUIN

Photography by MICHEL PILON



Above, the very ambitious *Still Life in 8 Calls*, a suite of works, each with its own transmission hologram. Below left, a call in close-up: note the telephone, keys, lamp, pencil and glasses. In *Egg*, (detail below right), the spectral artist gets cracking with a real cast iron skillet.

Michael Snow is one of the most recognized artists in Canada. One of the very few Canadians to have exhibited at the prestigious Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and to have works in the collection of the no less prestigious Museum of Modern Art in New York, he has also shown in most Canadian museums. His work has won him an enviable reputation in the art world and his films have been praised as classics of avant-garde and contemporary cinema. As a musician, he has performed extensively both in Canada and abroad. Having built this solid reputation on the national and international art scene, Snow has also charmed the masses with his flock of Canada geese on permanent display at the Eaton Centre, one of the most frequented tourist and shopping spots in Toronto. And even this work, with its popular appeal, still displays the rigour and intelligence that characterize the impressive body of work Snow has produced since the second half of the '50s. This summer in Vancouver, on the Expo 86 site, Michael Snow is unveiling a series of ambitious new works. And once again, millions of people will enjoy Snow's creations (the only official contemporary art presence on the grounds of the fair), many of them not even suspecting that they are experiencing a work of art.

Entitled *The Spectral Image* and located in a former locomotive repair hangar known as the Round House (one of the few original structures on the Expo site), this exhibition brings together some 48 holographic images, grouped into a dozen installation pieces. A didactic explanation of the holographic medium is mounted on panels near the entrance to the building, but aside from a brief artist's statement, there are basically no clues indicating that, indeed, this is an art show. There are no paintings on the walls, no arty-looking objects. Very simply, Expo-goers will find a series of etched holographic plates — some hanging in specific groupings, others contained within sculptural forms — in a 929-square-metre space inundated with exquisite light and monochrome sound.

Holograms are photographic negatives made on a plate without the use of a lens but by means of interference between two parts of a split laser beam. As Snow explains in his introductory statement, holography shares the two-dimensionality of painting, drawing and photography. But it is also allied to sculpture by its illusion of real space. Invented in 1947 by Dennis Gabor, holography has become a popular medium only in the last few years. While artists have toyed with holography since the late '60s, contributing such devices as the sand table used as a stable support for the objects to be etched on the plate, little of the work



Planetscape, above, reveals a lunar vista bathed in mercury vapour light, as if glimpsed through the window of a spacecraft. *Driven*, opposite, combines a colour photo on wood with a pulsed hologram.

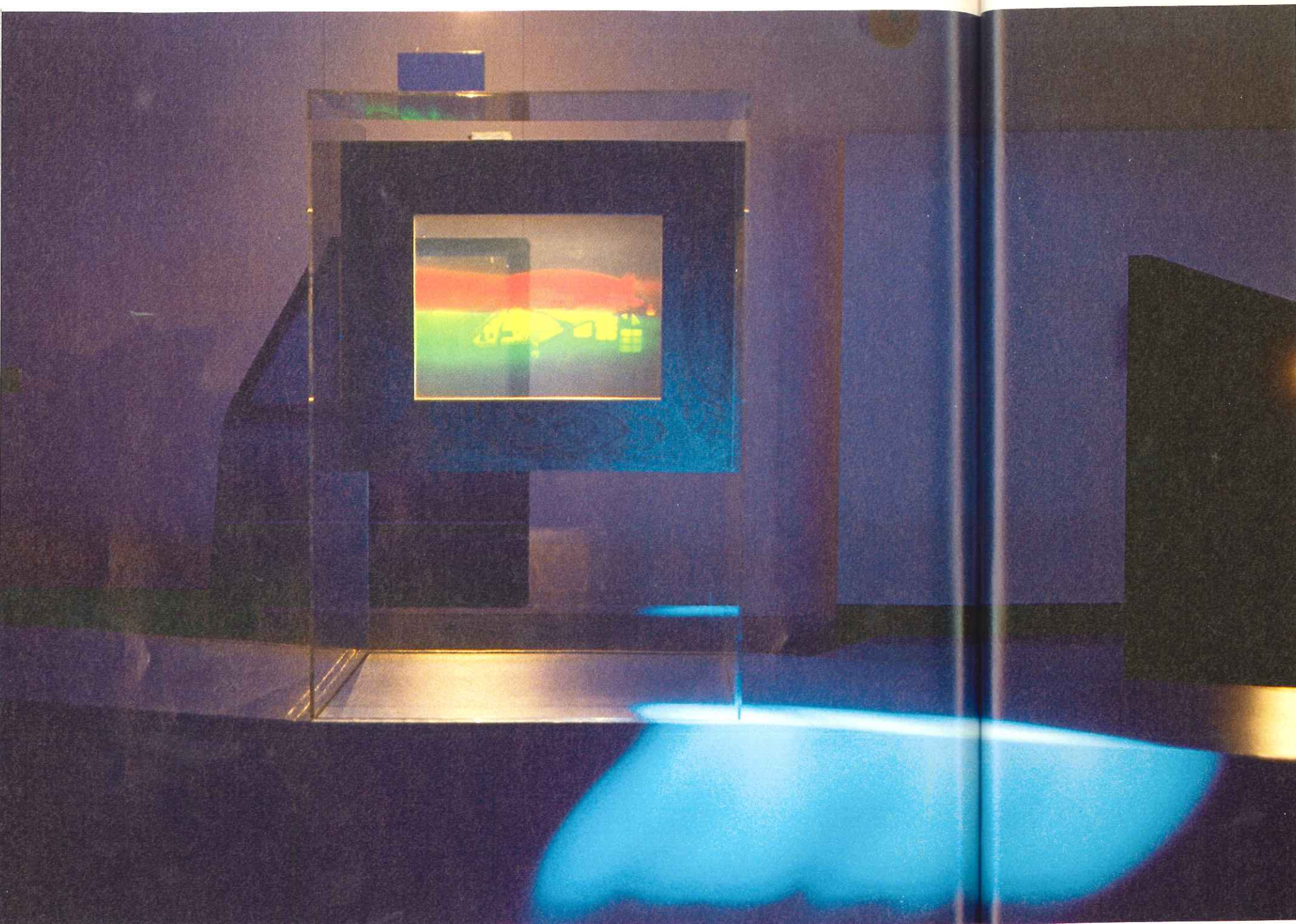
done in this area has so far been aesthetically conclusive.

Snow didn't come to use holography because of its sudden popularity. Rather, it was a challenge put forward to him by Expo visual arts consultant Luke Rombout. Originally, Rombout was to curate a large international exhibition specifically designed for the visual arts pavilion planned for the site. When these plans were changed and it was learned that the pavilion would not be built, it was clearly impossible for Rombout to carry out his original idea for a show involving all of Expo's participating countries. Given the new building allocated for the visual arts — the Round House — and given that a group show of contemporary art was not feasible for that space, Rombout elected to invite one artist of international stature to work with holography, a medium chosen for its relationship with the transportation and communications theme of the fair. Because of the type of work Snow had done previously, much of it influenced by the camera, he was Rombout's first choice.

Although Rombout felt that holography would be a logical medium for Snow, and although Snow had in fact been interested in working in that area for some time, the risk was nevertheless a considerable one. The artist had only one year to produce a fully resolved work. Given the technical complexities, both the consultant and the artist were, as Rombout says, putting their heads on the block. The resulting exhibition will only be on display for the duration of Expo 86. Afterwards it will be dismantled and components are likely to find their way into the collections of a few Canadian museums. But it is unlikely that one will be able to experience it again under such controlled conditions.

Although holography is the common medium of the works in this exhibition, *The Spectral Image* is much less about technology than about looking. The properties of vision and the mechanisms of the perceptual process have always been at the very core of Snow's concerns. (The fact that his father went blind when he was still a youngster might have something to do with this.) In his first important group of works, the *Walking Woman* series of the '60s, he was already haunted by the impact of the camera on visual perception — its framing and compositional devices, for example — and a large portion of his work since then has been directly related to photographic and film processes. The meditative focusing of his much celebrated film *Wavelength* (1967) for example, was research into the intensity of perception. In this film the viewer's vision is concentrated on a portion of a room through a lengthy and unwavering camera zoom forward. In his film *La Région Centrale* (1969-70) this intensity is evoked





Light Waves, above, one of two major installations, is composed of 34 theatrical gels, set in a row of skylights that run the building's length, producing a full spectrum of colours.

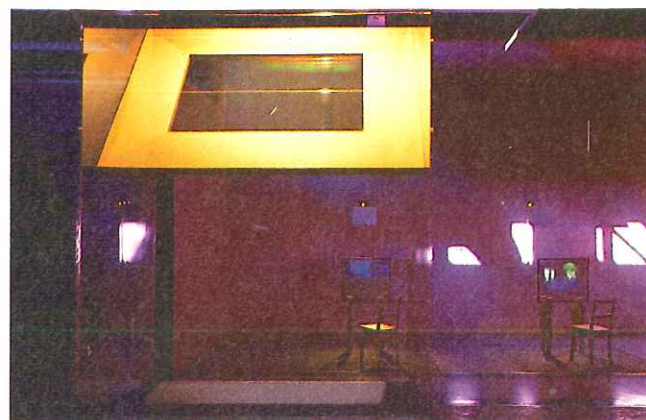
by the obsessiveness of the camera's circular movements and its speed. In more recent works, such as *Wait* (1985), the incredibly dense concentration of light (3,500 watts) within a one foot square frame is a device used to highlight an aspect of visual perception. His work with holography falls within this continuum.

Light has a lot to do with photography and film, as well as being a major factor in holography — where, in Snow's words, it becomes a material both in the production of a hologram and in its presentation. It also has everything to do with vision. And this exhibition, as its title implies, is all about light, about how certain qualities of illumination affect visual perception. As Snow writes in reference to *The Spectral Image*, "this title is uniquely appropriate to holography but it also can fittingly be applied to all colour representation including photography and painting. Another aspect of its rightness to describe this exhibition is that the 'subjects' in all representations are ghosts, spectres. The experience of this truth has never been more powerful than with holography."

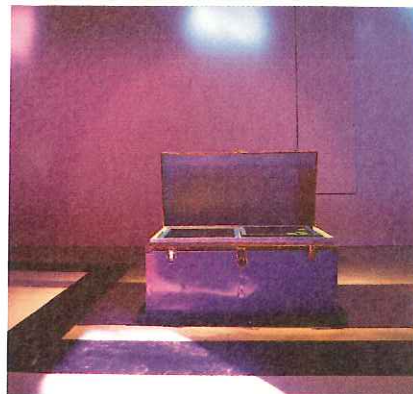
As in Snow's previous works, the artist's own biography has served as primary material for the pieces he has created. *Children's Parade*, for instance, the first work encountered by the viewer in his itinerary around the exhibition, is definitely informed by Snow's experience of raising his young son. The work is composed of 10 holographic plates hung in sequence above a wedge-shaped sculptural form. (The sculpture is painted in graduating colours.) The holograms offer a stylized history of transportation, with each tableau reflecting a different phase of human development through arrangements of toys. The first one, suspended at the eye-level of a small child, shows a walking baby doll, seen from above. The final one, at the other extremity of the line, shows a spaceship. So if early in life the notion of transportation simply means walking, later on it comes to mean space-age velocity.

Biographical sources are also at work in *Sailboat* (To Wieland), a juxtaposition of three marine scenes executed in three different media — a back-lit transparency, a child's drawing and a hologram of a romantic marine painting, complete with gold frame. The iconography here certainly relates to early works by Toronto artist Joyce Wieland, with whom Snow has entertained a privileged, long-time relationship.

The most ambitious work in this exhibition is certainly *Still Life in 8 Calls*, a series of eight stylistic variations on the same image — a still life composition of a telephone, keys, a lamp, a pencil, and a pair of glasses. Although the references suggested



Above, a detail from *Children's Parade*. The work totals 10 panels, encompassing a stylized history of transport. Below, two views of *Parade*: below left, a panel with a section of *Still Life* visible behind it; below right, a more complete view, showing plates suspended above a wedge-shaped sculpture.



A viewer who peers into *Steamer Trunk* (above) is greeted by fish, flippers and a canoe paddle, as if seen from a glass-bottomed boat. *Redfice*, opposite, involves 20 sculptural and holographic compositions set in various apertures.

by these specific objects relate, once again, to the themes of the fair, this work deals primarily with the verification and validity of categories of representation: portraits, figure compositions, still life and landscape. As such, *Still Life* reflects Snow's ongoing interest in modes of representation.

Finally, the inclusion of two exquisite light installations among the series of holographic pieces enables the viewer to situate these works within a much broader context. The first of these light installations uses the row of skylights located in the upper part of the structure to create a beautiful spectrum of colours that runs from one end of the building to the other, illuminating the interior. Although reflecting quite literally the theme of the exhibit, it totally transforms our perception of this industrial space. The second consists of an area lit with sodium vapour lamps located at the far end of the space, behind a large frame. All visitors must pass through this area, and as they do the specific light conditions radically transform all colour perception. (A red object, for instance, will appear to be dull grey.) If the involvement of the spectators seems more obvious in this particular work, it is also the case in many other pieces.

Whether looking downward through the surface of a lake, as we do in *Steamer Trunk*, or surveying the panoramic *Planet-scape*, whether looking at people from above (as we do in *Maura Seated*) or from underneath, as in *Vertigoing*, we are gravitating in a 360-degree course around the subject matter. Because of the nature of holography, each image is seen to best advantage from a specific angle of vision. The gymnastics of the spectators as they jockey for the best position can be quite funny as each successive visitor experiences each new piece. This involvement of the viewer in the work is part of the pleasure Michael Snow draws from his own work.

Snow has certainly interpreted the theme of Expo 86 in an original manner. But the strength of this exhibition remains its very sharp understanding of visual perception and communication and the bodying forth of these interests through new technological tools. For those who are already acquainted with Michael Snow's work, *The Spectral Image* offers a delightful overview of the concerns that have stimulated his imagination since his beginnings as an artist. For those who will experience his work for the first time at Expo 86, this is a dazzling immersion in this artist's prolific inventiveness.

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