



The World As I Saw It

Tom Dean's *Girl* looks like a skirt or, as its creator describes it, like "a body cut off at the waist." Others might see it as a strangely funereal flower. An upended vessel. An exotic essay in stillness and motion (its prow-shaped crown cuts through space). A mourning of maidenhead in which, says Dean, "the object of desire is both elevated and concealed" under soft folds of form.

The object stands at the beginning of Dean's new body of work, and in the aftermath of his extraordinary *Excerpts from a Description of the Universe*, the sequential sculptural project that was the artist's sole creative preoccupation from 1984 to 1987. If the *Excerpts* were words,



Girl 1989
Gabardine, plaster, Styrofoam
54 x 39 in.
Photo: J. Williamson

fragments, then the new fabric pieces, like *Girl*, are the artist's first attempts at whole sentences. In all, the *Excerpts* include some 300 objects designed to be laid out — specimen-like — on 40 custom-built tables. Each one is an experiment in Dean's perennial concerns: stillness and thrust, horizontality and verticality, interior and exterior, sameness and difference, transformation and stasis. These concerns should not be mistaken with the merely formal; what makes them compelling is their closeness to our origins, to the basic currency of consciousness.

What these enigmatic little forms look like, however, are almost recognizable

The Visionary Physics of Tom Dean

By Sarah Milroy
Portrait Photograph by Ruth Kaplan

objects from the everyday world — clothes, hats, tools, wigs, plants — that somehow manage to avoid being quite what we thought they were. Sometimes charming, sometimes hallucinatory, sometimes mundane and sometimes exquisitely beautiful, they are, taken all together, enormously eccentric. If they could speak they would squeak or chatter or hum. In short, they are animated with an intelligence, a veritable laboratory of the imagination.

In fact, Dean started out as a scientist, studying physics and mathematics at Carleton University before throwing in the towel in 1967. "I realized the whole notion of the mad scientist — of a sort of Thomas Edison figure — was entirely obsolete. The reality is you end up work-

ing for a corporation developing products, instead of being out there on your own." Instead Dean was increasingly drawn to a group of like-minded souls called the Sock and Buskin, a university theatre group that was exploring — among other things — the theatre of the absurd. Here Dean came up against the work of Pinter and Ionesco, playwrights who posited an absurd universe that seemed just like home.

But by the end of 1967, kindred spirits notwithstanding, Dean had left Ottawa for Montreal where he was to spend the next nine years. In his first year there he founded The Yellow Door, a coffee house that was also a clearing house for poets and musicians. As well, he talked his way into the BFA program at Sir George Williams University on the basis of a handful of drawings he had done while working in the Sudbury mines. All of them depicted arrows and what Dean describes as "thrusting forms." "Looking back on them, they were really very phallic, although I didn't think so at the time," remembers Dean. "They were about purposefulness. But I think they were ironic about purposefulness."

So was Dean. Still mired in existential thought, his key influence at art college was his teacher, Gary Coward, a Marxist/Maoist painter, sculptor and rabble-rouser who has only recently resurfaced in Vancouver. Dean's most successful work from those years is a piece called *970 Market St.*, which Dean renamed *Four Floors*. Taking as his source the floors of the apartment where he was living, Dean meticulously replicated four linoleum patterns onto rectangular canvases and mounted them on the wall. The work showed labor as patently absurd, "a mindless but also a meditative act," as Dean remembers it. He may still have harbored doubts about his validity as an artist, but in 1969, Mario Amaya, then a New York curator, talked the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts into buying the work for the museum's collection.

The years between Dean's graduation from art school in 1970 until his departure from Montreal seven years later were frenetically productive and decid-



Excerpts from a *Description of the Universe* 1986
Porcelain, cast iron, wood
steel, plaster on 10 tables
Each table approx. 8 x 3 ft.

Greased Chair 1987
Chair with black grease
32 x 32 x 32 in.



Detail from *Excerpts from a Description of the Universe* 1986
Human hair
12 in. high
Photo: J. Williamson



The Floating Staircase 1978-81
Wood, steel
20 x 22 x 24 in.

Burning of the Floating Staircase 1981



Detail from *Excerpts from a Description of the Universe*
Hair, plaster
Diameter 24 x 12 in.
Styling: John Steinberg
Photo: J. Williamson

edly underground. Soon after graduation, he embarked on a suite he calls "the good-bye paintings" — pretty bleak irony for someone standing at the very beginning of his career. The first of these was an enormous canvas covered with sequins, each one painstakingly sewn on by the artist. This first work spelled out a glittering "GOOD-BYE," while two subsequent installments — painted in acrylic and india ink on canvas — broke the word down into a chaos of dots. Like the linoleum paintings, the goodbye paintings were absurdly labor-intensive, an exercise in futility. But because of their dazzling materiality and their dry humor, they were far from morose. (In fact, Dean's *GOOD-BYE #1* became something of a local landmark when he hung it from his studio window above St. Laurent and Prince Arthur.)

In the early '70s, Dean co-founded the artist-run centre Vehicule d'Art. At the same time he began making sculptures and installations that dealt with relativity and perspective. As well, he made his infamous "greased chairs" — armchairs

and straight-backed kitchen chairs swaddled in thick grease. Dean says the grease was a way of setting the object apart from its environment, of drawing attention to the elusive boundary between a thing and its environment (elusive to Dean as much because of the particle nature of physical matter as because of the relative nature of perception).

The greased chairs also operate on a purely visceral level, setting up a dialectic of attraction and repulsion. You cannot quite bear not to touch them, but having done so you are immediately beset by the difficult task of getting the grease off your fingers. (When the chairs were shown again at The Power Plant in Toronto several years ago, people desperately tried to wipe their hands on the gallery's white walls.) Like much of his later work, the greased chairs explore the way physical properties and conditions alter behavior and trigger the release of multiple meanings. (Dean and fellow artist Steven Lack used this same strategy in their special pornography issue of *Beaux Arts*, smearing the magazine with Vase-

line and bagging it in plastic before distribution.)

Like a lot of Dean's work, the greased chairs had a slightly nasty edge. But in the mid-'70s, an unmistakable note of darkness was starting to take over Dean's work. In 1974, he exhibited photographs of his genitals twisted into hair-raising configurations (which he insists look more painful than they were). But his *Performance* of the same year (a collaboration with Margaret Dragu) was nothing short of grisly. The work opened with tap dancing, a funny song and the seduction music from *Don Giovanni*, but quickly nose-dived in the second half when Dean and another "performer" — a Montreal street fighter — went three rounds in a boxing match, drawing blood and confusing and frightening his audience. In his tussle with purposefulness, he was down for the count.

In 1976, Dean moved to Toronto, leaving behind a city that was now inscribed with difficult memories. The works that he began in his new home had an air of regeneration. Certainly Dean's best-known Toronto work — other than the more recent *Excerpts* — is the notorious *Floating Staircase* that Dean and an army of friends and fellow artists built (at Dean's expense) and set afloat on Lake Ontario. Formally, the project summed up Dean's overarching concern — to reconcile the two poles of human nature: the active (the vertical, the purposeful, the transmitter) and the passive (the horizontal, the inert, the receptor). With its large, flat base and its upward reach, the *Floating Staircase* balances both principles in one form.

In a sense, however, it was a contradictory thing: a monument to purposelessness, a stairway to nowhere (particularly ironic when viewed against the newly "world-class" skyline of Toronto). And yet, through the enormous efforts required to build the staircase, to cover its entire surface with thousands of tiny dots (a throwback to the *GOOD-BYE* paintings), to maintain it, to defend it from vandals and from the harbor police, and to worry about its future (one plan was to motorize it and sail it up the Welland Canal to Ottawa), Dean's *Staircase* was an affirmation of striving, creativity and action over inertness, even though in the end he destroyed his Frankenstein in

a semi-public burning ceremony. (The ruins were subsequently exhibited at Mercer Union in Toronto and are now in storage at the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery.)

From 1978 until 1981, the *Floating Staircase* absorbed all of Dean's resources — financial, physical and creative. With the staircase burned and his obligations to it severed, he experienced something like levity. Out of this new mood grew the meditative and sweetly melancholy videotape (originally conceived as a performance) entitled *Fear of Blue*, a rambling poetic discourse on mankind's love and awe of the great blue void above. "As the hand is at the end of the arm, so blue is above us," wrote Dean; it is a condition of our existence, shaping consciousness and defining our thoughts. The hour-long work is made up of slow-paced handheld shots of the sky bisected by planes, punctuated by building cranes, replete with clouds — amorphous fields for imaginative projection — and of the sea, the fathomless body of blue that gathers up both our love of flight (the weightlessness of swimming) and our fear of falling. All of this rolls by us to the accompaniment of the melancholy melodies of old cowboy tunes, yodelling and slide guitar. The universe of *Fear of Blue* is a universe that is at once lonely and oddly maternal, like being embraced by nothing.

It is also a universe whose physical properties — like the color blue — govern us in elusive ways. It was this line of enquiry that led Dean to an explosion of form, the *Excerpts From a Description of the Universe*. The first set of *Excerpts* — a single table of objects — was exhibited at an Ontario College of Art faculty open house show in 1985 (Dean still works there as a teacher and has spent the last three years heading up OCA's New York studio). Like much of Dean's earlier work, the series bites off more than it is possible to chew, attempting to describe the universe as a kind of meditative discipline. In this series, Dean deploys an exhaustive sculptural vocabulary — the sphere, the cone, the ellipse, the square, the cylinder, the hollow vessel, the draped form, the measuring form, the form in motion, the static form.

But perhaps even more impressive is his wonderfully various use of materials, from lead, cast iron, ceramic, and steel to

hair, fabric and carbon — most of which he sets about mastering himself. Some of his most arresting works, those dealing with hair and the top of the head, fashion hair into odd hat-like shapes. Others thread hair through the surface of the table like bristles through the back of a brush. In these works, Dean is thinking about hair as a kind of drapery for the top of the body, and of the way the top of the body — the head — acts as a sign for the whole. Other head pieces have a wedge-like shape, articulating our sense of the human body as a form propelled through space, equipped only to see in front of itself. ("Most of our cultural artefacts are shaped by the fact that we have a front and a back.") Other forms seem to deal with the distinctions between male and female gender.

In none of this, as Dean is quick to point out, does he set out to illustrate preconceived themes. His process, having at its centre the exploration of meaning through the formal and material properties of the world, is in fact quite the opposite. In the end one can think of Dean's work as a kind of visionary physics, a morphology of the imagination in which the physical world is somehow translated from the original, reconsidered, and then reconstituted in new forms, familiar, yet not wholly recognizable.



Detail from *Excerpts from a Description of the Universe* 1986
Porcelain
8 and 9 in. high
Photo: J. Williamson



Foot 1988
Cast steel
17 in. high
Photo: J. Williamson

Performance 1974
Tom Dean with Glendon Light
Photo: Steven Lack

