

Ricky Swallow/MATRIX 191

For those who came in late

April 22 – May 27, 2001

University of California
Berkeley Art Museum

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“I realized that my studio is a place where objects come to die or to be rendered in their final moments. Bleached of all their functional charm, they serve to commemorate their past operations.”

—Ricky Swallow¹

A cross between a cultural archeologist and a hobbyist model maker, twenty-six year old Australian artist Ricky Swallow explores the circular motion of culture in his meticulously handcrafted sculptures and coyly rendered drawings. Blending whimsy with a disturbing undertone of malevolence, his works are informed by science fiction, pop music, the *Planet of the Apes*, art history, evolution, and the paranormal. His sculptures reference architectural models, product prototypes, and the museological archiving of formerly essential objects. Regardless of scale, from miniatures to life-size sculptures, craftsmanship predominates in Swallow's work. *For those who came in late*, Swallow's MATRIX exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum, can be divided into three pseudo-thematic parts: broken communication, human disappearance, and the celebration of the time that follows.

The artist's early signature works incorporate 1950s and 1960s phonograph turntables, which Swallow transforms into miniature dioramas that rotate between 16 and 78 rpm. The sculptures thus revolve endlessly, literally replaying a moment in time over and over. *Even the odd orbit* (1999), a group of twenty-one turntable models organized into four distinct groups, encapsulates many of Swallow's recurring themes. One work is a model of a gallery displaying a Ricky Swallow retrospective complete with miniature replicas of earlier works as well as a rethinking of *Humans are smarter*, a 1998 work as it would appear in an exhibition later that year. Swallow's works offer subtle social commentary on the situations they depict: a crashed BMX and its rider sprawled face down beside it; faceless youth seated at video game terminals; chimpanzees holding human hostages at gunpoint on a rooftop.

Like many of Swallow's works, *I Don't Want to Know if You Are Lonely/Harry Feinberg's Communicator* uses elements of 1980s culture as a point of departure. The positioning of the content in that era is less important, however, than its placement within traditional art historical genres, such as still life and formalist modes of representation. The dual title, *I Don't Want to Know if You Are Lonely/Harry Feinberg's Communicator*, combines that of a song by the punk band Husker Dü and the name of the designer of the object for the movie *E.T. (The Extra-Terrestrial)*.



Swallow says he included Feinberg's name so that the communicator would assume an air of historical importance. Carved from balsa wood, this work is one of a series of objects by Swallow that allow a type of transcendence: the telescope which facilitates eyes travelling into the universe; the metal detector which makes hidden things visible; and, the E.T. communicator which promises the hope of returning to another world. Swallow's works vacillate between a yearning to celebrate the magic and mocking those who would believe such a hokey invention would have any hope of success.

Silence Kit/Upturned PowerBook is the exact size, shape, and form of the artist's own computer, which he used as a model. Swallow makes replicas developed to unusable perfection. He has described his use of the 1:1 relationship employed in prototype making this way: **“The idea that you are approaching something that in every way looks like, and has all of the parts of, the thing that you really want it to be, but totally emphasizes the fact that it is just a fabrication of that thing.”**² Swallow's sculpture functions as a non-functional prototype for the prototype of the Apple PowerBook, which was, of course, not carved out of wood. The work commemorates the pre-use or pre-communication phase of the object. Swallow's *PowerBook* is mutated into a static, inoperable form. He exacerbates its uselessness by turning it upside down. As such, his computer posits its eventual and inevitable fate: extinction through obsolescence—a victim of the technological survival of the fittest.

The body of a pigmented resin skeleton patterned in gray, olive, and black camouflage forms the horizontal section of a park bench in *For those who came in late*. The head and feet fuse with the architectural elements of the bench. This amalgamation recalls a scene from the sci-fi cult film *Logan's Run*. In it, a man who is being pursued is shot and killed and then sprayed with a chemical that causes his body to dissolve into the pavement. *For those who came in late* is Swallow's second major work involving the full body of a skeleton. The idea of repetition is essential to Swallow's work, and many of his objects either refigure or reconfigure others. He continually perfects his ideas and themes through updated sculptures. The establishment of a dialogue between individual works (or series of works) and between exhibitions is part of Swallow's strategy as an artist.³

Apple 2001 B/W, 2001; pigmented resin; 3 3/4 x 3 x 3 in. (scale 1:1). Photo by John Brash.



A skeleton is seen climbing a ladder in the original work; it is unclear whether he is in the process of rising to his first moment or descending to his last. Swallow says of the skull, **“It is an image or icon that has been laughing at me all my life in a way...I have been looking at the skeleton as, rather than being a sign of mortality, being the sign of immortality.”**⁴ Here Swallow attempts to capture someone or something's last moments before it disappears forever. The artist often references the ruins of Pompeii when describing his works. Accordingly, he records objects unaware of their impending, untimely demise, things whose importance becomes elevated because they happened to be saved.

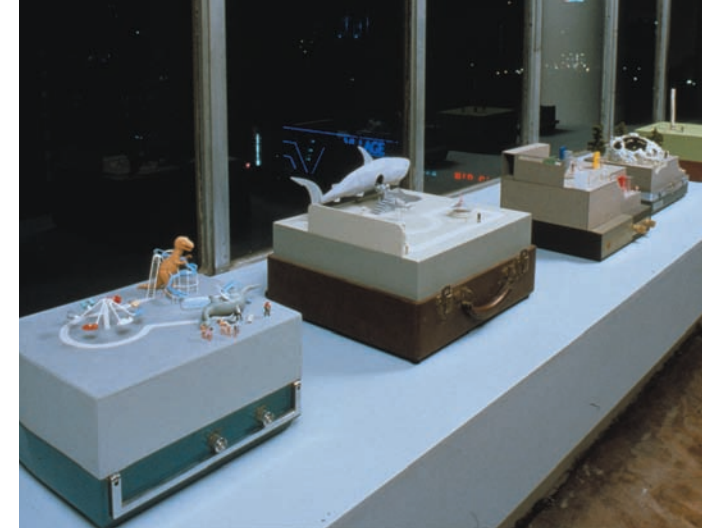
The patterning on *For those who came in late* covers the entire object and reveals the artist's gesture as well as providing a more straight forward (and humorous) art historical reference by aping the process and product of Jackson Pollock's archetypal painting *Lavender Mist*.

Vacated Campers, two 1:1 scale tennis shoes constructed out of binders board, paper, and glue, is a metaphysical self-portrait. Swallow replicates his own empty shoes in a way that suggests he will himself one day be replaced with an updated model. The worn soles indicate aged and traveled objects. The shoes, absent of any apparent owner, can be positioned within the context of urban lore. Similar to abandoned sneakers seen hanging from telephone wires, intentionally but oddly placed, they function as representations of vanishing civilizations and urban decay.

The sixty skull keyrings that form *We the Sedimentary Ones/Use Your Illusions vol. 1-60* are souvenirs of the artist's practice as well as of his recent artist's residency in New Zealand. Created from layer upon layer of pigmented resin, they recall the glass animals filled with colored sand that children buy to memorialize a family vacation. The keyrings are commemorative elements of the eventual disappearance of humanity and our culture. Says Swallow, **“It is probably the equivalent of going to a concert and bringing home a tee-shirt and hoping that the tee-shirt is going to contain everything till it falls off of your back. In a scale it is quite diminished from the original concert, but I guess it is what you attribute to it.”**⁵

All of the drawings included in Swallow's MATRIX exhibition display the reversal of evolutionary processes. In *Aping the Humans*, a drawing inspired by the dramatic contrast and haunting figures found in the work of El Greco, an ape stands off to the side intensely watching two youths. Here Swallow records the transfer of knowledge

I Don't Want to Know if You Are Lonely/Harry Feinberg's Communicator, 2001 (detail); balsa wood, plaster, and string; 37 3/4 x 98 7/16 x 59 in. Photo by John Brash.



that is necessary for the apes to take over the planet once humanity disappears. In Swallow's world, as in *Planet of the Apes*, the apes win in the end.

While artists such as Keith Edmier recreate objects of personal importance from their childhood; Tom Sachs constructs replicas of ordinary objects and cultural icons; Callum Morton explores the concept of the architectural model; and Michael Ashkin fabricates miniature scenes of dystopic events, Ricky Swallow combines all of these elements and more into his unique and arresting art.

In the introductory text for his first solo exhibition in 1997, Swallow asked what would or could be learned from his objects if they were sealed as is in a gallery excavated in the future. Swallow mines culture for content and peppers his work with social commentary. His acutely contemporary objects, resembling *nature morte* and presenting *vanitas*, are actually somewhat conservative: representational with an overt interpretation. Themes of death and immortality, evolution and survival, and transience and permanence filter in and out. The most moving and poignant description of Swallow's work that I have read was written by critic Justin Patton: "Think of the gypsy Melquiades, in the first scene of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, whose magnet pulls a cargo of lost objects out from their hiding places. His motto might be Swallow's: 'Things have a life of their own. It's simply a matter of waking up their souls.'"⁶

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

¹ Telephone conversation between Ricky Swallow and the author, 3/14/2001.
² Marah Braye, "The Voyeur Awakes," *Art and Australia*, Winter 2001, vol. 38, no. 4, p. 566.
³ *Ibid.*, p. 565.
⁴ Lara Travis, "None More Blacker," *None More Blacker* (Melbourne, Australia: 200 Gertrude Street, 2001), n/p.
⁵ *Ibid.*
⁶ Justin Paton, "The Recreation Room," *Above Ground Sculpture* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2000), n/p.

Vacated Campers, 2000; binders board, paper, and glue; 3 ¹⁵/₁₆ x 12 ⁵/₈ x 13 ³/₄ in. (scale 1:1). Photo by Paul Green.

Ricky Swallow was born in 1974 in San Remo, Australia. He attended the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne, Australia, where he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1997. He continues to live and work in Melbourne.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2000
 "Above Ground Sculpture," Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand, and Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand
 "Unplugged," Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, Australia
 "Platstruct," Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
 "Individual Ape," Hot Rod Tea Room, Oslo, Norway
 1999
 "The Multistylus Programme," Studio 12, 200 Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
 1998
 "Repo Man," Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, Australia
 1997
 "The Lighter Side of the Dark Side," Grey Area Art Space Inc., Melbourne, Australia

Selected Group Exhibitions

2001
 "Ricky Swallow and Erick Swenson," Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia
 "None More Blacker," 200 Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
 "Utopia / ROR," Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland
 2000
 "Keith Edmier, Ricky Swallow, Erick Swenson," Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY
 "Drawn From Life," Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, NY
 "Terra Mirabilis," Centre for Visual Arts, Cardiff, Wales
 "Brand New Master Copy," UKS Gallery, Oslo, Norway
 "Rent," Overgaden Gallery, Copenhagen, Denmark
 1999
 "Contempora5," The Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, Australia
 "Signs of Life," Melbourne International Biennial, Melbourne, Australia
 "Spellbound," Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
 "Walkmen," with David Jolly and David Noonan, Synaesthesia Music, Melbourne, Australia

1998
 "Institutional Transit Lobby," 200 Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne, Australia

We the Sedimentary Ones/Use Your Illusions vol. 1-60, 2000; pigmented resin, keyrings; 60 keyrings, approximately 22 ⁷/₁₆ x 48 ⁷/₁₆ x 1 ³/₈ in. overall. Photo by Bill Nichol.

"Video Soup," Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland
 "Hobby Core," Stripp Gallery, Melbourne, Australia
 "All This And Heaven Too," Adelaide Biennial Exhibition, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

Selected Catalogues and Publications

None More Blacker, 200 Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne, Australia, 2001.
Ricky Swallow / Erick Swenson, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia, 2001.
All This And Heaven Too, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia, 1998.
Above Ground Sculpture, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2000.
Brand New Master Copy, UKS Gallery, Oslo, Norway, 2000.
Contempora5, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, Australia, 1999.
Memory Made Plastic / Ricky Swallow, published in collaboration with Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 1999.

Selected Bibliography

Braye, Marah. "The Voyeur Awakes," *Art and Australia*, Winter 2001, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 560-567.
 Engberg, Juliana. "No Radio," *Art/Text*, August–October 1998, no. 62, pp. 32-35.
 Nicholson, Tom. "Ricky Swallow: Leagues Under the Sea," *Like, Art Magazine*, Summer/Autumn 1997/98, no. 5, pp. 12-16.
 Palmer, Daniel. "Shadowplay," *Frieze*, April 2001, no. 58, pp. 84-87.
 _____. "Melbourne International Biennial," *Frieze*, September 1999, no. 48, p. 100.

Work in MATRIX

Apple 2001 B/W, 2001
 Pigmented resin
 Scale 1:1
 3 ³/₄ x 3 x 3 in. (9.5 x 7.5 x 7.5 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
Far those who came in late, 2001
 Pigmented resin and wire
 Scale 1:1
 31 ¹/₂ x 59 x 27 ¹/₂ in. (80 x 150 x 70 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

I Don't Want to Know if You Are Lonely/Harry Feinberg's Communicator, 2001
 Balsa wood, plaster, and colored Plexiglas
 Scale 1:1
 37 ³/₄ x 98 ⁷/₁₆ x 59 in. (95.8 x 250 x 150 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Silence Kit/Upturned PowerBook, 2001
 Balsa wood, plaster, and colored Plexiglas
 Scale 1:1
 24 x 54 ³/₄ x 20 ³/₄ in. (61 x 139 x 52 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Vacated Campers, 2000
 Binders board, paper, and glue
 Scale 1:1
 3 ¹⁵/₁₆ x 12 ⁵/₈ x 13 ³/₄ in. (10 x 32 x 35 cm)
 Private collection, Brisbane

Communication, 2001 (detail); watercolor on paper; 15 x 11 in. Photo by John Brash.

We the Sedimentary Ones/ Use Your Illusions vol. 1-60, 2000
 Pigmented resin, keyrings
 60 keyrings, each approximately 2 x 1 ³/₈ x 1 ³/₈ in. (5 x 3.5 x 3.5 cm); 22 ⁷/₁₆ x 48 ⁷/₁₆ x 1 ³/₈ in. (57 x 123 x 3.5 cm) overall
 Courtesy of Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

Aping the Humans, 2001
 Watercolor on paper
 11 x 15 in. (28 x 38 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Communication, 2001
 Watercolor on paper
 15 x 11 in. (38 x 28 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Chain, 2001
 Watercolor on paper
 15 x 11 in. (38 x 28 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Earth Time/Ship Time, 2001
 Watercolor on paper
 11 x 15 in. (28 x 38 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Outdoor Ape, 2001
 Watercolor on paper
 15 x 11 in. (38 x 28 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

25 additional works on paper, all 2001:
 Watercolor on paper
 11 x 15 in. (28 x 38 cm)
 Courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Please Note:

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson will give a curator's walkthrough of this exhibition, along with Ed Osborn/MATRIX 193 *Vanishing Point*, on Thursday, May 3, at 12:15 p.m.

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COVER: *The First One Now*, 2000; pigmented resin; 25 x 23 x 50 in. (scale 1:1). Photo by Paul Green.

ABOVE: *Even the Odd Orbit*, 1998-99; portable turntables, chip M.D.F., printed figures, acrylic paint; dimensions variable; "Signs of Life," Melbourne International Biennial, Melbourne, Australia—installation view. Photo by Kenneth Pleban.

