

Ian Burns by Jonathan T.D. Neil

It was a matter of bad timing. On the day we finally managed to make it out to Ian Burns's studio last spring, almost all of the work had disappeared to art fairs in France and Switzerland, or to shows in Spain, Ireland and Italy. The studio was not empty, mind you. Scattered among piles of repurposed wood and wires lay various aborted attempts at new pieces or the cannibalised remains of previous ones. But there was nothing 'finished', for which the artist kept apologising.

As compensation Burns began describing, or rather demonstrating, the seed idea for what would become *Ice (Version 3): Ode to Lady Jane* (2007), a wall-bound 'kinetic sculpture' (a limited label, as we will see) that produces a scene which appears to be shot off the bow of an icebreaker as it bobs on gentle Arctic swells. "You could see that looking like an iceberg, couldn't you?" he asked, pointing a tiny closed-circuit spy camera at a white plastic bag, the now environmentally vilified kind common to New York City's bodegas. And indeed, at that moment, looking at the video feed on a nearby monitor, I found it difficult to think of anything else that could quite so easily 'look like' an iceberg at all.

This kind of mimesis is central to Burns's art, and it's most effective when live video feeds play a role in rendering, or representing, his scenes of reality. This was the case when I first encountered the artist's work in late 2005. Even then I thought that the diorama works which produced various animated shadow plays remained too couched in, and comfortable with, their own 'contraption-ness'. But the scenes of motion that appeared on the monitors – driving in *Here in My Car* (2005), flying in *15 Hours* (2005) – achieved something else. At the time, I understood these scenes to arise out of so many different 'reality effects', those seemingly insignificant details by and through which mimesis operates. But now I see these reality effects in turn as a subcategory of what I understand to be Burns's engagement with assemblage – that is, with assemblage as a concept, and most definitely not as a style.

Thus what those earlier pieces and what *Ice (Version 3)* or *Himalayas* (2007) or *Pinnacle* (2007) demonstrate is how mimesis arises as an emergent property of Burns's art, an ontological reality that is separate and distinct from any part of the apparatus itself. And though it may seem counterintuitive at first, this is exactly what connects Burns to independent filmmakers and artists such as Ken Jacobs, Tony Conrad and Anthony McCall, whose efforts from the late 1960s and 70s have been labelled 'paracinematic', but which we know, more simply, as avant-garde.

clockwise from below left: **Sanitary Gesture**, 2007, overhead projector, hand sanitiser, changed daily by gallery staff, dimensions variable; **Ice (Version 3): Ode to Lady Jane**, 2007, mixed-media kinetic sculpture producing live video and audio feed, 185 x 478 cm; **End of an Era**, 2007, 16 black & white televisions, mixed-media sculpture producing live video feed, dimensions variable; **The Way We Know It - Surrounded Islands (Version 1) - Keep it clean and organized**, 2007, mixed-media kinetic sculpture producing live video and audio feed, 127 x 127 x 71 cm. All images: photo: Etienne Fossard, courtesy Spencer Brownstone Gallery, New York



