



Colby Parsons In An Instant



*New organs of perception come into being as a result of necessity.
Therefore, increase your necessity, so that you may increase your perception. ~ Jallaludin Rumi*

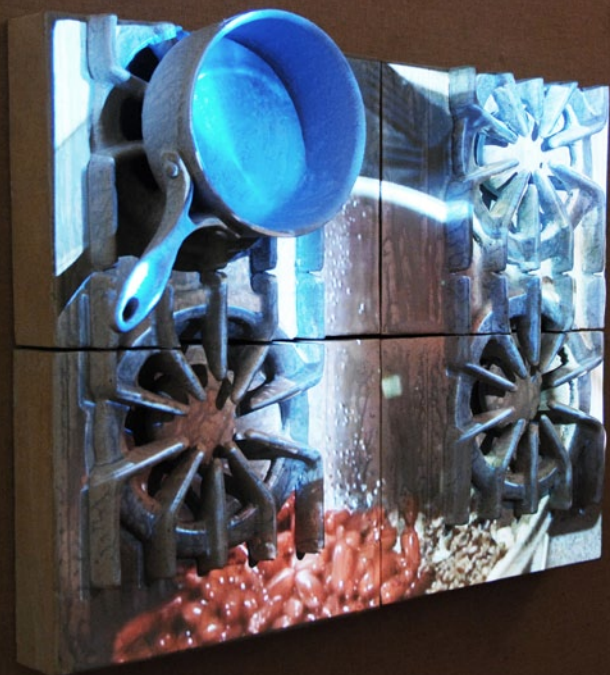
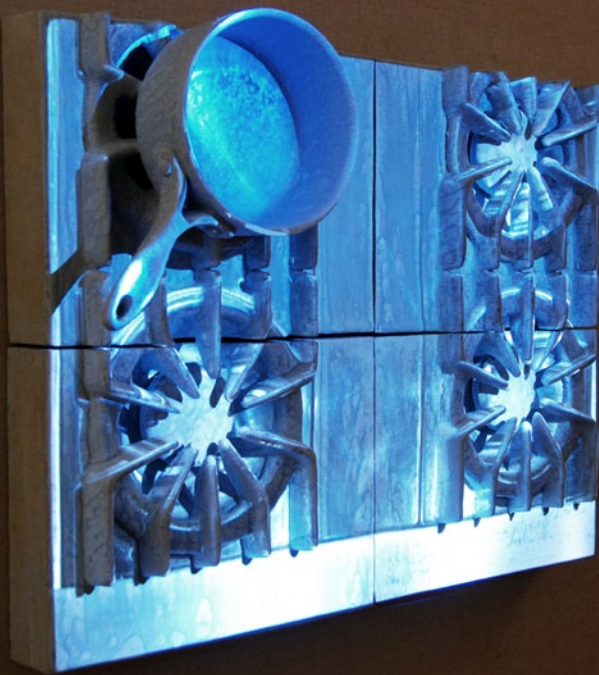
OUR MINDS ONLY EXIST IN THE INSTANT OF PLANCK time, roughly 10^{-25} of a second. This is the minimum amount of time required for a force in the observable universe to cause a transformation. Granted, those making these claims and those observations are physicists with highly specialised equipment. For the rest of us, we are simply living in our bodies, relying on them to do the best they can to make our observations for us. Our eyes, for example, these scientists tell us, do not actually see anything, they just transmit light wave frequencies to our brains which translate those frequencies into images we understand to be a yellow banana, green grass or my orange cat Marmalade. Those images that I think I see, subjected to the same level of scientific scrutiny as the length of that short Planck instant, were actually first projected upside down on to my retina, or occasionally as is the case of Marmalade, correctly perceived as upside down on the tree limb outside my window. But mainly when he is on the sofa dreaming of a morning, mid-afternoon or evening snack, what I see is him and the sofa and the room as I feel them to actually be – the right way up – but that, the scientists tell me, is not what I first observed.

A Review by S Portico Bowman

It all happens fast, the righting of the images and those instants, like the movies we watch – singular frames flashing in succession $1/30$ of a second each, but observed as a seamless continuous experience exactly how it feels our lives are happening every 10^{-25} second – which then, if we agree with that rather fantastic scientific fact, as we agree with the ophthalmologist and my grade five science unit on eyes when

I first agreed to the notion that everything is projected on the retina upside down to pass the class, then I probably have to accept that as the scientists say, there is no past or future beyond that instant of 10^{-25} second, only recollections of what was or imaginations of what might be and that there is limited if any access to an actual experience of ‘now’. Surprisingly I come to see that what has been promoted as a new virtual reality peculiar only to our technological age, is not so new or any more virtual than how we mostly experience ‘real’ life. These lives we live are mostly reverberating in our imaginations that are no more locatable than the zeros and ones the computer scientists manipulate to create the images on our digital screens.

Given what now seems like a rather dim possibility of actually experiencing my life as it is (and not as what I imagine it to be) how fortunate and transformative it would be to encounter some medium that might allow me to enter into those abstract notions about time and experience for a taste of real life. Colby Parsons’ art practice is exactly this encounter as his hybrid hiatus of ceramic and computer craft creates a circumstance where I look at myself looking rather than looking only at what he has made. His use of technology is not a toy or gimmick. The technology itself becomes the symbol, metaphor or sign; the touchable, palpable, plug-innable stand in for the mind and perceptual experience he too is looking to see and understand. In so doing Parsons’ technology becomes a prosthetic for our perceptual awareness to expand its awareness of perception so that this Planck instant and what goes on in our bodies



Facing page, left and right: *Silverware Drawer*. 2012.
 Stoneware with projected video. 18 x 15 x 3 in.
 Above, left and right: *Stove*. 2013.
 Stoneware with projected video. 21 x 29 x 8 in.

that becomes our minds, can expand to become an awareness that will more deeply taste the yellow banana, smell the freshly cut green grass and dream so completely at peace as does Marmalade .

I (and I imagine many of us) resist, avoid and rail against this cold, mechanical, unyielding, mainly only mathematically programmable mysterious world of computers (except for email and maybe Photoshop) because somehow I feel more compatible with humans and the notion of all, or even some of us, or too many parts of us, being replaced by machines is, if not rather implausible, hopefully impossible. There are people (Ray Kurzweil to name only one) who are not only working, but working hard to usher in this new reality where by 2099 human intelligence will have merged with machine intelligence and the post-human age will have arrived. This is to me unthinkable and so probably were aeroplanes to my great-grandparents as were cell phones to me.

Why is it then that I am writing an essay about Parsons? Because his work, along with others in the genre of New Media (Bill Viola, Mirosław Rogala and Teresa Wennberg among others) are handling technology and its powers the way we all handle the intelligent expression of art. The use of technology supplies the medium that best expresses their ideas, which are not about technology per se, but the technology either affords them the exploitable mechanism for a certain perceptual experience they want themselves and their viewers to have, or as in the case of Parsons, the technology stands in as the appropriate metaphor for his artistic inquiry. Just as we tease, tug and touch the ceramic material to form a nurturing handle or perfect spout, they are manipulating technology in service of expanding our embodied human experience.

For his piece, *Mind's Eye View*, Mirosław Rogala installs two photographs with fish-eye lenses that are then processed into a 360° pictosphere so the artwork combines elements of chance and viewer control. The goal of the installation, Rogala concludes, "is to externalise an internal image in the mind allowing the viewer to stand outside and perceive it. The usefulness of the single image no longer serves as a record of an event."¹ Rogala's work foregrounds the shift from an optical to a haptic one where visual sense-making becomes an embodied experience, or as Henri Bergson, one of the earliest philosophers of the ideas underpinning much of the New Media philosophy, wrote back in the 1890s, "The body then is a source of action on the world, subtracting among all the external influences those that are relevant."² Bergson called the ability to isolate the components of experience "perception" and that because the body is the only location where human experience can be affected emotionally, or beyond reflexive action and reactions occurring every 10⁻²⁵ of a second. The ability to expand the experience of 'now' as neuroscientist Francisco Varela suggests, "generates time in a manner that must be said to be radically creative since integration is always emergent and not certain."³ We never know in the middle of any experience if we will actually remember it, or ourselves in it. Varela goes on to say that humans are not simply in time "but of time".⁴ Indeed, Varela argues that "affect" as understood through Bergson's theory, "is the glue that underpins consciousness and connects it with subperceptual sensorimotor processes" (which is almost everything happening in those



Above: *Stove (Detail)*.

Right: *Bedroom Floor (Detail)*.

Facing page: *Box of Lightbulbs*. 2011. Glazed stoneware with projected video, 15 x 11 x 5 in.

Planck instants). This “enactive cognition”⁵ as the brain aligns itself with our emotions or ‘affect’ comes to be biologically bound by how deeply we can engage with what is happening in our instant-by-instant lived experience. This ability to be ‘affected’ and to feel precedes temporality and sculpts the dynamics of time flow, to “enlarge the frame of the now itself”.⁶ And that is why I am writing about Parsons. It is profound to sculpt space in spite of the demanding temperament of ceramics and to throw a pot taller than eleven inches (for me) is a miracle, but if Parsons’ work guides me to an understanding of how to sculpt time through the absolute participation of my embodied existence I am signed on and ready to leave on his ‘trip’ that is legal, free and no assembly required. I am already all in here.

Not unlike Bill Viola, perhaps the father of New Media, as neither he nor the technology are old enough to be grandfathers, Parsons exploits the technical capacity of projectors to bring the viewer into an experience of himself. Viola films people at high speed, often professional actors, acting out scenes, often inspired by iconic Renaissance paintings and then, following the conversion of the footage to digital video and projected at normal speed, Viola brings the viewer ‘face-to-face’ with the temporal (affective) dynamics underlying the emergence of the present as his work “anticipates a new configuration of

human experience and machinic recording”.⁹

Parsons’ installations of projections of bedroom floors, steaks, boxes of light bulbs and cutlery drawers and other visual stimuli onto ceramic sculptures of bedroom floors, steaks, boxes of light bulbs and cutlery drawers are intended to draw us into our bodies where the synaptic actions of the big screens in our brains are the ones we are going to watch as he confronts our bodies, minds and spirits with a novel instant where the minds must now affirm a new experience from scratch, “such that the thickness of the physical instant is expanded”¹⁰ as the mind, instant-by-Planck-instant, in this new experience dilates into this smallest designated unit of time required for a transformation of any dimension to occur and fully apprehends and responds appropriately to the new stimuli or “action packet”.¹¹

Actually Parsons’ art practice is not so new. The new media is new, but his artistic goals and what he accomplishes by them are timeless and archetypal. “Myths are contrivances by which we struggle to make our experience intelligible. The meaning of a myth is intuited rather than defined. It has a way of implying things that are difficult to state.”¹² The art that moves, opens and transforms us individually and culturally happens first because the artist takes us to a new view, or invents two-point perspective, or translucent porcelain and then drops us over the precipice and we free fall into beauty wrought by the marriage of material, skill and creativity. In this regard, Parsons’ practice is not new at all and, in fact, is old but the new





Facing page and above: *Bedroom Floor*. 2013. Stoneware with projected video, 21 x 42 x 11.5 in.

world we fall through is the one within.

And yet while we are free falling through our bodies, we pass Parsons' ceramic objects on our way down. These ceramic forms do not exist as mere props or incendiary devices. In the same way that a seductive glaze will not hide a poorly made pot, Parsons' ceramic replicas that receive the projections of what is being replicated are themselves immaculate forms, as for Parsons' work to 'work' he must marry tangible matter and projected light into a seamless tango so it becomes virtually impossible to decipher were matter ends and the illusion he is presenting begins. It is along this edge where matter and light become perceived in one novel instant that our expectations clatter to the floor like a dropped spoon from the cutlery drawer as our minds try to understand the waves of light energy sending messages to our brains, or we try to comprehend how the flames from a gas range are boiling water in a pot on the wall. The pot handle is one that I can reach out and touch and it feels the way a pot handle should, but the flame 'feels' like nothing because though the flame moves and looks real it is merely a projection. This jolting juxtaposition stops my automated responses and I am seeing what it is like to see something for the first time.

Each concentric and convex curved surface of each perfectly crafted pile of clothes on the bedroom floor, the ceramic cutlery in the ceramic drawer, or as with the first piece in Parsons' series, a ceramic

blender blending, is matched particle per wave on the edge of the spoon and space. Any slight unfitting would smash the illusion and we would be wasting our time instead of co-creating time, here with Parsons' refined aesthetic choices of patterns, textures and forms that dance over our synaptic optic greed for beauty and feeling the sensory exhilaration of the 'never before' instant. Parsons' subjects are mundane but the works excite us because in seeing them we are watching ourselves observing ourselves perceiving.

The magic here is not that the illusion is happening so much as that it is happening at a speed slow enough to be affected by it – in the Bergsonian sense – where my bodily experience is invaded by the amplified sensations of Being, such that I can reflect on this epiphanic space. Once this space of appearing is recognised, understood and cognitively harnessed in this slow motion state, I will recognise and enjoy more the same sensations when they are racing through me in an instant. And perhaps when anger or fear or other negative emotions are raging to the fore it might become possible to counter them. Buddhist psychologist Jack Kornfield says, "because of the particle-like nature of consciousness, we can enter the space between instinct and action, between impulse and reaction."¹³ Here again Parson's art practice is not so new and, in fact, it is so old that we can trace its origins back to when art existed as an eminent place for peace, repose and contemplation of both the most sacred and mundane orders.



The humming projector in the background is not the adversarial intrusion of technology, but rather the visible symbol or sign of what Parsons wants to understand. The projector has become the sign for the mind as, not unlike the projector, the mind only projects what passes through it and, in both cases, it is practically impossible to touch exactly how and where that image happens. "Some scientists proclaim that the properties of nuclear particles are nothing but creations of their own minds, that in reality particles have no properties independent of the minds of those observing them. This implies that in the world of particles, the mind that perceives reality in fact creates it."¹⁴ Eknath Easwaran, commenting on the ancient Katha Upanishad, where it is written, "The senses derive from objects of sense perception,"¹⁵ says that the Upanishad author here has stated exactly what in modern physics is called the "participatory universe", as the human mind in a real way co-creates the outer world. This does not mean the outer world does not exist but, on the other hand, as Ramana Maharshi has said, "The heart is the centre from which everything springs."¹⁶ The heart of Colby Parsons' works is to be found where the technologies of human existence merge across aeons in service of exploring and perhaps even explaining components of the invisible universe we wander through in every instant.

ENDNOTES

1. Hansen, Mark, BN, *New Philosophy for New Media*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) p 110.

2. Bergson, Henri, *Matter and Memory*, translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and W Scott Palmer, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911. Retrieved from www.reasoned.org/dir/lit/matter_and_memory.pdf), p 23.

3. Hansen, p 250.

4. *Ibid*, 249.

5. *Ibid*, Introduction, xxii.

6. *Ibid*, 251

9. *Ibid.*, 267.

10. *Ibid.*, 251.

11. Szirko, Mariela, "Effects of Relativistic Motions in the Brain & Their Physiological Relevance", *Ontology of Consciousness: Percipient Action*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), p 326.

12. Retrieved from www.sriramanamaharshi.org/mountainpath/2010%2011%20April.pdf.

13. Kornfield, Jack, *The Wise Heart*, New York: (Bantam Books, 2008), p 211.

14. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, Berkeley: (Parallax Press, 1988), p 85.

15. Easwaran, Eknath, *The Upanishads*, Berkeley: (Nilgiri Press, 1987), p 102.

16. Godman, David ed, *Be As You Are: The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi*, (London: Arkana, 1985), p 18.

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