

MEDITATIONS ON A CHAIR



by Ross Woodman

Refined to a point of essence, Murray Favro's *Modified Aluminum Chair*, hung in the Michael Gibson Gallery in London, Ontario, is a work that, as art, ultimately emerges from the inevitable exhaustion of Abstract Expressionism. As if searching among its ruins for what it had rejected, celebrated as a mock recovery in Robert Rauschenberg's "Combines," in which rags and tatters of cloth replaced de Kooning's free brushstrokes, this rescued *Chair* is a recovery of the thingness of things, a thingness that had fallen well below the sidelines of art. Raised less than a foot above the floor, neither a sculpture nor a three-dimensional wall piece, Favro's abandoned aluminum folding chair opens to its post-industrial transformed presence. Liberated from its practical function, it becomes something never seen before. Only with some closer disinterested inspection is the process of its transformation

1-2 Murray Favro, *Modified Aluminum Chair*, 2011, aluminum, steel, 33 x 21.75 x 22". Courtesy Michael Gibson Gallery, London.

gradually revealed, a process requiring the viewer to strip herself of every physical demand attached to a physical function.

The process of inspection, as it repeats the process of making, is rather like watching the frenzied gesturing involved in an action painting in very, very, very slow motion. With this fundamental difference: what is being made is what was always already there, now released from the abandoned familiarity of its unwanted presence. Transcending its own abandoned existence, the chair becomes the post-industrial idea of itself as art without ceasing to be the chair in which, right before your eyes, it happens. To know how it happens can be discovered. To know why is another matter. Your guess is as good as mine.

Here's mine. Humans have evolved to the point where they can absorb writing, painting, sculpture, music and architecture as an organic part of themselves. That took time. Not all of us are there yet. Photography still appears to be threatening. The movies even more so. Television is worse. The electronic revolution has finally settled it. Humans can take so much mirroring. But there is a limit. What emerges from the hidden operations of an abysmal machine, as hidden as the polished air, is a ceaselessly talking, moving, mirroring (mocking) of the actual, turning it into the fiction of Marshall McLuhan's "mechanical bride." Seeing ourselves backwards. Running from what we are fearfully pursuing.

Favro's *Chair* is the real chair. It's the art of the real at a time when the real is fast disappearing, when we are disappearing. It's a chair making a comeback as itself, as the actual thing, not the simulacrum of a chair, but a chair, an actual chair hanging as art on the wall without ceasing to be what it is: a chair. In Favro's chair on the wall, we come back to where we began ready to start again. Conception.

The recognition that nothing can be disposed of no matter how hard we try means that everything somehow or somewhere remains. That's the curse and the blessing of our own human presence. "The generations of men run on in the tide of Time / But leave their destined lineaments permanent for ever & ever," wrote William Blake. How to dispose of what we dispose of in order to be released from the nightmare of hoarding is an issue that art now confronts. How to escape the psychosis of junk,

particularly in places no longer particular, like London, Ontario. The entire planet is now the global dump of discarded cultures, which Blake describes as a "Void Outside of Existence."

What Favro has done with the aluminum chair is more than retrieval. It's a return to what happened before notice was taken. Taking notice allows something human to happen. William Blake tells us that, if entered, the "Void" becomes a "Womb." It's a way of making a comeback. Several people, Michael Gibson noticed, came back to see the chair. To see if it was still there.

If what they thought they saw they did see. One person asked Michael to take it off the wall and put it on the floor, then he watched it being raised. He saw the difference. But did he see the difference it made to his life? He's thinking about that. About a dream he once had in which he levitated.

Raised from the floor 10 to 12 inches, the chair is there to be seen, but not sat on. Left on the floor, it is barely noticed, or, if noticed, noticed only as the need for its immediate disposal. But raised, hanging like other works on the wall, it settles into its new space among objects to which, in their hanging state, it clearly belongs.

This is a chair not to be sat on. Like the works of art that surround it, it cannot be physically inhabited. And the eye, conscious of the gal-

lery situation, makes an adjustment, a shift of perception not simply in degree but in kind. We inhabit the chair in another way, a metaphysical way that raises it, as the hanging raises it, to the condition of art. We are released from the body and the demands that it makes, as if the body itself were performing an entirely new function, an alchemical function in which matter is transformed into mind. Favro's *Chair* is not only a work of art, it's also a lesson in the making of art. The viewer who knows that it is not there to be sat on begins, herself, to find reason for it. That other reason is art. Gazing at it there on the wall, the work of its making becomes the work of the viewer transforming what she sees into the idea of it. Perception itself becomes an act of making. A transformation takes place right before our eyes as a process going on behind them—the act of creation itself. Resurrection is in the air, 10 inches from the floor. ■

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