

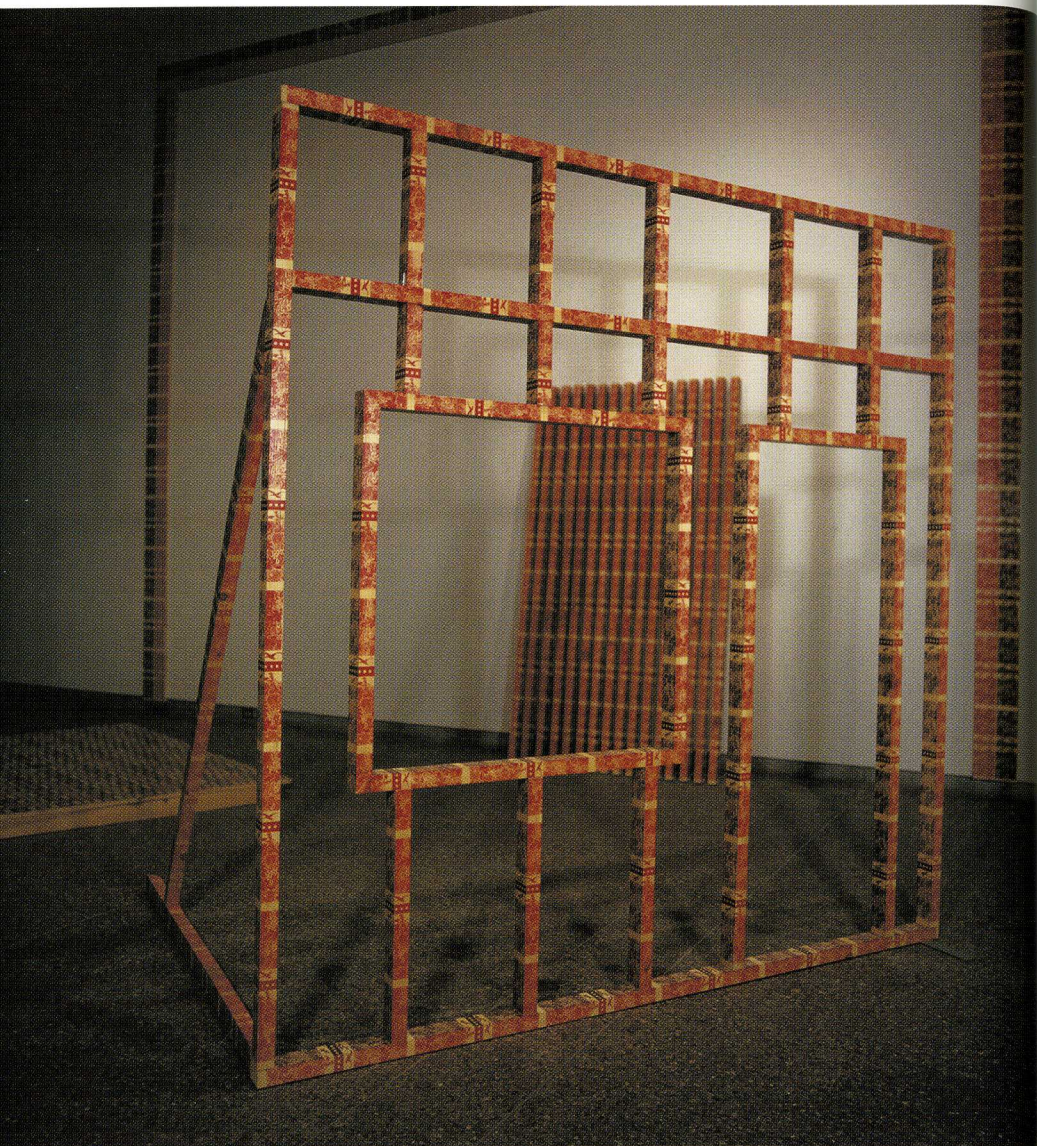
Storehouse, Storefront, Gift Shop

IN SLEEP, I often find myself in a place I call the Warehouse of Dreams. It can be an army surplus store or a flea market or an attic jumble of curious forgotten objects. Whichever form it takes, it is a place where all things may be found, by chance, eventually. They lie cheek by jowl with things that have nothing in common with them except that all are severed from their original use contexts and are therefore available to be appropriated, purchased, stolen, spirited away, possessed.

Three recent projects by Patrick Mahon — *Tunnel of Love*, *The Palace at 4 a.m.* and *GIFTwrap* — all deal with aspects of the store. When it first appeared in English around 1300 (from a Latin root having to do with setting things upright), 'store' referred to a supply of objects (associated with abundance, wealth and treasure) and to the action of appropriating or taking possession of such objects as well as putting them together. It was not until the 17th century that the place of storage itself came to be called a 'store' and not until the 18th

century, and then only in the New World, that 'store' came to mean a place where things were sold. Notably, in contradistinction from the English 'shop' — which usually offered a specialized class of objects for sale — the American 'store' sold a whole gamut of things, corresponding with an English 'general shop' or 'shop-of-all-work.' This reflected the emergence of new forms of commerce that would eventually give rise to the department store and the shopping mall. The earliest citation in the Oxford English Dictionary of the verb 'store' for the deposit of objects of intrinsic value, as opposed to use value, is in 1899, meaning to deposit for temporary preservation or safekeeping (rather than as a quantity of supply).

What persists through this evolution is the idea of putting things away for future use or enjoyment. In each of these three projects, Mahon engages architectures of storage, exhibition and exchange (by both gift and purchase).



The Storehouse

In *Tunnel of Love*, Mahon enters into the storage vault of a museum collection (that of Museum London), a storehouse whose contents have been acquired mostly through private gift. Although the Museum has substantial holdings of visual art, it is from its regional history collection that Mahon derived the motifs that form *Tunnel of Love*. Exploring the vaults with the cooperation of Michael Baker, the Curator of Regional History, Mahon sorted through objects as diverse as children's games, typewriters, iron lungs, beer trays and hats. He was taken with elements of surface design and two dimensional patterning and with the flattened outlines of three-dimensional objects. He photographed stencil forms used to project light in a defined shape, as well as indicator dials, hatboxes and bicycle seats. About half of what he selected from the collection consisted of graphic elements: company logos, label typography, an animate tiddley-wink with stick-man arms and legs.

Mahon isolated and simplified the shapes he selected, reducing each to something close to a silhouette, and had each reproduced as a dies in Dupont Cyrel, a synthetic material. He used these dies like large rubber stamps to print his shapes onto white silk banners that hang from steel cables in the Forum Gallery, forming the stamped marks into letters that spell out the name of the exhibition. He placed the dies themselves, which glisten a candylike translucent orange, on specially built display tables along with the photographs from which they were derived. The final element of the installation is a decorative doorframe from a 19th-century London home whose rounded form echoes that of the barrel vaults of Museum London, the signature flourish of the institution's architecture.

At first blush, Mahon's appropriated two-dimensional shapes resemble hieroglyphs and indeed many of them have a pictographic quality. Printed on the silk banners in columns and rows, they suggest a Rosetta Stone of obsolete commercial semiotics.

They embellish the simple block letters of the banners at the same time as forming the very body of those letters, like fabulous beasts in an illuminated manuscript. However, in abstracting them from their original contexts, Mahon has also moved them *away* from linguistic meaning. While suggesting a potential to read visual pattern as language, he also reduces that iconographic and typographic language to simple visual pattern. *Tunnel of Love* thereby functions as a palimpsest, a text written on the half-effaced ground of an earlier text that can be only partly deciphered through it. This displacement of meaning produces new and accidental readings, such as when the drawing of a little girl in a bonnet, from a household bracket for hanging keys, comes to resemble the parka-wearing character of Kenny from the animated television show, *South Park*. Mahon is not interested in challenging the viewer to decipher some encoded meaning. The work is less about "getting it" than it is about making it, spontaneously creating new meaning.

The institutional and architectural structure of the museum derives from that of the palace. When the French Revolution appropriated the Louvre and its contents, resituating the King's private collection as a cultural treasure belonging to the people, the idea of a public collection was born out of the earlier model of the *wunderkammer* or Cabinet of Curiosities. These vast miscellanies of objects were brought together by the idiosyncratic acquisitive interests of individual collectors.

The palace-museum thus arises from the initial separation, or alienation, of the art object from its ritual, social context, whereby it ceases to be a numinous conveyor of collective meaning and becomes a curio. It happened early on with the ransacked products of conquered or colonized cultures — the fetish object that Marx understood as the embodiment of the essence of the commercial commodity — and eventually absorbed even the sacred works of Western religion. Having once

belonged to the realm of the gods, of the spirits or ancestors, of the temple or longhouse, capitalism pried them loose and allowed them to drift on the currents of commerce until they settled in the jumbled sediment of the gallery or collection vault. They became embodiments of abstract value, “congealed labour” (in Marx’s term) onto which the newly born consumer could project desires that Freud could then begin to name.

Mahon has spoken, in private conversation, of the apparent “chaos” of the museum, but museum collections do not so much lack pattern as manifest a pattern whose structure is obscure. The *wunderkammer* is a picture of the universe, enacting a cosmology whose original logic is that of the unconscious: the desire of the collector made manifest.

If the ‘love’ in the *Tunnel of Love* is this acquisitive lust, as well as the presumed altruism of the gift whereby the private collection becomes public patrimony, the

‘tunnel’ can be understood as the vault — often subterranean, as is the case at Museum London, and suggested by the vault forms of its architecture. The title as a whole, of course, recalls the cheesy thrill of the midway. There is a line running from the *wunderkammer* to the museum that passes through the sideshow display of weird and sensational objects like shrunken heads and Siamese twins and also through the utopian fantasies of Luna Parks and Disney World. From the shopping arcade or mall to the World’s Fair, the practices of commodified display generate a spectator culture whereby objects are abstracted from their original contexts so that we can stand before them in wonder before turning restlessly to the next curiosity.

The Storefront

In *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, Mahon evokes an architectural memory of a particular space once used for exhibition. Having silk-screened repeat patterns reminiscent of wallpaper onto the surfaces of pine studs,

Mahon deploys these studs to represent, at two-thirds actual size, a former artist-run gallery by the same name. It operated for a few years during the 1990s in London, Ontario in a tiny storefront space at 13^{1/2} Blackfriars Street, not far from Museum London. The title is well known as that of a small 1932-33 sculpture by Giacometti that renders, in wooden rods, the outlines of a building in which mysterious narratives seem to be taking place.

The appropriated architecture of the storefront has a particular set of cultural associations arising from its use in mundane commerce and its proximity to the public space of the street. Whether housing an activist law office, a community police station or an artist-run centre, it is marked as a space of engagement, accessibility, lack of pretense or privilege. As the name for such a space, The Palace at 4 a.m. was paradoxical, alluding to the private palace while occupying a rickety wood-frame storefront in a working-class neighbourhood on a low lying flood-plane (a reliable marker

of social position in a city whose privilege is strongly coded by geography).

Although his work characteristically takes the form of installation, Mahon’s output is rooted in the medium of printmaking. I have written elsewhere (in the catalogue for *Palindrome*, a 2000 exhibition at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery) about how Mahon sets up a tension between architectural structure and surface patterning — two cultural practices that are decisively, and oppositely, gendered — by printing wallpaper patterns onto pine building studs.

The social history of printmaking is a complex one. Lithography, the dominant medium for fine-art prints, has undergone an inversion of value since its inception two centuries ago. It has gone from being the first effective colour medium of mass visual communications, both political and commercial, to the preferred means of producing precious limited-edition prints. Mahon’s choice of silkscreen to print on the

wooden surfaces of *The Palace at 4 a.m.* is both a practical means of replicating the flocked patterning of commercial wallpaper and a conscious use of a printmaking medium that remains close to everyday life, through such familiar institutions as the printed T-shirt outlet in the local mall. In a similar way, the use of simple inked dies to stamp out the letters in *Tunnel of Love* employs a technique that is relatively legible to the layperson. Mahon consistently favours methods that are associated with multiplicity, reproducibility and accessibility.

The Gift Shop

Mahon's third project, *GIFTwrap*, involves placing banners in public spaces around the city of Hamilton — the airport, the GO Train station, the exterior walls of the public library and the YWCA, the lobby of a hotel in a mall. Each vinyl banner, in one of three primary colours, features a single letter, one of the four making up the word 'G I F T'. Each letter is composed from squares of black-

and-white wallpaper of the artist's own design. The pattern of the wallpaper borrows from contemporary newspaper accounts about heroic artists represented in the collection of the Art Gallery of Hamilton and reflects a 1950s faith in such now-discredited notions as the artist as solitary genius.

Smaller text on each of the public banners directs the viewer to the second element of the project, whereby Mahon offers pieces of his wallpaper as free 'gift wrap' in the art gallery's gift shop. The very term, 'gift shop,' embodies contradictory notions of purchase and gift; the oxymoron of the something that is at once free and of a specific monetary value.

A few years ago, I had a minor epiphany when I saw, in the window of an art-framing and greeting-card shop in Halifax, gift or tote bags decorated with details from Monet's *Water Lilies*. In a 1999 project for the Art Gallery of Windsor, Mahon reproduced

abstracted details from works in the permanent collection on *Loot Bags* available in the gallery's shop. From wrapping paper to screensavers, we live in an age when the icons of art history are available as background embellishment. If art has become wallpaper, Mahon presents his wallpaper as art, but an art already humorously devalued by its placement in the gift shop (rather than the more vaunted space of the gallery) and further by being given away for free.

North Americans, Christopher Isherwood once wrote in *A Single Man*, have "reduced the things of the material plane to mere symbolic conveniences." A hotel room, for example, is "designed to be unreal," "an advertisement in three dimensions."¹ In a recent conversation with Patrick Mahon, we talked about Slavoj Žižek's thoughts about Diet Coke and what Mahon called the "culture of the sign."² Consumer culture will take what was once sugared, flavoured water with caffeine and traces of cocaine in it and,

over the course of a century, progressively remove its active ingredients, starting by omitting the coca and ending with a substance that is virtually sugarless, flavourless and devoid of stimulants. We are left with the Idea of Coke. Beverage as pure sign, whereby the advertising becomes the product, the logo the commodity.

In *GIFTwrap*, Mahon reduces the commodified exhibition experience to its defining initial and terminal points — the street banners advertising it, luring one into the museum, and the souvenir products one acquires in the gift shop on the way out. The advertising and the spin-off shopping experience constitute, in this case, the whole of the exhibition. If, in Conceptual Art, the idea is the work, often encoded (as in the work of Yoko Ono) in a set of instructions, Mahon comes close, in both *GIFTwrap* and *Tunnel of Love*, to allowing the title, presented on banners, to be the exhibition.

The public banners are separated spatially and therefore temporally, allowing each viewer to encounter the letters in a different order. They may spell out G I F T, or, just as easily, T G I F — or the more fragmentary and enigmatic I F, or I T. As in *Tunnel of Love*, a certain disordering principle infects the project, opening a space for random meanings to arise.

To have a 'gift' — as the gushing newspaper accounts about Paul-Emile Borduas filed in the Art Gallery of Hamilton remind us — is also to be possessed of genius. It is a state both of possessing and being possessed and thus partakes of that numinous aura that capitalist consumerism continually pursues and continually destroys by the very act of seeking to possess it. The exchange value of commerce tends to deaden, alienate, cancel or contain the cultural or spiritual values that motivate the exchange in the first place. Art, under these circumstances, is an impossibility that constantly regenerates itself as possibility through a circular dance

of filling and emptying objects of meaning. These internal contradictions of capitalist exchange value, as mediated by the respective store rooms of the museum, the gallery and the shop, constitute the subject of Patrick Mahon's social and aesthetic inquiry.

Robin Metcalfe
Curator of Contemporary Art
Museum London

1 Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man* (New York: Bard/Avon, 1964/1978), p. 75.

2 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* (New York: Verso, 2000).



13^{1/2} Blackfriars Street, London. Photo: Patrick Mahon