

CANADIANART

Rewind



Christian Eckart

The relationship of abstract painting to the spiritual is an abiding concern for Christian Eckart. His meticulously crafted constructions function as "interrogative mechanisms" for exploring the transcendental possibilities of art within the context of contemporary capitalist society. In his most recent meta-paintings, on view at Calgary's TrépanierBaer, he continues to work in multiple series that develop parallel, often overlapping, concerns. Embracing and transfiguring the monochrome strategies of Malevich, Newman, Reinhardt, Ryman and the European Nouveaux Réalistes (a group that included Fontana, Klein and Manzoni), Eckart's "painted objects" hold a liminal position between material and immaterial concerns.

His recent *Curved Monochrome Paintings*—*Seventh Variation #2003-1* and *#2004-1* (both 2002) further this ongoing exploration. These concave aluminum discs, 45 inches in diameter, employ industrial processes and materials, such as a cutting-edge high-gloss automobile lacquer that produces iridescent colour effects. Their luxuriant slickness seems complicit with the seductive pleasures of high-end consumer culture, yet simultaneously they also evoke, in the tradition of the Romantic sublime, the expansive, ephemeral majesty of a vivid sunset sky. The chameleon-like surfaces take on variegated hues depending on the shifting position of the viewer, echoing their status as art objects oscillating between the sacred and the profane.

Circuit Painting #2805 (2002), part of another new series, is comprised of eight mirror-polish stainless-steel constructions that extend 32 feet along one gallery wall. Recalling Eckart's earlier interests in the artwork's frame or boundary, the constructions are ovoid or circular configurations whose interiors remain empty. While their gleaming surfaces elicit the hygienic sterility of an operating room or the anonymous artificiality of an office-tower lobby, their sinuous, curvilinear shapes also evoke bodily orifices—voluptuous openings that lead into the depths of an intimate yet inaccessible realm. This foregrounding of somatic experience is enhanced by reflections on their cool, immaculate surfaces. Like Narcissus transfixed before the pool, we are confronted with our own image, unable to detach ourselves from the phenomenon of looking.

Similarly, *Circuit Painting—Variation #2807* (2002) is a thin, radiant circle, 66 inches in



diameter and six inches deep, that hovers just in front of the wall. We find ourselves standing before the wall's immaculate, elegantly circumscribed whiteness. We are not confronted by a void but faced with a quiet, ineffable emptiness. Informed by Eastern philosophy, the work presents itself as "a support for meditation," implying the infinity of the circle and enveloping the viewer in its tranquil beauty and grace.

Where abstractionists like Barnett Newman insisted on making a distinction between beauty and the sublime, Eckart re-empowers beauty. In his work, it coexists with the sublime on a phenomenological level, so that a paradox lies at the heart of his self-incriminating artistic enterprise. We see an invocation of the immaterial through the apotheosis of the material, the arousal of spiritual desire through a provocatively carnal medium. JODY PATTERSON