

FEATURE

Kristan Horton: An Image of Sculpture

By Yam Lau



THE JOY OF ARTMAKING

At our first meeting in his studio, Kristan Horton showed me his recent self-produced artist's book, *Oracle*, an product of his project, also titled *Oracle*, which translates audio books into printed books. Although it is a charming clothbound work, the book is also in some way sub par. For one thing, the title on the cover is off-centre. Sure, a great deal of effort and care was invested in making it, but the book is short of being ideal. It is as if Horton's attempt at making *Oracle* could at best pass as a double of its ideal version, good enough only to pose as an imitation if used in circumscribed contexts, such as a photo shoot, or when seen from a distance in dim light.

Gradually, during the course of that afternoon, I learned that this is characteristic of the way Horton makes art. *Oracle* is marked by a tenuousness that is typical of a hobbyist's touch, like those creations forged in a garage studio, a canoe or a plane for example. It does not matter so much if the plane can't fly. Is the book in my hand *Oracle*, or a one-to-one scale prototype of *Oracle*, I ask?

Horton's reply was that he prefers to make everything himself. The remark, though casual enough,

should not be taken as an excuse for the "less than adequate" craftsmanship. The artist's approach to making *Oracle* also applies to his practice in general. His craftsmanship is oriented not towards perfection, but rather is used as a trope that constructs a critical position for the artist. The charm of the book's sub par execution is an expression of the artist's sophisticated practice, one that has philosophical implications. In hindsight I understand that the statement about making things himself refers to the strategic position Horton takes of being an amateur.

A TACTIC OF AMATEURISM

The amateur is a special kind of outsider. Not the subversive that causes trouble, but the kind that enjoys being left alone. Since they operate outside of any trade, amateurs enjoy the privilege of not being bound by its rules. Left to proceed with limited skill, the amateur enjoys an unlimited license to produce whatever he or she might find desirable or interesting—in order to bring it closer, to possess it in its likeness. A lack of expertise means that the product will only at best be an approximated double, a simulacrum of its ideal version and therefore not expected to function at all. For this reason the amateur's work has no currency outside the studio. Instead, the work, in addition to

Kristan Horton, *Cig2Coke2Tin2Coff2Milk* (2006), video still 6 minute stop motion animation, DVD projection, Image Courtesy of the Artist

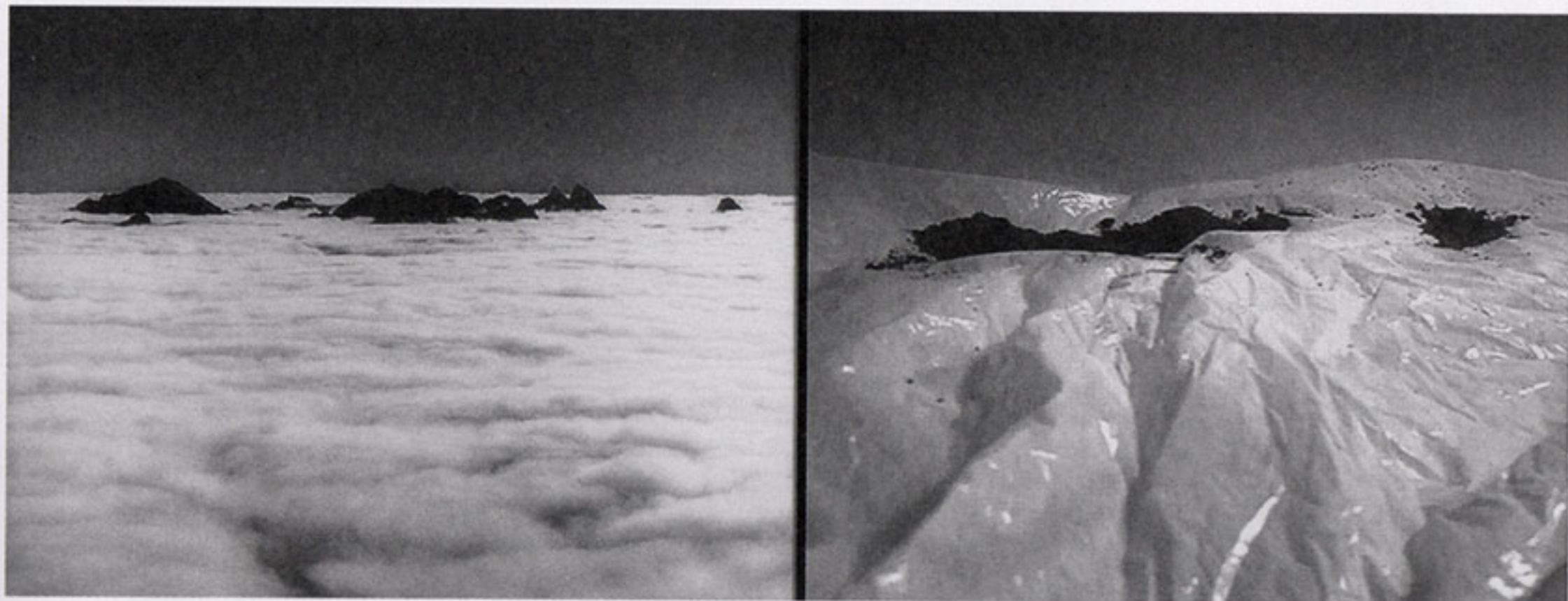
what it is, also serves to exhibit the autonomy of the amateur's studio as the work's site of origin and destination. It indicates the specific kind of independence the amateur enjoys.

**FROM DR. STRANGELOVE TO DR. STRANGELOVE
DR. STRANGELOVE**

Like the amateur's creation that never quite arrives at what it is supposed to be, Horton's work perpetually spills over from one provisional construction to another. At issue in Horton's art is a sense of mobility that exceeds mastery of technique. A major ongoing work in this mode is based on Stanley Kubrick's classic 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.

creates a shorthand expression for Kubrick's "mise-en-scènes." A comparison between the two can take place because they exist in spaces of comparable logic.

Surely, these homage reconstructions are not good enough to pass as a doubles. They are not forgeries that attempt to usurp the original, the way fake designer bags do. They manage to mirror the original in order to provoke the viewer's admiration, but not the censure of copyright laws. It is only the counterfeiter, who profits from producing a false identity that competes with the real thing, who may run up against the law. By contrast, the amateur—in this case, Horton—manages to deviate from the deadlock of mimetic rivalry. His structural mapping enables him to twist free from the traditional model of mimeticism based upon representation and the rivalry that it engenders.



Kristan Horton, *Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove* (2004), black and white ultra-chrome archival prints, 28 x 76 cm, Image Courtesy of the Artist

The film's formal structure is one of the things Horton admires about Kubrick's work. The plot of the movie plays out in discreet and self-contained sets with no transition in between. For this reason the film lends itself to a kind of mimetic mapping. *Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove* (2004), Horton's personal homage to the original, is a collection of photo diptychs composed of images that re-create selected scenes in the movie shown alongside the original scenes that inspired them. Horton creates his images using simple objects found lying around in his studio. For example, in one shot a fork stands in for the body of a B-52 bomber; in another, a white plastic sheet works as clouds.

Exhibited beside images of the original scenes, the reconstructions are marvels of resourcefulness. A mimetic connection between the two images hinges not so much on a representational but rather on a structural correspondence. To begin, Horton analyses the composition of the film still and breaks it down into a collection of discreet elements: the B-52 bomber into a body, wings, etc. He then indexes the individual parts with substitutions such as knives and forks. Looking at both images together, their constituent elements function like abstract variables in an algebra equation that are infinitely substitutable. B-52 wing = fork, B-52 body = knife. One could say that Horton

CONCEPT ART

One may also see the amateur's haphazard arrangement as the swift response that captures an idea when it first germinates. In the context of film production, the lightness and inconclusiveness of Horton's reconstruction prompts me to see it as a form of storyboard—a kind of concept art that directors and set designers use to plan the realization of the final film sets. If this is the case, then Horton's "copy" is the expression that precedes the original, and not merely an imitation that is made after it. The copy would be a strange primal scene that is prototypical to Kubrick's. It is interesting to imagine Kubrick's film sets as a realization and elaboration of Horton's own versions.

Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove displays the methodology and, moreover, the unique sensibility of Horton's practice. One senses that Horton's mock-ups are always in the middle of decomposition and recomposition. The mobility and tenuousness inherent to them suggest a movement that passes beneath the stasis of form, representation and narration. Hence, his imitations amount to a subterranean movement that is ontologically prior to that of the original. It is his prerogative.

ANIMATION, FROM CIG2COKE2TIN2COFF2MILK

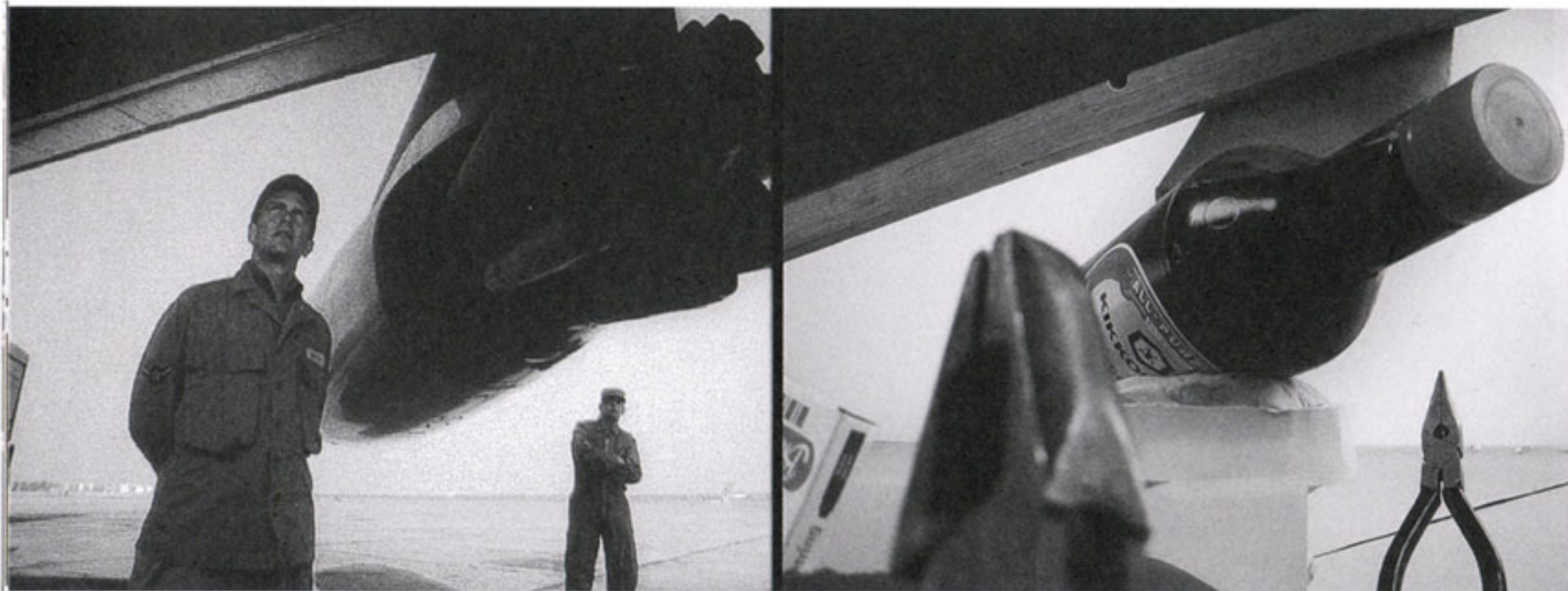
I would characterize the objects in Horton's work as being animated by a surplus of desire that perpetually distributes them beyond their provisional identity or composition. Here we are speaking of animation not only as a genre but as a principle that directs his practice. Incidentally, Horton is trained as an animator and has worked in the industry. Coming full circle, his sensibility finds its best articulation in that medium.

Cig2Coke2Tin2Coff2Milk (2006), a frame-by-frame stop-motion animation, was recently exhibited at YYY Artists Outlet in Toronto. On a worktable in his studio, starting with a du Maurier cigarette box Horton performs an animated sequence of transformation. The cigarette box is cut and folded into a Coke can and

or wrinkles within what might otherwise appear to be a linear narrative. They are pockets that produce reserves out of which unforeseen connections and identities can appear. For example, a paper Coke can still bearing a du Maurier logo suddenly becomes within the interval of a new frame a tin one with the real Coke logo.

THE TIME OF THE AMATEUR

Kristan Horton took his time. Taking the advice of his art-college instructors, he did not exhibit immediately after graduation. Rather, his years after art school went to preparing a body of work for a professional career and also, and more importantly, to cultivating a set of values and strategies integral to a personal ethic and a certain degree of independence. Although informed about what was happening in contemporary art dur-



when an approximated Coke can is achieved, a real one appears to replace it, setting off another transformation. The sequence that follows unfolds in the order indicated by the work's title, finally ending up with a carton of milk.

In the high-tech world of digital animation, stop-motion is almost an anachronism, the kind that, like flipbooks, can be created by just about anyone. And it doesn't matter how adept you are at it; some degree of discontinuity is inherent in this type of animation. It is telling that Horton, even as a trained animator, chooses the most low-tech type of animation, the type that demands less specialized technical expertise than ingenuity and imagination.

The work can be appreciated as an instructional how-to sequence. At the same time it makes its animating movement palpable: a kind of structural morphing out of which novel forms and processes continuously unfold. It is not only the inherent forms of objects such as the box and the cylinder but also their associated corporate identities (*du Maurier* and *Coke*) that are being morphed into one continuous movement. The duration of this movement is the subject of the animation. Within this process the intervals or stutters inherent to the stop-motion method help to facilitate new connections. These gaps signal the unforeseeable folds

ing this time, he did not directly participate in the exhibition circuit and so benefited from the advantage of being left alone. Finally, he makes a contribution—but as a sophisticated amateur.

Choosing this role enables Horton to make artwork at a slight remove from the art scene and its protocols, whatever they might be. His relationship to contemporary art as an amateur amounts to personal and artistic independence. There is a beautiful intelligence and humility in this. Horton is recognized as a contemporary artist, but he at the same time complicates the discourse of contemporary art. Are his prototypical film stills and Coke cans contemporary sculpture? Are they imitations of a contemporary sculptural practice? Or both? From the delicate but critical distance he creates with his work, Horton the amateur artist performs an imitation, a doubling of Horton the contemporary artist, and vice versa. 30

Kristan Horton, *Dr. Strangelove Dr. Strangelove* (2004), black and white ultra-chrome archival prints, 28 x 76 cm, Image Courtesy of the Artist