

Robin Ripley

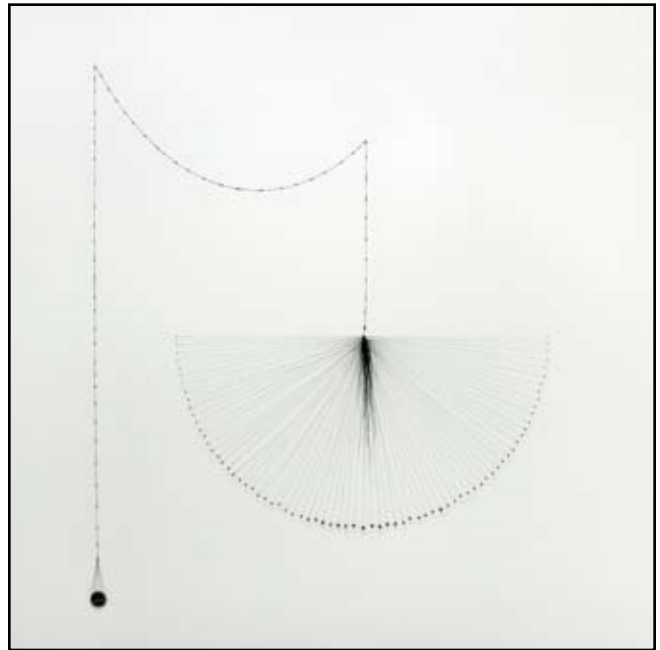
UNTITLED (THREAD DRAWING 1)

Robin Ripley: Drawn Threads

BY BETTINA MATZKUHN

Artist's Statement (2003)

ROBIN RIPLEY



Robin Ripley: Drawn Threads

By Bettina Matzkuhn, 2004

At an early age, Robin Ripley became aware of the language of objects. Born into a military family that shuttled between various bases in Europe and North America, she was surrounded by heavy equipment. Retired cranes, jeeps and tanks rumbled to a stop in her playground. Oversized treads and machinery formed patterns and structures. Typical family decor on the bases included lamps made out of shell casings or Christmas ornaments fashioned from painted ammunition boxes. The transformation of objects, recycling through ingenuity, was part of

Robin Ripley

Untitled (thread Drawing 1), 2003

mixed media installation with
cotton thread, steel pins, steel
needles, metal dome fasteners

(275 x 195cm)

SAG 2003.07.01

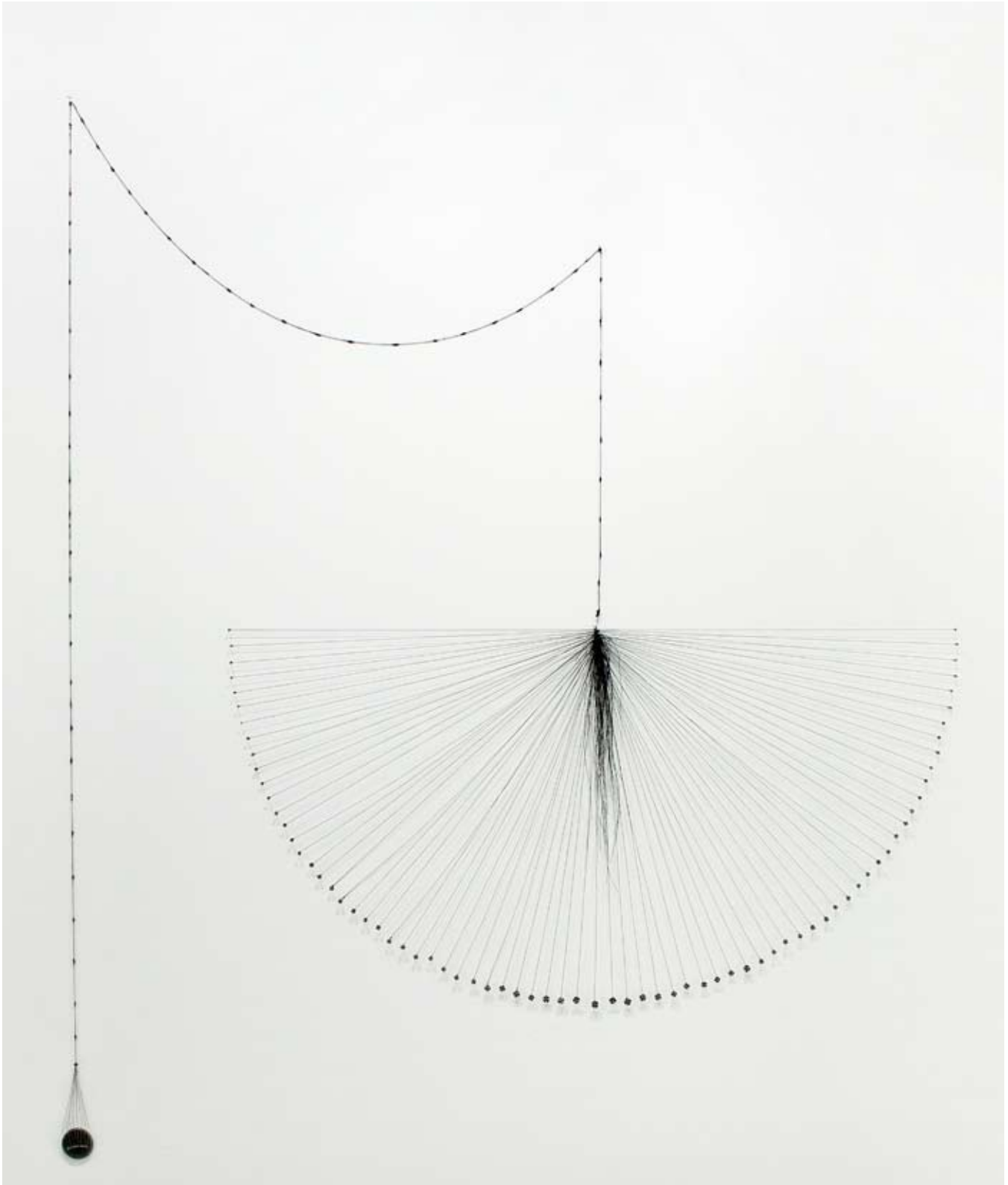
Gift of the Artist

Photograph by Scott Massey



An Open Book

a catalogue of artworks from the Surrey Art Gallery's Permanent Collection



Robin Ripley, *Untitled (Thread Drawing 1)*, 2003, mixed media installation with cotton thread, steel pins, steel needles, metal dome fasteners (275 x 195cm), Gift of the Artist SAG 2003.07.01 Photograph by Scott Massey

Ripley's understanding of how they travelled through time.

Originally Ripley was drawn to printmaking when she attended the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, as she liked the idea of accessibility. A print could be an affordable way to disseminate art. On completing her BFA in 1992, her subject matter dwelt on the everyday: rubber boots, laundry, chores. Her subsequent works have evolved to include actual familiar objects rather than depictions of them. They are presented in ways that provoke surprise and curiosity. Ripley has used maps collaged with prints and found objects from walks to describe landscape in a more comprehensive way. The experience of place includes all the senses as well as memory, history and change - a richness she feels is narrowed too much in the single viewpoint of a traditional landscape. She has explored a series using kitchen implements such as eggbeaters, baking pans, and metal spoons, collaborating with electronics artist Diana Burgoyne to add elements of animated, interactive hilarity. Having worked in libraries, Ripley has a strong sense of the centrality of books, both as containers of ideas and as familiar objects. "Spine" (2001), a multi-media sculpture, was produced for a touring exhibition co-presented by the Surrey Art Gallery and the Surrey Public Library (2001). It featured what seems to be shelves of books but are pieces of microfiche Ripley has inscribed to mimic different volumes. Illuminated from within, the bookcase radiates the potential knowledge and ideas that books often carry. After coming across an old sewing box, she has spent years wringing meaning from its unpretentious contents. Works using labels from clothing began as two-dimensional collages and grew to inhabit shadowboxes with an added depth. Soon she had buttons, wire and thread blossoming from the walls.

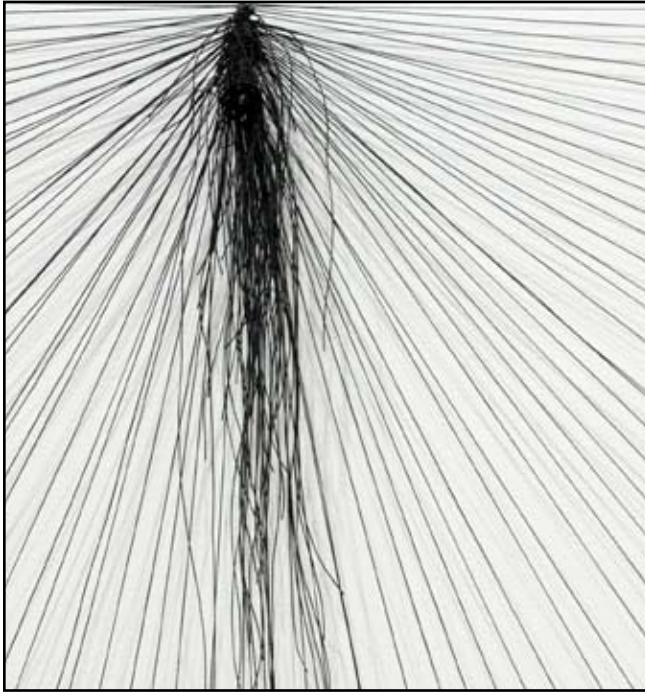
The compact can expand; the miniscule can evoke the global.

Ripley's work honours the ideas of the Arte Povera movement of the 1960's in Italy. These artists gave concept and material similar importance and "sought to dismantle the barricades between art and life".¹ Their materials for art making were not stocked in art supply shops, but were most certainly available in our daily lives. This meant not simply taking materials at their face value, but interrogating, combining, and relentlessly scrutinizing the most banal of materials. Ripley's work follows this bent. There is an emphasis involving all the senses, on direct experience at a human, not monumental scale.

Before Arte Povera, the French Dada artist Marcel Duchamp used existing objects to challenge the art world's ideas regarding what are legitimate artists' materials. Later, the American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg began to incorporate everyday objects into his paintings. Pop Art borrowed from contemporary life as well, concerned with the anonymous, overwhelming output of mass culture. Ripley's work aligns with the Arte Povera movement as it is not about consumption but rather about the possibilities of imagination. We are invited to imagine the process of re-using or transforming a material, and in turn to imagine changes to our own habits and attitudes.

Ripley's processes are also tied to the resourcefulness of folk art - the convergence of necessity, art and invention. Many folk art pieces can be "characterized by personal expression and personal discovery rather than by imitation or tradition".² In this vein, Ripley's works expand rather than continue, explore rather than seek a likeness. She cites seeing an exhibit by British artist Tony Cragg as a revelation. His self-portraits and sculptures made out of the detritus of

modern life demand a double understanding; one has to consider many discrete objects such as cup-hooks, mass-produced plastic pieces or machined parts as well as their re-presented, re-combined incarnations as murals, sculptural figures and installations. If



Cragg's works are "an individual meditation on the state of existence of people and materials", Ripley's works bear a similar concern for what everyday, overlooked objects have to say about us.³

Ripley tries to enter what she refers to as the "thingness of an object" or an intimacy with the characteristics of that specific material. The old sewing box, filled with needles, thread and "notions" which are the associated hardware of sewing, opens a reflection on how consumer goods describe changes in our lives. Ripley remarked at her surprise upon seeing the proliferation of brooches from Roman times in a museum, and her realization that this was how they fastened their shawls and capes. For her, these objects highlighted how we take buttons and

zippers for granted. Why use snaps or hooks and eyes when Velcro can secure a pocket flap or cuff?

She emphasizes that her thread drawings are not about nostalgia, but about the evolution in society and technology, and in her own creative process. While developing "Untitled (Thread Drawing 1)" in 2003, Ripley tried a variety of threads and colours, yet found most of them distracting. The grey shadows cast by the black thread added enough tonal variation and depth. She kept to her sense of sewing notions as basic equipment, the way a plumb bob and nails serve a carpenter. We are left with an exquisite emphasis on line: precision, balance, slackness, tension, and points of connection. The cables of suspension bridges, pulleys, and diligent spiders share linear concerns. There is a constant cross-referencing between the structures of nature and those built by humans.

Significant to this work is the laborious process of graphing out and securing the threads, an echo of the labour involved in sewing. Ripley's work acknowledges but is not textile art, rather a combination of the handwork of craft and the material exploration of contemporary installation art. Other Canadian artists who bridge this gap include Kai Chan who has used everything from metal bottle caps, buttons, twigs, toothpicks, nails and thread to "span unlikely spaces, link disjunctive points, and produce unusual material metaphors".⁴ Chan is a winner of the Saidye Bronfman Award for Excellence in the Fine Crafts, an indication of the way tradition is subject to evolution. Brian Jungen has made audiences look anew at the mass-produced running shoes he turns into aboriginal masks or the white plastic chairs he reassembled into a suspended whale skeleton. Jungen is addressing issues of colonialism, but also

begins with the “loaded everyday object” to make us imagine it in other contexts.⁵

Ultimately, Ripley’s choice of these materials extends ideas of the Arte Povera movement and the folk art tradition to a concern that is becoming ever more pointed in this new century - that of ecological crisis. There has always been a subtle modesty of making do with what is at hand, but in an age of planned obsolescence, staggering amounts of industrial and consumer refuse, and dwindling natural resources Ripley stubbornly proposes what may be a technological necessity - a quest to re-examine and transform the objects we think we no longer need.

Footnotes:

1. Flood, Richard and Frances Morris. *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972* Walker Art Center Minneapolis, Minnesota. 2001, p.9.
2. Riordon, Bernard. *Folk Art, The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia's Permanent Collection: Selected Works* Art Gallery of Nova Scotia 2002, p.107.
3. Celant, Germano. *Tony Cragg* Thames and Hudson, 1996, p.12.
4. Dawn, Leslie. “Kai Chan: Rainbow Lakes” *Artichoke* Vol. 15, No 4, p.37, 2003.
5. Tousley, Nancy. “Brian Jungen: Cool, Cooler, Coolest” *Canadian Art* Vol. 20, Issue 2, p.38, 2003.

Artist's Statement (2003)

Notions

Notion: 1. an idea; 2. a concept in the mind of the various marks or qualities of an object; 3. any small article ingeniously devised or invented.

The acquisition of an old sewing box, complete with contents sparked my initial explorations of the topography of materials and furthered my interest in how societal changes are often reflected in our consumer goods.

Gathering, sorting and reconfiguration are all processes I have used to explore the inherent characteristics of the notions in my search for what I think of as the "thingness" of an object.

The focus of my art practise has often included the re-examination of mundane objects, as they function as signifiers for sensory information, knowledge, and memory, while highlighting the interwoven nature of our perceptions and the interplay between art and life.

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13750-88 Avenue
 Surrey, BC V3W 3L1
 Phone: 604-501-5566
 artgallery@surrey.ca
 www.arts.surrey.ca
 www.surreytechlab.ca



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