

Prodigal Sons and Daughters

Until recently, NetherMind occupied the province of rare printed artifacts, 35 mm slides and rumours. Their first exhibition was staged in 1991, a time when Toronto was a far more condensed art scene. NetherMind coalesced around an axis of recent York graduates, Lyla Rye and John Dickson, who brought together a group of like-minded contemporaries; Max Streicher, Catherine Heard, Greg Hefford, Mary Catherine Newcomb, and a pair of more seasoned colleagues; Tom Dean and Reinhard Reitzenstein. This same eight still forms the core of the group. Facing a dearth of exhibition venues, they rolled up their sleeves, secured abandoned basements and warehouse spaces, and proceeded to organize their own shows featuring new, anxious and confrontational sculptures and installations. Having established a degree of notoriety, NetherMind disbanded with little fanfare in 1995.

Track 1: Mary Catherine Newcomb, “Ascension”

A floating wheat-field suspended in place. A modest platform invites viewers to walk up and contemplate the juxtaposition of this unlikely agrarian vista hovering amidst a horizon of white walls.

So, I was surprised to hear that after a 17-year hiatus, NetherMind was getting back together. In 2012, I eagerly attended their *Mirabilia* installation at St. Anne’s Anglican Church in Toronto. After so long a time apart, it might have been expected that their work would have felt less urgent, less defiant, but I was pleased and frankly inspired to discover this was not the case.

Track 2: Reinhard Reitzenstein, “Parasite”

A subtle intervention featuring over a dozen wax casts of tree fungus or conks mounted on the sides of walls and support columns. The fungal forms evoke a strange form of architectural infestation.

When the opportunity of hosting their eponymous 2013 follow-up exhibition was proposed, I eagerly jumped on board, but with some reservations. I found myself in the unique yet nerve-wracking position of hosting a NetherMind exhibition in a gallery. Until that moment, their projects had always been based on making artworks in response to the unique characteristics of non-traditional spaces. Their very reason for coming into existence was predicated upon an act of *not* showing in gallery spaces.

Track 3: Max Streicher, “Architecture of Cloud”

Striking monochromatic inflatables that evoke macroscopic follicles, anemones or spermatozoa. They gently surge over the walls and billow onto the floor invading a full corner of the space.

As the original site of Waterloo Manufacturing, a furniture fabricator, the gallery retains a degree of its residual industrial character. While I rationalized this was enough, I was also very aware of the fact that

the so-called white walls of the gallery could not offer the same atmospheric resonance as the non-traditional venues that the group was more accustomed to working in.

Track 4: Greg Hefford, “travel graphs: a version of things”

A selection of five incomplete pie charts representing several years of travel by the artist. The wall-mounted schematics suggest some form of enigmatic research project gone awry.

NetherMind demands space. While the two galleries and extra storage rooms offered a generous amount of real estate to occupy, in retrospect it was nowhere near enough. Space was greedily claimed for each project. To their credit each artist was sensitive to the requirements of their peers and everyone worked well together, it was also a very claustrophobic environment.

Track 5: Tom Dean, “Mortal Torch series”

An inscrutable display of eight hand-held clay grenades, inscribed for each member of the group. The grouping suggests a tentative act of eroticized terrorism or noble attempt at guerilla altruism.

The collective is made up of very different personalities, a sixteen-armed entity that is difficult to pin down or manage. The group is doggedly egalitarian and decentralized. Decisions are consensus-based. While open to ideas, my role as curator was closer to directing traffic. Everyone played a role in planning and installation. My anxiety was running high but I came to accept that this was a natural extension of the group’s process.

Track 6: Catherine Heard, “Grave”

A sprawling memento mori featuring over a dozen clay skulls scattered across the floor alongside a modest projection of an animated sonogram composed from multiple scans of the artist’s head.

The group functions as more of a partnership rather than a pure collective. It’s an important distinction. Unlike, say BGL for instance, there is no confusing who made what. NetherMind is more like an eight-piece band with each member playing a specific instrument in harmony, or discord in many cases. Their approach incorporates a willingness to trust in one another’s often widely divergent approaches.

Track 7: John Dickson, “Stormy Weather”

A trio of small kinetic tableaux that mimic the effects of a hurricane. Miniature surveillance cameras transmit the footage live. The surprisingly convincing results are projected in an adjacent storage room.

The name NetherMind suggests a dark and unexplored region of the subconscious—or the interstitial gap between the lizard brain, limbic system and neo-cortex—but it also coincidentally echoes the title of

Nirvana's 1991 breakthrough album *Nevermind*, which was itself a nod to the Sex Pistols seminal 1977 album *Never Mind the Bollocks*. Further echoing these Punk precedents, their logo is mash-up of warning labels for poisons and explosives, and the members share a similarly resilient do-it-yourself attitude.

Track 8: Lyla Rye, "Double Doors"

Video footage is projected onto a large sheet of iridescent black vinyl. The subsequent distortions and reflections confuse the imagery and simulate a phantasmagoric passageway on the adjacent wall.

Following this line of reasoning, NetherMind like Punk maintains a deeply held code of independence. Non-conformity, originality, and experimentation are the critical benchmarks underlying each exhibition. Forged and deepened by several decades of shared experience, NetherMind maintains their stubborn and dogged determination to approach each project on its own terms.

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