

Greetings- it is more sublime here than I'd imagined. And also colder.

Paul P.

During our correspondence regarding his forthcoming solo exhibition at Scrap Metal, the Toronto and New York-based artist Paul P. sent me the photograph above, accompanied by the brief message that follows. Receiving this piece of news and visual reference, and thinking about the low tables, stools and woven woolen rugs that would soon occupy the exhibition space, I imagined Paul—his slender figure which echoes the lines of his sculptural pieces—gently poised in one of his room-like compositions, looking out on to what appears to be infinity, but which in reality is only a small share of the world.

The impression of seeing, knowing and inhabiting the world's fractures—which carry the potential to become worlds onto themselves—has been a leitmotif throughout our preparations. Paul has often referred to one of his temporal interior settings as “an island that awaits alighting upon.” This reference is fitting: the emergence of an island is, after all, based on a rupture from within the water's surface. The artist's interiors, much like islands, are thus deserted fragments caught in a moment of waiting and openness. Paul goes further, suggesting that his objects are “laid and oriented in an attitude of expectancy.” Set on hovering plinths, each of the mahogany tables and corresponding stools are liberated from functionalism, alluding to inhabitation as something much more esoteric and deeply felt. This sense of anticipation that Paul implies becomes two-fold when we consider the less sensible and more museological nuance of the artist's furniture and its presentation; that is, while the objects are positioned as an invitation that expects the viewer, their E.W Godwin-like frames, scale and surface also assumes that they have been preserved as testimony to the life of a great novelist or draftsman. Given the artist's impulse to draw on literary figures such as Nancy Mitford and James McNeill Whistler, it is not so curious to think that these very figures, in some way, are kept alive through Paul's sculptures.

One can imagine that many of these ghosts who linger around the artist's work would use such restrained and elegant structures as lookout points from which to observe the world, and then to rewrite its very systems. Upon reading Clive Bell's 1929 book, *Civilization*, Mitford wrote to her brother Tom, “It is a charming book and expresses things I have always felt and sometimes tried to say. We'll start a new civilization...” Mistrusting of 1920s British society, Bell, at the beginning of his text, seeks to destabilize the status quo in favour of approaching civilization not as a measure of industrial, technological and political advancement, but as maintaining a virtuous “state of mind.” Grounding his notion of civilization, Bell adds that a good state of mind encompasses values such as

“truth and beauty, tolerance, intellectual honesty, fastidiousness, a sense of humour, good manners, curiosity, a dislike of vulgarity, brutality and over-emphasis, freedom from superstition and prudery, a fearless acceptance of the good things in life, a desire for complete self-expression and for a liberal education, a contempt for utilitarianism and philistinism, in two words – sweetness and light.” In this spirit of questioning civility, longing for it and then defining it for oneself, Paul has composed this exhibition for Scrap Metal. However, it is not the artist’s intention to prescribe an ideal set of values, but to suggest that it is important to coordinate and reorganize the necessary physical and psychological space from which a good life might spring. Rather than approaching civilization as being synonymous with moving forward, perhaps it can be measured as something that moves *around*. From this, the exhibition gains its title: Civilization Coordinates.

Keeping in mind these loosely connected elements of islands, civilization, codes and ideals, it is important to note that this exhibition is a reintroduction of Paul’s artistic practice to Toronto, which is also an invitation to enter the artist’s consciousness, for a moment. Spanning intimate paintings, sculpture, books and rugs, the exhibition has become a physical capacity for the systems, signs and meanings that Paul has developed since leaving and returning to Toronto. Paul’s share of the world promises moments of familiarity and newness, coherence and abstraction, singularity and likeness. Between these junctures lies the opportunity both to consult one’s attitudes and values, and to recognize that art and literature continue—unrelentingly—to civilize.

Rui Mateus Amaral, Curator

### ScrapBooks

The writer Nancy Mitford benevolently looms over my work of late. When I first read *Love in a Cold Climate* I was moved, but I couldn’t anticipate the profound interest in her that would take hold of me, nor that her writing would influence the work that I put forward, including several of those in this exhibition. It was due to what I have come to think of as ‘a consanguinity of temperament’; a connection that is manifest across time, from one artist to another; an alteration that happens as we read. I found that I understood Nancy Mitford as none of her biographers could. They saw her as sexually immature, emotionally unfulfilled and sad, whereas I saw her as a dandy, a proto-feminist, a champion of love in all its myriad forms, and a satisfied artist who ranks among the intellects of her generation.

During the Second World War, Nancy Mitford worked in a London bookstore. After each long night of the unrelenting Blitz she trudged across the city on foot through the morning wreckage towards 10 Curzon street in Mayfair, where her buoyant and cutting personality presided over the latest

books and created a salon atmosphere to which weary literary London flocked. During the war the English were voracious for books, as readers, writers and publishers; to help pass the horrible nights of black-out, to be transported outside of themselves somewhat, but mostly to take comfort in external evidence that love, sex, happiness, and a will for the future, burned equally inside other minds and bodies faced with the prospect of the eradication of life and of civilization. Books, and the unregulated access to all types of books, the joy taken in them and that freedom, are the truest markers of civilization.

Books disappear, just as lives do. My fascination has always lain in the transience, and the recurrence, of aesthetic high points, especially as they have coupled with cultural tragedy in certain contemporary epochs; most specifically the post-gay liberation, pre-AIDS moment, and now the generation of writers and artists who shone brightly between the two World Wars. I gravitate towards what is almost lost in an attempt to better myself with what I can glean from that beauty. Naturally, most of the books I love are out of print. Books that contain the words that reverberate in my mind - such as Clive Bell's *Civilization* (1929), in which he declares confidently that, 'A sense of values, as I understand the term, is possessed only by those who are capable of sacrificing obvious and immediate goods to the more subtle and remote. People who deliberately sacrificed comfort to beauty – with no practical or superstitious end in view – would appear to me to possess a sense of values.' Or Elizabeth Bowen's words that make up a phrase in the postscript to *The Demon Lover* (1954), her collection of wartime, often supernatural stories, in which she relays an observation that reveals an unforgettable melancholic yearning, "whatever else I forget about the war," a friend said to me, "I hope I never forget my own dreams, or some of the dreams I've been told. We had never dreamed like this before; and I suppose we shall never dream like this again." Both acknowledge that fantasy exacts a cost, yet make a wish for the future through the considered organization of the richness of the past.

Focusing on the best of what is available now - what is currently in print - is a wish for the future; this is what a bookstore does. Some books stay in print, others do not. It is not a measure of the quality of the books, but the quality of their public. *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949) stars Cedric Hampton, most likely the first unpunished homosexual character in mainstream literature; not only is he terrifically happy, but he wins the hearts and fortunes of all. I understood the importance of Nancy Mitford with the revelation of that this book has never for a moment gone out of print. Though it may still. Cedric Hampton was created as a triumphant amalgam of many of her friends who did not fare well in a world beset by war and homophobia, and as such he is emblematic of the importance of milieu for the artist. Many of the authors that I have selected for this bookstore are the product of some lively set battling for beauty amidst the exigencies of their social and political

realities.

Paul P.

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