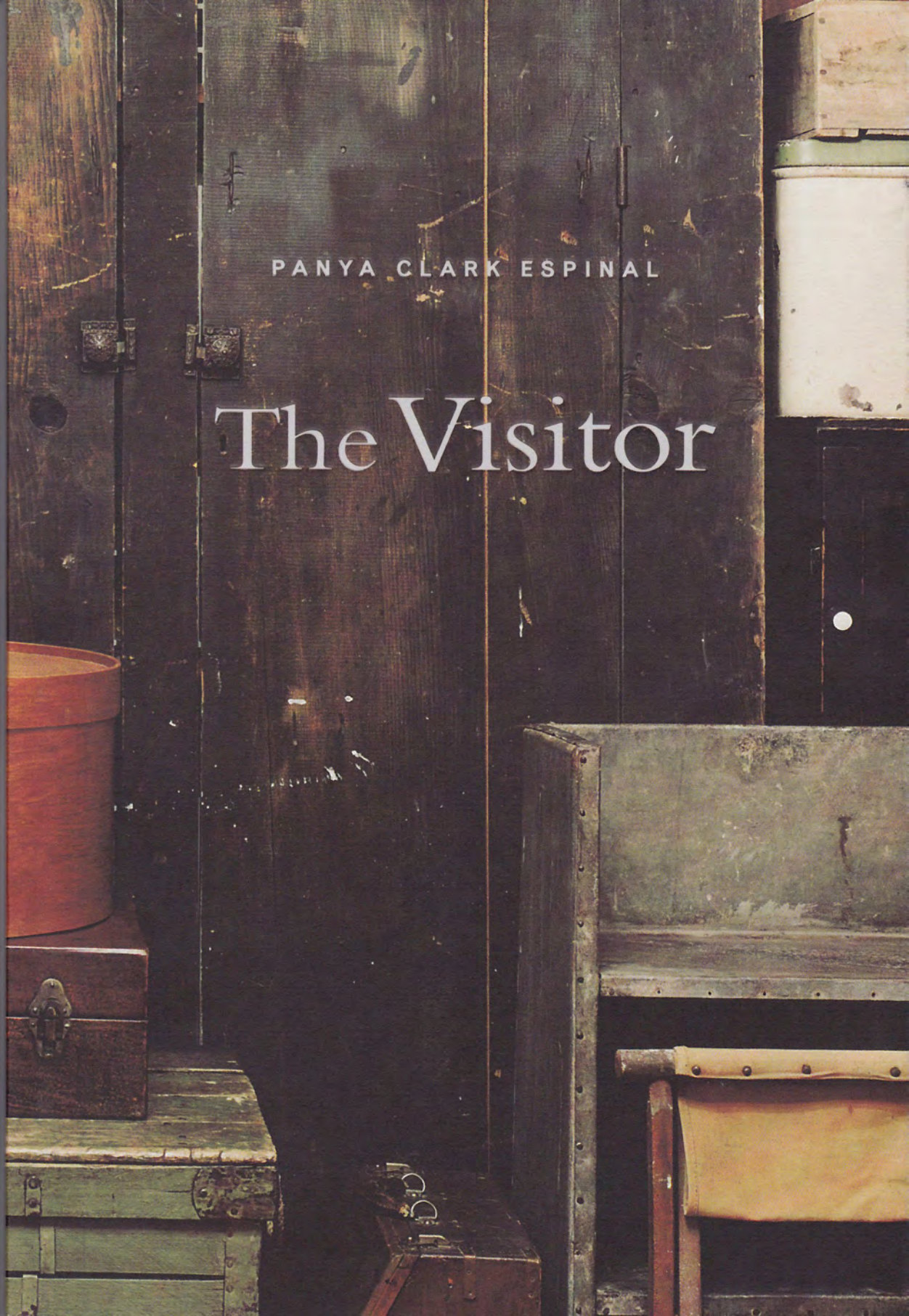




PANYA CLARK ESPINAL

# The Visitor

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*Curated by Marnie Fleming*

*Text by Ruth Kerkham*

Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens

21 April–10 June 2001

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## Foreword

Panya Clark Espinal's exhibition *The Visitor* reveals her interest in different containers, their design, shape and colour, which in itself is engaging. However, she also uses them as devices to control our private environment and to reflect on ways to deal with overabundance. Moreover, Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, a former home, offers the perfect setting for the presentation of Panya's work, since its very structure provides another kind of container.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I extend my gratitude to those who contributed to the project. To Panya Clark Espinal most of all, for sharing her work with Oakville Galleries' public. To Marnie Fleming, Curator of Contemporary Art, for her thoughtful attention to the artist's needs. And to Ruth Kerkham for an insightful text that brings a clear perspective to Panya's practice. The exhibition also benefited from Shannon Anderson's conscientious attention to shipping and Rick Dzipina who installed the works with finesse.

This exhibition could never have taken place without the ongoing assistance of the public sector, and for this Oakville Galleries acknowledges the financial contribution of The Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, the Corporation of the Town of Oakville and the membership of Oakville Galleries.

*Francine Périnet, Director*



# Panya Clark Espinal's Inscrutable Visitor

Ruth Kerkham

*"It's—it's a magic wardrobe. There's a wood inside it, and it's snowing, and there's a faun and a witch and it's called Narnia; come and see . . ."*

*[Edmund] . . . sneered and jeered at Lucy and kept on asking her if she'd found any other new countries in other cupboards all over the house.<sup>1</sup>*

In C.S. Lewis's famous children's story *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the main character, Lucy, is the first of four children to visit the magical land of Narnia. Stuttering in disbelief, she tries to explain her bizarre passage of entrance to a faun that she meets in this enchanted world: "I—I got in through the wardrobe in the spare room."<sup>2</sup> The faun, thinking that a wardrobe was a whole country, laments, "If only I had worked harder at geography . . . I should have known all about those strange countries."<sup>3</sup>

Curiously shaped compartments inserted into Panya Clark Espinal's new sculptural works guide our imaginations into fanciful worlds and dream-like situations. Everyday domestic objects such as furniture and storage containers conceal enigmatic spaces that have been built inside them, which, although empty, are latent with the possibilities of imagined locales and events. In *Diva* (1999–2000), for example, a vintage armoire opens up onto an operatic

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1950, pp. 19–20. <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9. <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

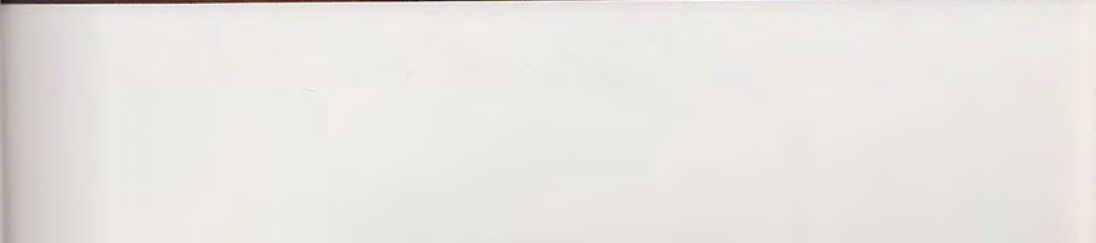
architectural panorama, and in *Hedonist* (2000) a rough timber chest reveals an illusory world of sultry escape where Mediterranean villas and swimming pools ramble up a sun-baked hill. Encouraging viewers to interact with the pieces by opening the doors and drawers themselves, the artist sets up an equivocal sense of anticipation, inviting viewers to visit the intricate corners of their own imaginations.

The artworks in this exhibition were initially inspired by the article "Secret Rooms" in a *Martha Stewart Living* magazine. In this article the "diva of domesticity" instructs her readers on how to transform an armoire into an entire room by outfitting it for a particular function such as letter writing or papermaking. Upon opening the doors of an armoire, a built-in desk, for example, could be folded down, or customized drawers could be pulled out to divulge an array of concealed functionality. The article, which is exquisitely illustrated with antique armoires and luxurious objects, begins as follows:

*An armoire holds nothing so much as promise: every one is a big wooden box waiting to be filled . . . Although the earliest examples might have housed weapons or church documents, since the middle ages armoires have been used primarily for storing clothes and linens . . . the term clothes press eventually became closet, which is how armoires have always been used. Until now. Open the doors of armoires here, and you'll see much more than storage. These pieces have been refitted as private escapes . . .*<sup>4</sup>

These cupboards are turned into architectural spaces that, according to the text, ". . . make up for the shortcomings of a house . . . they're not just closets, they're more like rooms. . . . Here's a chance to renovate without construction."<sup>5</sup> The glossy pages of the magazine display stylish organization *par excellence* and enticingly hold

<sup>4</sup> "Secret Rooms," *Martha Stewart Living*, 1998, p.104. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.106.



out the promise that "Every home can have this extra room, tucked into a nineteenth-century Hungarian ashwood armoire."<sup>6</sup>

It is this seduction of the lustrous magazine page that draws Clark Espinal in at the outset and, as in her previous works that dealt with *National Geographic* magazine, it is the layers of construction and artifice that compel her to enquire further into the depths of desire. While *National Geographic* allures the reader with ostensibly exotic locations that are fabricated as accessible fantasies, *Martha Stewart Living* attempts to inform the reader that every home can be as glamorous, organized and tranquil as the ones between its pages. In previous works such as *Research and Discovery* (1988) Clark Espinal reveals the failure of tantalizing images to assuage that which one is encouraged to crave. Similarly, in this body of work, she exposes the deficiency of desire as set up in Martha Stewart's presentation of the "perfect" lifestyle. As Stewart's unauthorized biographer Jerry Oppenheimer suggests in his book *Martha Stewart Just Desserts*, "Martha Stewart appeared to have a monopoly on all things domestic."<sup>7</sup> In the preface he describes her construction of perfection that inspired him to write his book:

*Stewart writes in great detail about her perfect childhood, her perfect family, her perfect education, her perfect marriage, her perfect motherhood, her perfect career, her perfect husband, her perfect daughter, her perfect house. . . . If her stories were true I foresaw a book about the perfect woman who had brought perfection to the masses. If her stories were not true, I foresaw a book that would shatter myths that were well constructed.*<sup>8</sup>

Oppenheimer does indeed go on to rupture the myth of "Marvelous Martha," as she is often called. While the works in this exhibition

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.104. <sup>7</sup> Oppenheimer, Jerry. *Martha Stewart Just Desserts: The Unauthorized Biography*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1997, p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. vii–viii.

are not about Martha Stewart *per se*, they are about the deconstruction of our myths of want and satisfaction that are so apparent in the Martha Stewart industry of domesticity.

This sense of ungratified greed is successfully captured in the emptiness of the intricate spaces in Clark Espinal's works. As the consumerist drive displayed in most magazines compels us to own more and more paraphernalia, storage increasingly becomes a problem. One of the responses to this dilemma has been the transformation of storage itself into a chic aspect of home decorating. As such, our desperate attempt to organize and thus gain control over our excessive acts of consumption and collection is turned into a fashionable lifestyle that falsely suggests ease. While some stored objects can still be hidden, many objects are stored in manners that emphasize display rather than concealment. For example, a trend in home-making and life-style stores such as IKEA is to fit cupboards with partially see-through doors so that storage borders on exposition, even with the storage of seemingly private objects such as clothes and toiletries. In *Martha Stewart Living* the armoires that are turned into "secret rooms" are secret in that unexpected spaces are found inside them, rather than in the sense of trying to hide things. While Martha Stewart certainly does have some interest in practical organization, her ultimate goal is conspicuously to display, and thus fetishize, this orderliness. As the article says, "Close the door, and you'd never imagine the world inside. But why close the doors?"<sup>9</sup>

As the viewers open the doors and compartments of Clark Espinal's works, some might initially feel disappointed by the sparseness they encounter. After all, why would such appealing spaces not be filled with possessions or objects of display? It is precisely

<sup>9</sup> *Martha Stewart Living*, p.106.



this lack, however, that makes these artworks so replete in meaning and connotation. Whereas the neatly packaged Martha Stewart industry leaves little room for one's own creativity, the suggestive emptiness of these works allows for far more imaginative meanderings of the mind. Opening the doors of *Diva*, for example, one might initially expect to encounter the mothball aroma and luxurious texture of the fur coats that Lucy found in the old wooden wardrobe. Instead, one is faced with a matrix of splendid visual rhythms alluding, perhaps, to a vibrant cityscape seen from afar, or to a grand theatrical setting in which the viewer becomes the Diva herself, looking out at a sea of magnificent applause. The performative opening of these artworks is not about a search for contents. It is about being led by the imaginative process through the wardrobe into architectural and cosmic worlds. It is about visiting these temporary spaces.

The act of visiting has particular connotations when it is related to visiting a gallery or visiting somebody's home. By exhibiting these works at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens these layers are even further nuanced: artworks that were previously functional, domestic objects are being displayed in a contemporary gallery that was once a lived-in house. As the viewer enters the gallery, then, there is a dual sense of walking into a home. Just as we are accustomed to not touching artworks in a gallery, we would certainly not walk into someone else's home and open their cupboard, or peer into their document box or dresser. By inviting the viewer to open up her sculptures, which from the outside look more like domestic objects than artworks, Clark Espinal pushes the concept of visiting beyond our polite codes of acceptable behavior. As such, she challenges our constructed notions of public and private space. She also alludes to the concept of this division in *Martha Stewart Living*, which is fundamentally about entertaining visitors, about

presenting your private home to the public. However, instead of systemically challenging this division of space-related behavior, the Martha Stewart industry simply adds to the tiers of artifice. What is presented to the public through the magazine is a picturesque and seemingly private intimacy, as if that were the scene one would come across, even on an unannounced visit. Most of us know, though, that we could expect otherwise.

This exhibition is all about expectations, and the subversion thereof. An old fashioned suitcase, for example, rests on a small bench, as if a guest had just arrived. Based on its title, *The Visitor* (2000), one might naturally suppose it would be filled with a few neatly folded clothes, some curled up socks, a towel, and, of course, a toothbrush. Depending on the type of visitor one was hosting, the suitcase could potentially hold a concertina-ed ventriloquist's puppet waiting to stretch its legs and exercise its voice. When the suitcase is indeed opened, the viewer is greeted with a fresh and playful composition of flowers. The interior of the lid displays its original fabric lining, which is a delicate floral in pink and blue. In the bottom of the case, Clark Espinal mimics this pattern by building geometric compartments made up of small circles, which are grouped together to represent petals. Reminiscent of her hummingbird suitcase in *Research and Discovery* (1988) that is based on a Brazilian naturalist who filled his suitcase with tiny hummingbirds, one can conceive of this case being taken on a field trip and filled with petals or flowers—seasonal visitors themselves.

Similarly carefree, one could imagine walking down a hill accompanied by a pail in hand to collect water from the river below. *Companion* (1999) is a piece that poignantly captures the comfortable and vital alliance that our human bodies have with water, a necessity to our existence. The rings, in various shades of blue, that are assembled inside the pail, allude to the propitious pastime of





throwing pennies into a wishing well or stones into a stream. A comparable sense of verve is found in *Agent* (1999), a metal breadbox that is scuffed on the outside from many years of use, but opens up to display an immaculate, orange interior that seems to radiate with well-being. Like water, bread possesses indispensable agency.

With a tad of imagination, though, it is hard to look at *Agent* without thinking of a secret agent or spy who puts on a sunny face in order to hoodwink his adversaries. A container as innocent as a breadbox would be a wonderful place to hide stolen or clandestine papers by tucking them into a false bottom or a secret compartment. In an underground world of conspiracy and deception it is probable that a spy would cooperate traitorously with the enemy in order to find out classified information. The piece *Collaborator* (1998), which is made from a wooden typewriter box, seems to suggest a scene from a Mafia film where sinister affiliates peer through a haze of cigar smoke to type up false documents and ID cards. The typewriter itself becomes a collaborator of sorts, as it colludes in the production of conspiracy. It is more than just the writer who writes.

Letters of all sorts were at one time stored in the document box that became *The Executor* (2001). Inside one of the wooden compartments is a removable box that looks like a hard-cover book. The word "Letters" appears on the spine. Upon opening the book-like container the viewer comes across a three-dimensional version of a page that the artist has constructed. Two vertical rows evoke typeset columns, which are then divided into twenty-six slots indicating the number of letters in the English alphabet. Everything inside this container is painted off-white to simulate the usual colour of a page. The title *The Executor* implies that somebody's will was probably stored inside this container.

Once someone has died, one of the hardest tasks is to go through their belongings and to know how either to use or dispose of them

in a respectful way. There are always a couple of drawers where little knickknacks are thrown because they have little use at all or simply because there are no other logical spots to store them. Such a drawer is typically found in a bedside table, a dresser, or with a bedroom mirror, as in the piece called *Diviner* (2000). Standing in front of this mirror one could imagine one's grandmother powdering her nose or attaching a little butterfly brooch to her dress. Although one's own face is reflected, the mirror seems to signal the history of a life gone by. Opening the drawers, though, one unexpectedly finds a swirl of blue cosmological rings, incorporating past lives and foreseeable futures. The rings also allude to water, bringing to mind Narcissus, the beautiful youth who rejected the nymph Echo and fell in love with his own reflection in the water. Once connections to Narcissus and the cosmos have been made, the image of one's grandmother sitting in front of the mirror might change to a rather hackneyed image of a fortune-teller coating her eyelashes with thick mascara and her lips with fire engine red.

An analogous image is brought to mind when one opens the large drawer of *Tart* (2000), perhaps one of the most wonderful surprises in this exhibition. Built into the drawer are rows of circular compartments that are painted in passionate red. While the round slots are wider than regular lipstick containers, one cannot help but imagine monstrously large lipsticks of the gaudiest shades being stored inside this drawer by a promiscuous seductress or *femme fatale*. When one realizes that the cabinet, in which this "lipstick drawer" is placed, is actually a homey pie safe, the sense of bold juxtaposition is breathtaking. The original purpose of the mesh door was to allow freshly baked pies and tarts to cool, a connotation that playfully contrasts to the heat of the red.

Playfulness is an essential component of this entire body of work, and Clark Espinal uses it to set up as well as break down expectations.





She leads the viewer to the entrance of the magic wardrobe, but she deliberately withholds the secret of how to reach the worlds beyond it. When exploring her enigmatic compartments and architectural spaces, remember the Professor's words to the children who were desperately searching for Narnia, "... don't *try* to get there at all. It'll happen when you are not looking for it."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, p. 153.



# A Conversation with Panya Clark Espinal

Marnie Fleming

Marnie Fleming: Your new work seems to have its origins in an element of a much earlier work—the hummingbird suitcase in *Research and Discovery* (1988). Would you agree?

Panya Clark Espinal: There are visual connections with the hummingbird suitcase because it contained a tray which was divided up into compartments and had been custom-made to house a scientist's collection of birds. But when I think about the connection between this work and the previous work, I think about it really being more about desire. *Research and Discovery* came out of looking at *National Geographic* magazine and being seduced by objects that have been hand-made by people and then documented by the exoticizing medium of the magazine. With these new works the initial seed also came from looking at a magazine, this time it happened to be *Martha Stewart Living*! It was about seeing this world where things were idyllic and beautiful and custom-made to suit a particular purpose. Other aspects unique to *Martha Stewart Living* interested me as well, but to me that's the primary connection to my earlier work.

MF: Today your containers or repositories are empty. What accounts for this difference and what is important to you now in working with various kinds of containers?

PCE: Initially my intention was to take an armoire and create compartmentalized trays or shelves to house some kind of activity in. I thought about having all my mosaic materials and tools in it, so all these jars of coloured glass and things would find a place in the container. This is what the original article in *Martha Stewart Living* was about; making secret rooms by taking large containers—like wardrobes—and changing them to house a collection or activity. When I started working on them, I realized right away that they were much more interesting when they were empty. Somehow, just the configuration of the compartments would trigger a notion in the viewer as to what might be kept in the compartments. Each viewer would come to the piece and fill that space for themselves. As the work developed I also became interested in different kinds of containers and the various designs each would trigger.

MF: There is also the sense of surprise when you open them up and the initial guesswork of “what am I going to find?”

PCE: The sense of anticipation and emptiness is a new direction in my work. A few years ago I recognized a desire within myself to develop a parallel practice to my site-specific and installation work that was studio-based. I felt that working on an ongoing series of pieces would give me the opportunity to develop my ideas more autonomously from the exhibiting process. As well, I was anticipating that I would be going through some lifestyle changes.

MF: Well, when I first saw the hatbox piece you were pregnant. Would this be pushing the ideas of “expectation” and “anticipation” too far?

PCE: Certainly I think the ideas of anticipation and emptiness and waiting—and knowing that there is something that is going to be filled—and not really knowing what that was going to be, or how it was going to operate in my life, has a lot to do with it. Also I found that once I went into the studio, it was challenging to face

the “blank canvas” in front of me, but I recognized I could make up my own parameters. I ended up with these containers and they became my sites. They set the rules. So in a way, I’m still creating site-specific work. It just happens to be a site that is contained in a moveable object. It seems that is the only way I can work.

MF: And yet you’ve talked to me about the Gairloch estate—now a gallery but once a home—as appealing to you as a site in which to exhibit your work.

PCE: Yes, it appeals to me. A big part of it is that the objects are domestically scaled and are themselves domestic objects. I didn’t think it would serve the art well to exhibit it in an institutional space that would dwarf the objects. I just think the architectural elements will suit these particular pieces.

MF: It seems to me that there is an architectural structure to the interiors of the new work. When you showed me the maquettes for these pieces they could have just as easily been grand architectural models. Have you been influenced by architecture?

PCE: Well, I was raised by two architects! There was a lot of planning things out on graph paper. My parents renovated their home themselves and were into many creative endeavours. It all had an influence on me.

MF: Are there any artists with whom you feel an affinity?

PCE: I always strike out with that question. While I have respect for many artists—especially those who are uniquely obsessive!—my own inspiration comes from other things. That can be something like magazines, as I have mentioned, or utilitarian things—such as displays, industrial processes and such. I try not to think about what other artists have done.

MF: What criteria or qualities do you look for in selecting your containers?

PCE: Well, most of them are from antique markets. I especially looked for containers that were rough, dark, worn, and not at all fancy in terms of their construction. I knew that I wanted the interiors I fabricated to feel clean and luminous against the exterior. When I opened them up I wanted to see if any ideas were triggered by just looking. Then I would ask—is it interesting enough? Is it unique? Is there something that draws me to this object?

MF: I find there is almost an op-art sensibility to the interiors of your containers. What are some of your considerations with shape and colour?

PCE: Initially I was determined not to do anything tricky or illusionistic with the pieces because this is what some of my other work is about and I wanted to avoid that. Especially with the earlier pieces, like the hatbox which I call *Witness*; I had to remind myself to keep it simple, open and fresh—not to overcomplicate it. Then, as I went along, I weakened to the point that, with *Tart*, I got a little over the top! Eventually I found that each container began to assume its own personality and they became like portraits of people.

MF: Hence the names you've given them?

PCE: Yes, the titles introduce a notion of these things being about roles people play, not only personality traits but the way in which they relate to others. I also think of the containers being like bodies and the interiors being descriptions of an aspect of one's spirit or soul. There are different ways in which the interiors could have been configured, so it is as though each container is being visited by an aspect of itself.

MF: Have you ever had any doubts about what you are doing?

PCE: Sometimes I show the work to those who are not accustomed to looking at contemporary art and I am sure they are thinking, "Why would someone do this?" They ask if I am going to put some-

thing in them and are a little bewildered when I say no. They want them to be filled up. I guess I sometimes have doubts about how effective they are going to be as art works. However, my feeling is that if I don't have these doubts then I am not taking risks in the work.

MF: Surely your doubts are what Martha calls "... a good thing!" Can I ask you about the process of making the pieces? You mentioned earlier that graph paper was important.

PCE: Yes. I would buy these wonky containers and then when I got home and measured them, I would inevitably find they weren't square or even. I would consider the shape of the container, how many divisions I would have, and how deep those divisions would be—then it became mathematics—designing something on paper. With every container I would fabricate a model out of foamcore or cardboard and fit them into the actual containers to see what they would look like. At this point I would either scrap the models, adjust them or be happy. With some there was a lot of re-working that took place and with others they just fell magically into place. The cupboard, or *Diva*, was like that.

MF: Systems, particularly those dealing in network storage or archival technology, are becoming critical to our work-a-day world. Is this something that you think about with this work?

PCE: I think it is completely relevant. In our society there is an overabundance of stuff and information. We all feel out of control when things are stacking up around us. I also think the whole Martha Stewart thing is an over-the-top obsessive way of fashioning your life so that everything has its place—so that you have control over this abundance. My pieces are largely about this. Ultimately, I have found relief in the emptiness and have enjoyed the potential it implies.

*January 2001*

# Catalogue

*Understudy*, 1998, wooden bottle box, wood, latex paint, 31 x 16 x 34 cm

*Witness*, 1998, wooden hat box, wood, latex paint, 44 (diameter) x 24 cm

*Collaborator*, 1998, wooden typewriter box on folding stool, wood, latex paint, 42 x 66 x 39 cm

*Agent*, 1999, metal bread box on metal table, wood, latex paint, 81 x 103 x 51 cm

*Companion*, 1999, wooden pail, wood, latex paint, 31 (diameter) x 29 cm

*Diva*, 1999–2000, wooden cupboard, wood, latex paint, 92 x 136 x 42 cm

*Tart*, 2000, wooden pie safe, latex paint, 73 x 62 x 48 cm

*The Visitor*, 2000, suitcase on wooden bench, wood, latex paint, 74 x 62 x 48 cm

*Hedonist*, 2000, baker's trunk, wood, latex paint, 81 x 49 x 57 cm

*Diviner*, 2000, jewellery chest with mirror on zinc-clad pail stand, wood, latex paint, 82 x 114 x 34 cm

*The Executor*, 2001, document box, wood, latex paint, 34 x 43 x 34 cm

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