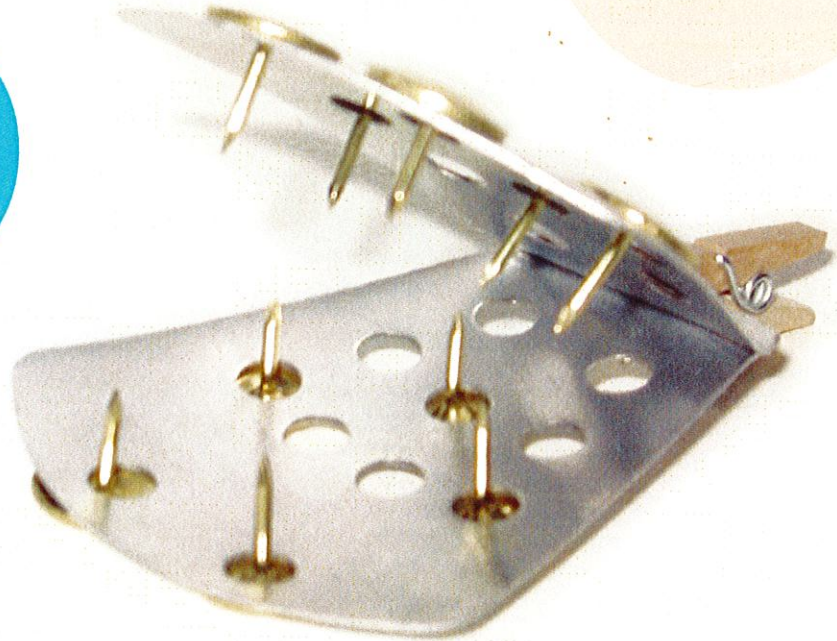


Jason Gress | **MOUSETRAP**

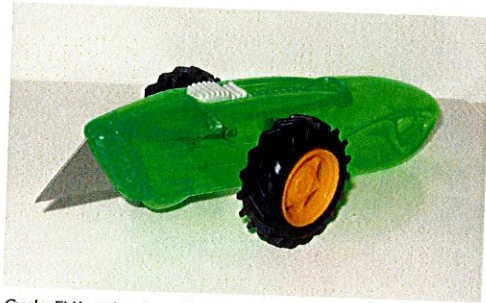


Accessorizing THE TRAP

Mice and rats have cohabited intimately with human communities for thousands of years. Rodents depend on unintentional generosity and the commodious niches and crevices of homes, garages and garden sheds. They stand in for us in the pharmaceutical-chemical research laboratories and they are marvelously amenable to anthropomorphization. As much as we enjoy culturally groomed embodiments of rodentia (Mickey, Minnie, Mighty, Templeton, Suzy, Jerry, Topo Gigio and other chewing personas), North Americans wage war on the real thing, plotting the genocide of the living, breathing, gnawing, shitting, and reproducing vermin. Our strange codependency with rodents is symptomatic of the relationship between consumerist culture and the environment. We think these critters are cute on the screen or in a photograph, but as soon as we have to get close to them, everything turns sour. I know this. I detest and fear rodents only when they try to move in. Mousetraps have been around for a long time, and the word 'mousetrap' has been in use since the medieval era, suggesting that the mousetrap has preoccupied the householder centuries before the first mousetrap was patented in 1897.

It's hard to reconcile Jason Gress's elegant sculpture with the greasy, slobbish viscosity of rodents. Though it is unlikely that his refined mousetraps will ever deal a deathblow, Gress has made a conceptually pernicious trap for mammals with over-extended credit cards. His manufactured objects generate big questions. When did mechanics trump the skill and innate enthusiasm of the household predator? When did the mechanics of function give way to objects engineered exclusively toward consumer appeal? As curator Greg Ball eloquently summarizes, Jason Gress "...uses mousetraps as a metaphor to pointedly critique contemporary consumer culture and the ubiquitous ploys of advertising."¹ It's not surprising that the mousetrap takes centre stage in the frequently quoted (misquoted) entrepreneurial truism, "Build





Cycle 5V1, mixed media 2005.

selection of predetermined options which pander to the individual's need to assert their identity. Consuming is ultimately easier than creating..."

Gress has been making things since childhood. He credits his industrial design and fabrication skill to a childhood in a DIY home – his father was a carpenter and his mother could sew anything. Preoccupied by throwaway materials of consumer obsolescence – most derivatives of the petrochemical industry such as elastic bands, pipe cleaners, sponges and kitchen scrubbers – Gress has fabricated an impressive inventory of tiny handmade, mass-produced objects. To achieve this oxymoronic feat Gress became a one-man sweatshop. After that experience, he was eager to make individuated objects. The resulting installation is a hybrid of retail décor, a science fair and a popular science conference. *Mousetrap* includes reference material framed with quilted metallic fabric; display units inspired by Swiss cheese; a ten-foot long collage of imagery taken from *Popular Mechanics* magazines, entitled *You Can Make It Better*, which resembles an assembly line that draws visitors to "envision it as a giant complicated mousetrap." The Mousemall, a device literalizing irresistible allure and inescapable dead end, is a sardonic foil to the centerpiece of the installation, a robust array of mousetrap prototypes. Gress's traps emulate the dexterity and élan of contemporary industrial design.

toward giving form to the projected desires of consumers and/or engineering desire itself within target communities. Let us not forget the energy required to shop, and make all the "choices" to assemble an identity congruent with the showroom model(s) of choice. To me, shopping is pre-landfill processing. Gress is kinder, calling this 'surrogate creativity,' which distinguishes it from problem solving, invention, or creativity as an end in itself. He asserts, "people channel their creative energy into consumptive consumer activities... these pseudo-creative gestures are really just a

spatula *Cycle 1 V1* works on a principal similar to that of the iron maiden, and the adorable yellow snare with wheels *Cycle 2 V2* isn't exactly a garrote, but when you think about how it might work, it's of the same genre. Then there is the clear plastic tube *Cycle 1 V3* prototype that combines the principle of a teeter-totter with an itsy-bitsy guillotine.

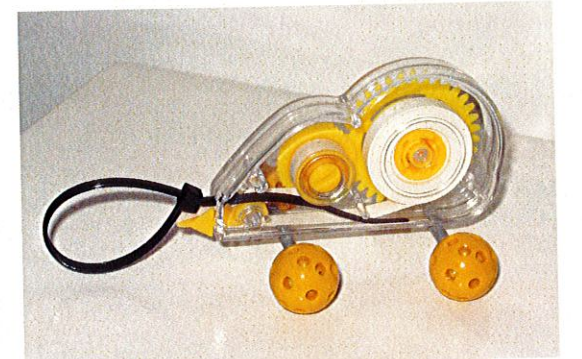
It didn't take long for revulsion to seep into my thoughts about Gress's traps. I was inventing kill mechanisms. That's when Gress's traps snapped. No matter what I did to return to the pleasure of seeing them as stylish sculptural objects, the stain wouldn't disappear. I imagined a contagious consumer rash of reverse engineering, infecting shoppers stalking the aisles of Costco or Zellers or the Bay, imagining the sources and ends of the endless gizmos filling the shelves.

Most of Gress's cute, sinister prototypes are endearingly coloured, pliable and ergonomically sensitive, even the ones with blades. By combining the look of kitchenware and toys (children's and adult's) with trap mechanics, Gress disarms the viewer. In so doing, Gress assays the unfettered territories of childhood imagination and play, best evinced by fairy tales, fables and rhymes, many of which carry a dose of entrapment, gore and death. One such tale is that of the unforgiving Pied Piper, who, when ripped off by the stingy burghers of Hamelin, lured away the town's children and immured them in a mountain until adulthood.

I can't help but see the Piper as a Wal-Mart executive, the mountain as landfill, and the emergent children of Hamelin, well, let's just say they walk among us. Gress also included Aesop's classic mouse duo, the city mouse and the country mouse, and an adapted Trojan Cat, both reminding us that our fascination with the glitter of consumer goods has a long, long provenance.

Jason Gress plays upon the artifice of consumerist culture in his cunningly executed mousetraps. Despite its upbeat surfaces, *Mousetrap* elicits a shudder and causes us to recoil from the embrace of rapacious acquisition.

Helen Marzolf
Victoria, April 2007



Cycle 2V2, mixed media 2005.

ENDNOTES

1. Curator Greg Ball has analyzed the sociopolitical engines of Gress's work in *Better: Jason Gress*. (Nanaimo: Nanaimo Art Gallery, 2006), unpaginated.

2. Hope, J., "A Better Mousetrap". *American Heritage*, October 1996, pp. 90-97. Apparently Ralph Waldo Emerson didn't mention a mousetrap in his original notes. Hope's history of the mousetrap and attendant patents provides some revisionist scholarship to what Emerson actually said. "I trust a good deal to common fame, as we all must. If a man has good corn, or wood, or boards, or pigs, to sell, or can make better chairs or knives, crucibles, or church organs, than anybody else, you will find a broad, hard-beaten road to his house, though it be in the woods."

All quotes by the artist are based upon a April 26, 2007 interview with the author and ensuing email correspondence.

Jason GRESS



Born: Saskatchewan, 1969

Resides: Nanaimo, B.C.

Education:

- 2005 Master's Degree in Fine Arts, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK
- 2003 Bachelor of Fine Arts Honours with Distinction, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC
- 2001 Diploma of Visual Arts, Camosun College, Victoria, BC
- 2001 Associate of Arts Degree, Camosun College, Victoria, BC

Selected Solo Exhibitions:

- 2006 "Better", Nanaimo Art Gallery, Nanaimo, BC
- 2005 "Rollz", Frances Morrison Gallery, Saskatoon, SK
- 2005 "Fleeced", MFA Thesis Show, Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, Saskatoon, SK
- 2005 "Standoffish", Xchanges Gallery, Victoria, BC

Selected Group Exhibitions:

- 2005 "Massive Response", Eastern Front Gallery, Toronto, ON
- 2005 "May Works", Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, Saskatoon, SK
- 2005 "Artists by Artists", Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, SK
- 2005 "Canadian Idyll", AKA Artist Run Centre, Saskatoon, SK
- 2005 "Return to Sender", Trap/door Artist Run Centre, Lethbridge, AB
- 2005 "The Infinity Project", Helen Pitt Gallery, Vancouver, BC
- 2005 "Sure?", Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, Saskatoon, SK
- 2003 "Primary", EC4 Gallery, Victoria, BC

Jason Gress | **MOUSETRAP**

Art Gallery of Regina
May 24 to June 29, 2007

ART
GALLERY
OF REGINA



© Art Gallery of Regina Inc.
Neil Balkwill Civic Arts Centre
2420 Elphinstone Street, PO Box 1790
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3C8

ISBN #978-1-896432-74-8

Curator: Karen Schoonover
Essay: Helen Marzolf
Design: Kate Kokotailo
Images: Jason Gress
Cover: *Cycle 1V1, mixed media 2005.*



Sponsored by
SaskTel

The Art Gallery of Regina gratefully acknowledges the support of the Regina Arts Commission, Saskatchewan Arts Board, Saskatchewan Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture and Recreation, SaskCulture, SaskTel, SaskEnergy, Greystone Managed Investments, SaskCentral, and the Cathedral Free House.

