

THINGS YOU CAN'T UNTHINK

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THINKING MAKES IT SO

by Natasha Chaykowski

Most of my vivid childhood memories are inexplicably moored to unremarkable traffic-related things; I remember being convinced that traffic lights were operated by people stationed in small cement bunkers under the sidewalks. Also, I recall being unable to understand how the “slippery when wet” road sign made any cautionary sense at all: to me it looked like a car with frog legs. One of the most vivid of these childhood recollections involves sitting in the backseat of my mom’s forest green Dodge Caravan, cruising through Ottawa’s bland and sprawling suburbs, listening to the local adult contemporary radio station, Majic 100.3. Celine Dion, Jann Arden. But, what colours this particular memory is Paul Young’s 1985 overwrought love ballad, “Everytime You Go Away.” I would sing along, unabashedly belting, “everytime you go away, take a piece of *meat* with you.” This is a thing I can’t unthink.

Echoing my early lyrical misinterpretation is conceptual poet and recently (rightly) criticized “Uncreative Writing” champion, Kenneth Goldsmith, who lists an expansive 800 confused lyrics in *Head Citations (The Figures, 2002)*. Some of my favourites include: *Joy to the viscous and the deep-blue sea, Mustang salad, Goodbye groovy toothpaste, Traveled the world in generic jeans, Count the head-lice on the highway, Gimme the Beach Boys and free my soul, and Killing me softly with his saw*. These are funny and relatable, as it’s not uncommon to misunderstand lyrics. But there is something else at work in the mechanics of such misinterpretations; often, even when we’ve amended our flawed understanding, the original



Erica Prince, *Released From Orbit*, 2012. Mirror, glazed ceramic, wire, found objects, plaster, paper maché, spray painted aluminum foil and lights, 487.68 cm x 609.6 cm x 22 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

(wrong) lyrics linger in the fissures of our grey matter, ignited from neural slumber by the stimulus of the timbre and cadence of that given song. In a sense, this is precisely what the group exhibition *things you can’t unthink* is about.

Bringing together works by artists Sara Cwynar, Eunice Luk, Virginia Lee Montgomery and Erica Prince, *things you can’t unthink* seeks to challenge our deep-seated knowledge—and our thinking per se—about the ways in which things exist in the world, autonomously from our own existence

and simultaneously inextricably linked to it. In each of the works included, materials have gone awry. Like botched song lyrics, now forever a part of the brain’s arsenal of information conjured variably at every turn of experience, the unlikely, strange or aberrant ways in which these artists employ things here is an effort to enshrine new modes of understanding the nature of materials into our already resolute perceptions of their use.

Let’s think about this epistemological magic through Erica Prince’s work,

Released From Orbit (2012). The installation is inspired by the phenomenon of rogue, nomadic, interstellar planets. These celestial bodies have either been ejected from their galactic homes, or have been cobbled together outside of the gravitational pull of a star. They wander the universe unmoored from the grind, the nine-to-five, the requisite elliptical schedule other planets are fated to follow in perpetuity. Prince was fascinated by the idea that there could, by some estimates, be more of these rogue planets in the universe than orbiting stars. Her lambent and mesmerizing installation—a series of sculptural works arranged upon a grid of mirrors—expands upon this astrological proposition. She imagines what it might look like if rogue planets were equipped with architectural appendages—sculpted enclosures, tubular cages and reflective orbs of light. These additions would in turn bestow the planets with the agency to determine the nature of their own existence in the universe through their imagined ability to consciously navigate themselves through solar systems, galaxies and the expanses between.

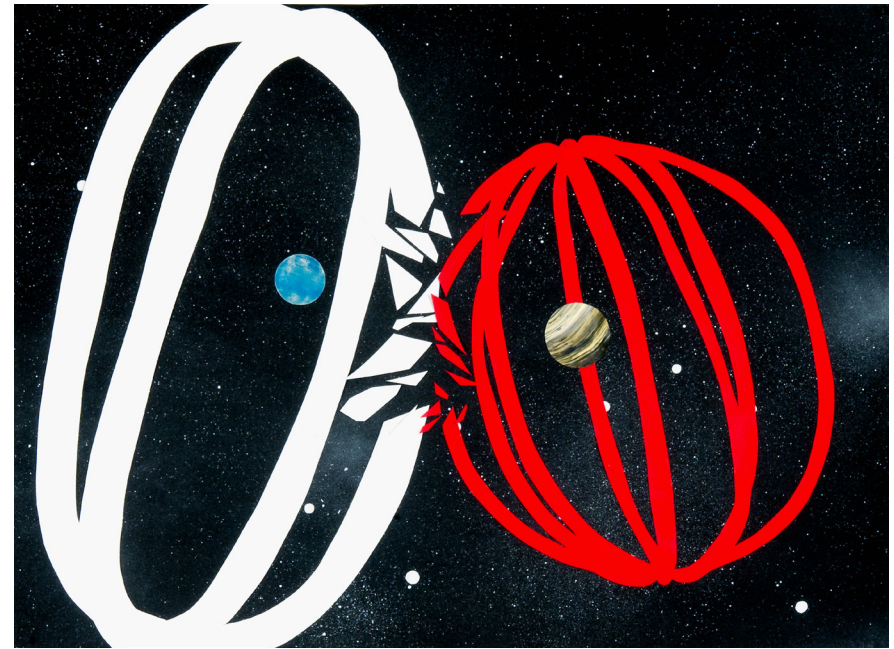
What an intoxicating idea, that planets could exist outside of the parameters that typically govern the behavior of all other things in our universe. And further, that they could outnumber obedient planets, and possess the will to determine their proper fate. Prince's imaginative take on this astrological phenomenon is communicated through her whimsical use of material: her irregular cages, brass ornaments and colourful tubes, all halves reflected back onto themselves to create a mirrored image that in turn is a representation

of a celestial body as a whole. The installation results in an effervescent evocation of a kind of wonder.

The symptom of an affective encounter (with knowledge, with things), wonder is arresting in its ability to undermine or subvert the shape of preexisting knowledge. It precedes knowledge, or unravels it. In *Released From Orbit*, Prince invites viewers to consider a wondrous hypothesis, a call to adjust the way in which our world had previously been understood. A proposition that henceforth, we can't unthink.

Ideas of unthinking—or, the inability to do so—that shuttle between viewers, the works, and the exhibition as a whole, speak to how we are submerged in an affective landscape of relations, rhythms and obstinacies of the material world. If a transcendent experience of wonder compelled by things exterior to ourselves can yield a new layer of knowledge—an additional stratum to be used by the mind in negotiating the world—then the mind has been altered forever. A thing you can't unthink, whether an acquisition compelled by way of wonder or other transformative encounters with materials, is not a mere addition, but rather a wholesale re-organization of our pre-existing knowledge.

In an implicit way, *things you can't unthink* grapples with many of the tenets of the nascent and somewhat amorphous philosophical field of new materialism. One such tenet describes the agency of things to act upon and thwart the will of humans. What if a sculpture can bend the pathways of the brain? What



Erica Prince, *Released From Orbit, Crash*, 2012. Acrylic, ink, black gesso, spray paint and collage on paper, 55.88 cm x 76.2 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

if a planet could navigate itself through the universe? These propositions speak to the limits of anthropocentrism, how things impinge upon us, and the infinite possible ways in which these things exist and exert themselves outside of human control. Shakespeare's Hamlet said, "for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," in reference to subjective value judgments, in this case about Hamlet's perception of Denmark as prison-like. In rethinking, *unthinking*, our relationship with things, Hamlet's words

prove remarkably germane. Things aren't inherently one way or another; they exist of their own volition. It is only our thinking, and our inability to unthink, that makes them so.

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