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Fool Me Once: The Trompe L'oeil Sculpture of Karen Dahl and James Doran

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Whether or not something is real or fabricated has become a compelling conversation in a contemporary context as technology allows for the simulation of reality on multiple levels. Artists have been interested in exploring the dynamics of representation and authenticity for many years, but what that actually looks like depends on the artist's interests as well as what is happening in society at that time. For example, *trompe l'oeil* (French for fool or deceive the eye) artwork has been an artistic pursuit for centuries. The art form has been historically associated with two-dimensional imagery that appears as three-dimensional space or objects, but can also be applied to three-dimensional objects that, to put it simply, are deceptive in one context or another.

Using clay and enamel on copper, respectively, Canadian artists and married couple Karen Dahl and James Doran explore these concepts through their well-known *trompe l'oeil* sculptures. The two are not collaborators, but their work is rooted in similar subject matter and a desire to explore what still life means in the modern era. A recent gift of 27 works by Dahl and Doran joined three pieces by Dahl already in RAM's collection—establishing archive holdings for each artist. Shown intermingled in this exhibition, the works of Dahl and Doran encourage extended viewing and consideration of art history, object meaning, and process.

Biographies and statements from select featured artists

As a child leafing through art books, and later visiting art galleries during my travels, I have always gravitated towards early European still-life depictions—the more realistic, the better. Not surprisingly, the objects surrounding me in everyday life, both natural and man-made, have always inspired me. I am a compulsive collector and I adore the bizarre and unusual. I use faithfully reproduced, familiar objects as visual tools to seduce viewers into my work...The narrative is in the individual objects, whereas the combined allusion is broad and amorphous and may vary according to the experiences of the viewer. My work is trompe l'oeil with layers of mystery, reflection, humour [sic] and occasional menace.

—Karen Dahl

Canadian artist **Karen Dahl** (b. 1955–) has become well-known for her ceramic sculptures that confound viewers. Dahl's works incorporating *trompe l'oeil* appear to be assorted objects arranged into groupings—sometimes fantastical,

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always intriguing. In reality, they are life-size interpretations of commonplace objects crafted with hand-built and press-molded clay, which is hand-painted and airbrushed with glazes.

From 1974 to 1978, Dahl studied at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, where she majored in ceramics. While there, she developed her own mixture of clay, which was used to cast molds of mundane objects and transform them into clay models, hand-building additional elements as needed. These ceramic objects are meticulously glazed in multiple layers, allowing colors to build up with life-like opacity. Because of this, each piece takes several months to complete.

Sometimes Dahl references her own life narrative in the works through the incorporation of meaningful objects. For example, in the piece *Continuing Journey* (2001) viewers can spot a 1955 penny as a nod to her birth year, Indian coins as a reference to the few years she spent living in India as a child, and a torn scrap of a Canadian map which pinpoints her home in Winnipeg. The books that appear in several of Dahl's works reference her love of reading and are often replicas of the old-fashioned books that she finds secondhand at garage sales.

Dahl received Manitoba Arts Council Individual Craftsperson Awards in 1988, 1991, 1995, and 2000, and the Manitoba Arts Council Crafts Award in 2003. In 2007, she was inducted into the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. Dahl is represented in RAM's collection by 13 works of *trompe l'oeil* sculpture.

At least I admit that my work is a deception. It is still real, though. The enamel is real, the copper is real, the objects and images are real, they're just not what they appear to be. The difference here is unlike so much around us today, my images are representations of reality, not misrepresentations.

—James Doran

James Doran (b. 1952– d. 2016) similarly worked in a *trompe l'oeil* style using enamel on electroformed copper as his medium of choice. Completely covering the metal bases of these pieces in enamel, Doran added in elements of texture by deliberately under-firing pieces or using chemicals to etch the enameled surface. Like Karen Dahl, he was drawn to mundane objects and exploring the relationships and associations that viewers may have with these things.

Before becoming an artist, Doran graduated from the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada, with his Bachelor of Science studying computer science, physics, and astronomy. Later, Doran began his art career as a painter and jewelry artist.

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The intersection of these two practices led him to work in enamel—first beginning by creating grisaille pins and eventually evolving into more larger and complex pieces that strayed away from wearable work. His background in painting has deeply influenced his approach to enamel, with particular inspiration drawn from the Italian Renaissance and Surrealist artists, especially René Magritte.

Doran's achievements include First Prize in the First (1981) and Second (1983) Biennial of Canadian Enamels. He received Manitoba Arts Council Individual Craftsperson Awards in 1987, 1990, and 1993. Doran is represented in RAM's collection by 17 works.