



Placebo Affectation

THE INTANGIBLE RESULTS OF
INTERTWINING CONCEPTUALISM,
MATERIALISM AND MYSTICISM

DANE MITCHELL



BY HG MASTERS



Nothing seems to me the most potent thing in the world.

— Robert Barry

In a converted auto garage in a former industrial area in

Zürich, a lone grate in the asphalt floor was emitting a dense vapor. Its soft scent was that of a muddy, languid river—or that is what I conjured up as I cupped the plumes into my hands, brought them toward my face and inhaled. The cloud quickly dissipated into the gallery space around me, as did the fleeting sensation. An onset of skepticism immediately followed. Did I really smell something—or anything? Was it actually a river? Or was I projecting what I had previously read about “All Whatness Is Wetness,” Dane Mitchell’s exhibition at RaebervonStenglin gallery, onto my experience? I took another whiff, and again felt transported to a humid environment. I detected a hint of silt and had a fleeting image of reeds on a muddy bank. Lifting my head up to look around, what else could I believe—except that momentarily I had been removed from the Zürich environs of steel, concrete, asphalt, automobiles and trains, to a more fertile, primeval place?

Whether or not to believe in Mitchell’s artworks is the question. Over the last 15-odd years, the 39-year-old New Zealander has explored a range of ontological questions about art, from his earliest projects in Auckland—some called them pranks—that betrayed a freewheeling attitude toward institutional hierarchies, to more recent investigations into the nature of perception and belief in phenomena that lie beyond conventional thresholds of visibility. In the last six years, his immaculately engineered projects have come to involve artificial scents, custom-blown glass and other highly refined sculptural objects that correspond to his intricately conceived elaborations on phenomenological concerns, the paranormal and the changing states of material objects. Throughout, Mitchell has filtered his concerns through a highly referential language of art-making, drawing on the conventions of museum-display systems and harkening back to 1960s-era conceptualism and institutional critique of the 1970s, a period when restive artists were undermining the accepted tenets of aesthetic experience.

Mitchell’s individual artworks (and his exhibitions as a whole) exhibit a hyper-awareness of the structures and systems of art-

viewing, while the schema behind each of his endeavors reveals his own diagrammatic thinking that links diverse fields of science and philosophy with more esoteric areas of knowledge.

For “All Whatness Is Wetness,” for example, Mitchell had traveled to southwestern Turkey to draw water from the winding Büyük Menderes river, which was known in antiquity as the Maeander and at whose mouth the ancient philosopher Thales (c. 624–546 BCE) had lived. Aristotle considered Thales the first philosopher for his hypotheses that water is the originating principle of nature (instead of a god or divinities), and that water is the foundational substance of all other matter. Departing from the realm of classical philosophy, Mitchell then gave the river water a “30C” homeopathic treatment, a standard dilution formula invented by the father of homeopathy Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843), who proposed that through dilution and “succussion” (vigorous shaking) the vital energy of the original substance could be activated throughout the new solution—even though there is likely no molecule from the original remaining in the new liquid. As Mitchell explained to me when we met in Switzerland, in June, the idea behind homeopathy is that “water contains memory, a memory of itself. And forms carry memory.” His pithy phrasing made me wonder if he truly believed in it or not. Creating a homeopathic formula is said to both increase the potency of and remove any toxicity from the original substance—which may, or may not, have been the reason Mitchell’s water vapor had such strong, evocative (yet possibly placebo) effects on me.

Something in the Air

With his dissipating water vapor expanding invisibly to become part of the gallery’s environment—a riff on traditional ideas about sculptural mass and volume, and also our ability to see what is all around us—Mitchell is working in a lineage of artists who, over the last century, have experimented in numerous ways with sculptural ideas concerning air, gas and the “empty” gallery, as well as formless and “dispersed” sculpture, one that is spread over vast or microscopic distances. Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) bottled 50cc of pure “Air de Paris” and developed a personal concept of the *infra-mince*, for minute physical or temporal changes in the world that go unnoticed, like the fine layer of dust he allowed to form on artworks

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ALL WHATNESS IS WETNESS I, MEANDER HOMEOPATHIC VAPOROUS OBJECT, 2015, ultrasonic humidifier, homeopathic remedy and pump, 28 x 33 x 22 cm. Installation view of “All Whatness is Wetness” at RaebervonStenglin, Zurich, 2015. Photo by Stefan Jaeggi.

(Opposite page, top)

(Back) **ALL WHATNESS IS WETNESS I, MEANDER HOMEOPATHIC VAPOROUS OBJECT**, 2015, ultrasonic humidifier, homeopathic remedy, pump, 28 x 33 x 22 cm; (Front) **POTENCY VENN**, 2015, brass, 106 x 190 x 2.5 cm. Installation view of “All Whatness is Wetness” at RaebervonStenglin, Zurich, 2015. Photo by Flavio Karrer.

(Opposite page, bottom left)

ALL WHATNESS IS WETNESS II, HOMEOPATHIC MEANDER REMEDY (30C) (detail), 2015, homeopathic remedy, plastic cans, acrylic label and canisters: 28 x 24 x 19 cm each. Installation view of “All Whatness is Wetness” at RaebervonStenglin, Zurich, 2015. Photo by Flavio Karrer.

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A MEANDERING COURSE (HYDROSTATIC FORM), 2015, Menderes river water, glass and brass, 26 x 83 x 160 cm. Photo by Dane Mitchell.

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MEANDER COLLECTION, 2015, C-print, 25 x 38 cm. Photo by Stefan Jaeggi.

Unless otherwise stated all images courtesy RaebervonStenglin, Zurich.



in his studio. Another early explorer in the arena of nothingness was Yves Klein (1928–1962), for whom the atmosphere around a vacant gallery or an empty glass vitrine became the artwork itself in his 1958 “immaterial” exhibition “The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility: The Void” at Galerie Iris Clert, in Paris. A decade later, American artist Robert Barry created *Inert Gas Series / Helium, Neon, Argon, Krypton, Xenon / From a Measured Volume to Indefinite Expansion* (1969), a work in which he simply released gas into the atmosphere, documented it in photographs and announced it on a poster. Barry’s gallerist Seth Siegelau stated at the time: “[Barry] has done something and it’s definitely changing the world, however infinitesimally. He has put something into the world but you just can’t see it or measure it. Something real but imperceptible.”

Real but imperceptible is a threshold that clearly fascinates Mitchell. He began one of his early experiments with the environment around an artwork in the ongoing series “From the Dust Archive” (2003–), for which he gathers particle samples from the galleries of art museums around the world—he has samples from 60 institutions to date including Tate Britain, Auckland Art Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York—and cultures them in a Petri dish. He then uses a flatbed scanner to produce an image of a dish that, with time, has developed small colored dots and pools of murky organic substance (the results often look oddly like those of galaxies). No museum’s “culture”—an imbedded pun that could only be intentional—looks the same. Meanwhile, they are humorous jabs at the purported “sterility” or neutrality of the white cube, while also being illustrations of things we do not see, or are not able to see, even when we are in a place specifically designed for looking.

It was while he was gathering dust that Mitchell also became interested in a non-visible characteristic of a space: its odor. Together with French perfumer Michel Roudnitska—whom, Mitchell informed me, is the son of Edmond Roudnitska (1905–1996), famous for creating Dior’s midcentury scents “Eau Sauvage” and “Diorama”—they synthesized *The Smell of an Empty Space (Vaporised)* (2011), which Mitchell once described as a “powerful, spacious, clean, ‘fresh air’ concoction that is sharp and headachy. It neatly creates an illusion of empty space, like ‘cartoon air.’” Since perfume is a vapor and a liquid at the same time, as Mitchell later reflected, it is “the possibility for making the invisible active or ‘charging’ the invisible, which interests me. By definition the smell of emptiness should be an olfactive vacuum—an absence of aromas, yet this is an impossibility.”

Mitchell is thoughtful and highly articulate about what interests him, both in art-historical terms—“perfume as a dissipated sculpture . . . an exploded form of sculpture”—and quasi-scientific ways, “perfume can be described as a cognitive object, a thought-object that takes shape in the brain,” as he wrote in “Table of Elements,” a bullet-point essay for the catalog of his trilogy of 2011 exhibitions “Radiant Matter” held in New Plymouth, Dunedin, and Auckland, New Zealand. And he has frequently commented, when talking about his work, that vapors enter our bodies through the nose and go to the brain directly, a pleasingly direct form of contact between artwork and viewer. Yet, despite his articulate expressions of interest in scents, as curator and critic Chris Sharp observed about Mitchell’s work, his immaculate material incarnations surrounding the perfumes seek to offset any potential aura of fraudulence or scandal that have threatened radical artworks in the past (Klein being Sharp’s chosen comparison).

Although Mitchell earned a Master of Philosophy with Honors at Auckland University of Technology in 2012—which suits his heady deployment of references from the physical sciences to conceptual art—his work has attracted accusations of artistic charlatanry. Most notoriously, in 2009 Mitchell won the Trust Waikato National Contemporary Art Award for *Collateral* (2009), a work in which he instructed the prize’s curators to collect the scrapped packaging of



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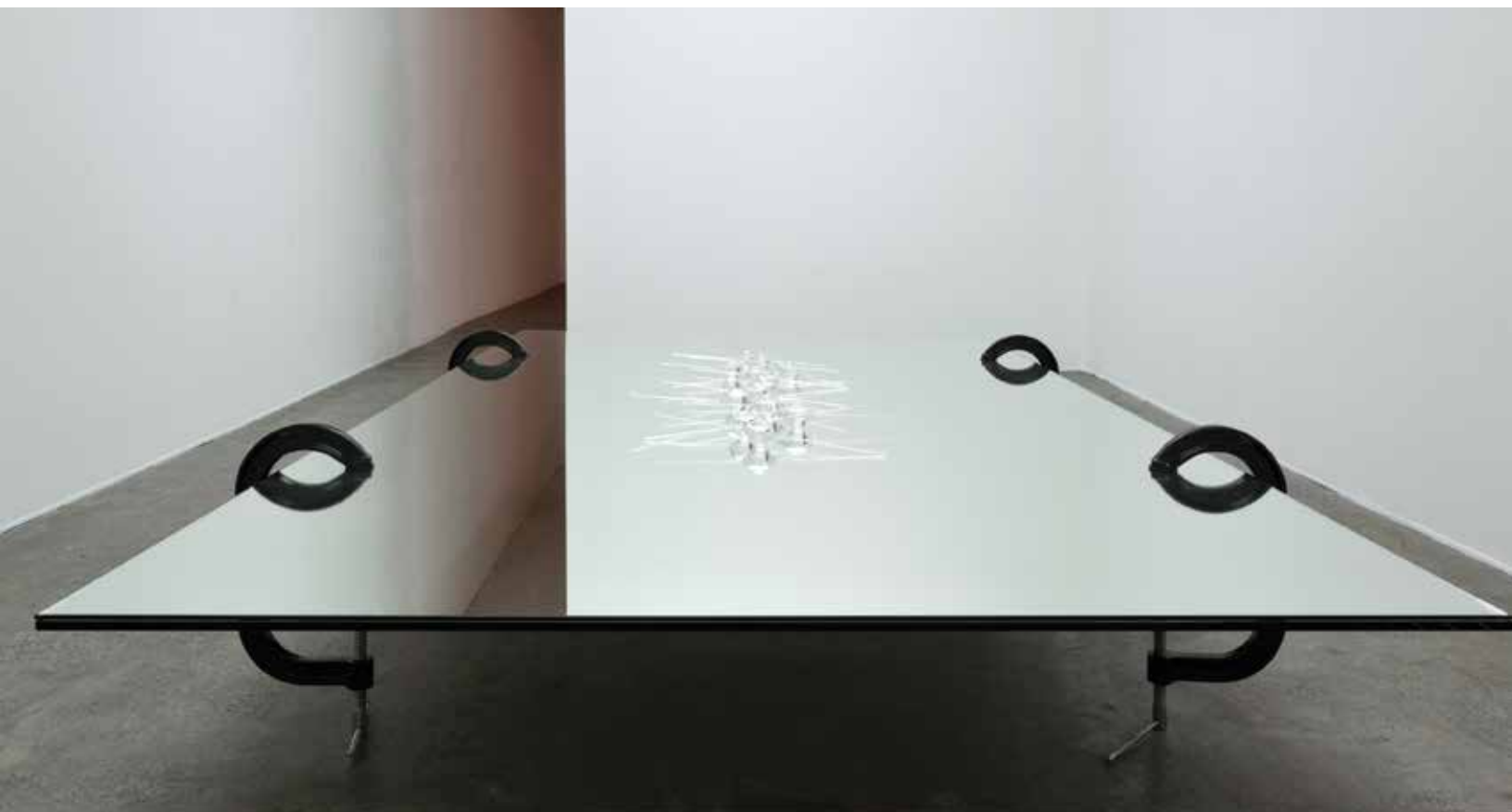
GUGGENHEIM (detail), 2007, from “From the Dust Archive,” 2003–, C-print, 37 x 44 cm. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, and RaebervonStenglin, Zurich.

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DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY (detail), 2003, from “From the Dust Archive,” 2003–, C-print, 37 x 44 cm. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, and RaebervonStenglin, Zurich.

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THE SMELL OF AN EMPTY SPACE (LIQUID), 2011, perfume, glass, mirror and clamps, 44.5 x 24.5 x 13.5 cm. Installation view of “Radiant Matter III” at Artspace, Auckland, 2011. Photo by Sam Hartnett. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland.



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the other submissions and pile it all together on a low plinth, as his own work. His victory set off a populist storm of controversy around the award, as perhaps he suspected it would, leading many to suggest that Mitchell’s pile of rubbish was, as art, exactly that—just as if this were the tautological trap he’d set for potential critics.

A decade earlier he was just as much of a prankster. In another notoriety-earning action, in 1998, he adopted the pseudonym Peter Roberts and wrote to former Auckland Art Gallery director Christopher Saines to say that he had found the art in the museum to be “quite ugly,” and that after accidentally putting \$20 in the donation box, he decided his trip to the museum was worth only \$5. Saines replied and sent him a check for \$15, and Mitchell displayed the correspondence and documents as an artwork. The following year, after “kidnapping” the Artspace sandwich board with his friend Tim Checkley and negotiating with then-director Robert Leonard for its safe return, Mitchell spent six months foraging through the trash produced by Auckland’s Gow Langsford Gallery, uncovering memos, shredded paper and other materials that cast light on the gallery’s unseen activities. The trash was more than just trash, apparently, because when the project “Private and Confidential” was shown at Auckland’s Rm212 space, in 2000, it attracted Gow Langsford’s ire, and a lawsuit. In a compromise, when the project was shown again in the 2001 exhibition “Risky Business” at the Physics Room, it consisted of documentation of the ordeal and approximations of the garbage Mitchell made from memory.

This latent anxiety about appearing cavalier when in fact—at least, these days—he is quite earnest, might explain why Mitchell’s olfactory works are frequently displayed or dispersed in some kind of relationship to sculptural objects. For example, in 2011’s “Radiant Matter I,” at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, in New Plymouth, *Your Memory of Rain Encased* (2011) consisted of two sheets of glass held together above the floor with G-clamps like a coffee table. In between the glass sheets was an invisible, synthesized smell of rain, while elsewhere, in the related work *Your*

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Memory of Rain Released (2011), Mitchell provided access to the scent through a hole cut in the wall that visitors could approach directly. In *Epitaph* (2011), a work included in the second part of “Radiant Matter,” held at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, he dispensed another perfume, also created with Michel Roudnitska, that was meant to evoke a ghostly presence with hints of dust, within an empty Victorian-looking vitrine with a hole cut in the glass. These tantalizing arrangements were visualizations of emptiness that created specific physical frames in which to anticipate the perfumes.

While at RaebervonStenglin in June, I had the opportunity to experience a work from Mitchell’s previous show at the gallery, *Epona* (2013), a scent described as having “overtones of hay in various states of decomposition and undertones of musky horse sweat.” Its package is an immaculate, silver-domed bell jar with a wooden base that holds a thin silver arrow. During the run of the exhibition that silver piece protruded from the gallery wall and was sprayed daily with the perfume, allowing the scent to dissipate into the room. There, the powerfully strange object—it has no obvious visual reference to the smell of a stable—took on the aura of an archetypal occult symbol: a precisely crafted piece of metal carrying a scent named after the Celtic goddess who protected horses. The gallery had long been a stable, and the scent summoned up, or re-created, the bygone olfactory environs.

While Mitchell can wax philosophical about perfume—“Illuminating the unseen, perfume dwells on thresholds—of vision, of physicality, of affect, of time, of dimensionality”—he can also wrap the scents in art-historical references as well. For *Cairaliencie/ Lightning (Three Ozone Notes)* (2014), which I experienced at Art Basel Hong Kong, in May 2014, two brass strips fixed to a wall clasped between them a piece of paper with the smell of ozone. In nature, a similarly potent scent is produced during lightning storms. Correspondingly, its companion piece, *Sketches of Meteorological Phenomena* (2014), comprises hundreds of tentacle-like glass pieces laid out on a dark-blue dais, resembling fulgurites, which are formed when lightning strikes sand or particularly fine soils (“tangible evidence of a transient phenomenon,” according to the artist). Mitchell’s own approximations of the forms were made by pouring hot glass onto sand to resemble icicles (frozen water) or root systems (water conduits). In the press release that introduces the project, Mitchell states that the display system quotes architect Philip Johnson’s 1934 exhibition “Machine Art” at MoMA, which



explored the “aesthetics of objects without artistic intention.” The elaborate packaging (physical, rhetorical) of such projects sets the stage for their delicacy: to make sure you tip from the experience itself—hitting the ozone notes and being taken to a rainy afternoon, in this case—into thoughts, which lead into a kind of contemplative credulity about the whole display.

Invisible Forces

I am beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is the imagination.

— David Wojnarowicz, “Postcards from America, X-Rays from Hell”

You can’t help but experience a scent. Walk into a space and your brain registers it—even if only on an unconscious level. But what about something even less tangible, a nonmaterial substrate that can affect your experience (give you chills, even)? That is the potential of magic or sorcery—perhaps an anachronistic forerunner to our relative comfort with wireless signals and mobile-phone reception, and which plays so well intellectually with Mitchell’s interests in thresholds of visibility and belief. In a previous exhibition at RaebervonStenglin, “Conservation of Mass,” in 2013, Mitchell emptied the main gallery space of all objects. Just outside the gallery doors, embedded in the cobblestone sidewalk, was a bronze plaque that read “THRESHOLD—beyond this point the spirits of the past have been beckoned.” It marks—but doesn’t explain or describe in any way—an esoteric ritual spell-casting by a pagan witch Mitchell was involved with during the installation process. While something *did* happen in the room, an original event to which the audience had no access to or knowledge about, whatever you might have experienced for yourself in that place was yours alone, and yours alone to question. Even seeing nothing, in this setting, or afterward, can be the experience of something. Suppose you received an unfortunate email while in the show or had tripped on the metal doorframe while leaving—wouldn’t you have thought about the spell cast back in the gallery?

I had my own encounter with one of Mitchell’s works that gave me pause. It was at Art Basel Hong Kong in March 2015, where his installation *Fourfold Threshold* (2015), consisting of four square, low, white metal museum stanchions, each placed inside the other, sat in a primary avenue of the fair. During the installation process, a spell had been cast in the central area of the stanchions by a local “villain hitter”—a specific kind of Hong Kong sorcerer who casts spells against one’s enemies—in this case, “to curse the enemies of the work.” Above were five silk banners created on a flatbed scanner, four of which showed the artist’s hand replicating gestures sourced from diverse cultures that traditionally, are used to activate magical powers. I had read about this in the fair guide, and being unnerved about what had in fact occurred in that space—and wary that museum stanchions often can’t even protect artworks from damage much less contain spiritual energies—and unsure about the meaning of the gestures in the banners, I personally didn’t get too close to this configuration. But I did try to photograph the work from afar and had unusual difficulty capturing it without it being strangely blurry or streaked with some kind of light from the convention center’s ceiling. As I continued in my attempt to get something usable, a middle-aged woman came up to me and said, “You cannot photograph this work.” At first I thought she meant it was not allowed, rather than impossible. But when I looked around to see if she was working for the fair as a guard, I couldn’t find her again. I then immediately wondered how, in the middle of the busy art fair, this woman had noticed that I was struggling to take a photograph. Who was she? Then it occurred to me: what if I was not able to take the picture because I was somehow an “enemy of the work?” Had I thought something negative about it—some cynical



(Opposite page, top)

EPONA, 2013, perfume, sterling silver, double-mirrored bell jar and base, 20 x 2.5 cm. Photo by Gunnar Meier.

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SKETCHES OF METEOROLOGICAL PHENOMENA (detail), 2014, glass, dimensions variable. Installation view of “Sketches of Meteorological Phenomena” at Art Basel in Hong Kong, 2014. Photo by Sebastiano Pellion di Persano.

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CONSERVATION OF MASS (detail), 2013, room installation, with a bronze plaque indicating the space has been cast with a pagan spell, dimensions variable. Photo by Gunnar Meier.



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NON-VERBAL GESTURE 3 (HERE ONE FEELS A TINGLING SENSATION THROUGHOUT THE HAND, THE THUMB SLIGHTLY VIBRATING. THOUGHTS ARE FOCUSED TO WARD OFF THE EVIL SPIRITS OF THE DEAD AND LURE WISHES OF GOOD FORTUNE TO PROTECT ONESELF FROM A MALEVOLENT GLARE AND DISTRACT THOSE WITH THE ABILITY TO CURSE YOU FROM THE MENTAL EFFORT NEEDED TO SUCCESSFULLY DO SO.), 2015, inkjet on habotai silk, 370.8 x 134.6 cm. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, and RaebervonStenglin, Zurich.

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A "villain hitter" casting a spell as part of **FOURFOLD THRESHOLD**, 2015, at Art Basel in Hong Kong, 2015. Photo by Dane Mitchell. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, and RaebervonStenglin, Zurich.

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INVOCATIONS, 2008, spell, stainless steel, print, door, stereo, paper and graphite, dimensions variable. Installation view of "Invocations" at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne, 2008. Photo by Andrew Curtis. Courtesy Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland.

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TELEPLASTIC ALLOY (MYSTIC TRIANGLE), 2014, datura and brass, 0.3 x 30 x 30 x 28 cm. Photo by Klöntal Triennale.



or frustrated impulse? (It happens, at art fairs.) I became flustered, and while juggling my camera, a bag and an iPhone, I inadvertently deleted the notes I had been taking on my phone—the last of which was about this very work.

Mitchell's first "spell work" was created for a 2005 group exhibition at Starkwhite gallery, Auckland, called "Vanishing Point: Representing the Invisible." Under the staircase in the gallery, in what the artist says was an invisible space, a pagan witch had cast a spell there, giving it an unknown change while also potentially making it even less usable (for those who are inclined to believe). But Mitchell himself maintains an equivocal attitude about working with those who cast spells. "It's not about belief; it's real because it occurs," he told me.

Since the Starkwhite show, Mitchell has explored all kinds of paranormal activities. In 2006, while doing a residency in Wellington, he recorded communications between a clairvoyant and the New Zealand painter Rita Angus (1908–1970). In 2008, at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces in Melbourne, he demarcated an area of the gallery with museum stanchions, accompanied by a sign that read: "A portal to the spirit world has been opened in this area. Please do not enter." In the Netherlands, he invited a witch to summon the spirit of 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and while blowing glass he spoke spells into the molten vessels. In the recent project *Clairvoyant Vision* (2014) a volunteer was put under hypnosis before the exhibition opening, allowing them to see an object in the gallery no one else could see. Meanwhile, between a set of three brass corners displayed on the gallery floor, Mitchell had sprinkled a homeopathic dosage of the datura plant, which causes hallucinations and even photophobia (fear of light). As he explained in a 2014 interview for an exhibition of the Chartwell Collection at the Auckland Art Gallery: "I have this interest in the oppositional forces of science and the unknowable through forces which we can't control. I guess the rubbing up against one another of the knowable and unknowable, the scientific or the rational and the irrational, is alive and well in this sculpture in a spatial way; it tries to give form

to this intangible clash of these two opposing moments."

While "dematerialization"—often mentioned in the context of Mitchell's work—sends us back to Lucy R. Lippard's 1973 book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, you can no longer say, as the author did, that "the idea is paramount and the material is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or dematerialized"—because the idea is so clearly expressed in and through specific materials. However, Mitchell's works take to an extreme one aspect from her characterization of conceptualism—one likely not imagined by Lippard in the late 1960s: "*The ghost* [italics added] of content continues to hover over the most obdurately abstract art. The more open, or ambiguous, the experience offered, the more the viewer is forced to depend on his own perceptions."

The reference to ghosts aside, Lippard and John Chandler do cite in their 1968 essay "Dematerialization of Art" another, future criterion for what art might look like, one that does come to look a lot more like Mitchell's projects. They borrow a concept from *Mathematical Basis for the Arts* (1948) by Ukrainian-American composer and theorist Joseph Schillinger (1845–1943), which states that the fifth and final stage of art is "scientific, post-aesthetic" art whose characteristics are: "analysis and synthesis of an art product. Scientific experiment. Art with a scientific goal . . . Fusion of art materials and art forms. Disintegration of art. Abstraction and liberation of the idea."

Yet at its core Dane Mitchell's art is more that of a philosopher-poet than a scientist. After he tells me about his idea for his September exhibition at Hopkinson Mossman gallery in Auckland, about a perfume that smells like a "concentrated form of loss" that would be accessible only via a ladder that leads up into a kind of non-space created by the drop ceiling of the gallery, Mitchell himself dissolves into the crowd of Art Basel in Basel, leaving me with my notes and a list of questions about his artworks that I had realized even he cannot explain. 🌀