

Blessed be churches that confirm our faith in art



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April 4, 2009 The Globe and Mail

Ian Carr-Harris at Susan Hobbs Gallery

Until May 2,

137 Tecumseth Street, Toronto; 416 504 3699

"When we approach a building ... when we approach a space," muses Ian Carr-Harris, "we tend to think of that building, that space, as a physical thing. But I believe that when we move through a building, through a space, we are actually moving through language."

I'm chatting on the phone with the Governor-General's Award-winning artist whose exquisitely crafted, linguistically tintured work I never feel sure I entirely understand. Which, of course, is one of the absorbing pleasures of Carr-Harris's art: Its graceful inscrutability, its genial hermeticism keeps you always at bay and, at the same time, always tethered to its perpetual, inexhaustible possibilities.

Take his new *Paradigm Series: 'eglise' [figure]*, the centrepiece of his current exhibition at Susan Hobbs Gallery. A bluntly constructed, black-painted church - too crude to be a genuine architectural model and yet too detailed and sophisticated to be a toy - rests on a table. There is a small notebook near it, a handbook, evidently, explaining (but not very clearly) the object's construction. This how-to atmosphere is considerably intensified by the church's second existence, on an adjoining table, as a boxed kit: the same church (or so it seems) knocked down into its snap-together, build-it-yourself components.

Offering the church as a kit is, I suppose, a radically economical way of demystifying it, of draining away its theological authoritarianism. And yet it doesn't seem to me that Carr-Harris is especially busy here with the

diminishing of hierarchies - especially religious ones. He seems much more engaged by the meaning of the ways we think about things, including churches and museums (the new churches).

The black church is the fourth "figure" in Carr-Harris's ongoing *Paradigm Series* which, to date, has presented chalk-white, model-like constructions of the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Power Plant, and the Tate Modern. The first church in the series is *'eglise' [figure]*. And the only black-painted structure.

About Carr-Harris's Tate Modern, I once noted that it was "primarily an allusion to the museum rather than a recreation or a compression of it." It's the same with the church. And just as the museum models possessed interiors you could glimpse through their windows but which were wildly, frustratingly inconsistent with what one knew of the actual buildings, so too is the interior space of this church way less articulated than you'd expect: no little pews beneath upward yearnings of noble vaulting, but rather a truncated, almost barricaded space - like white screens upon which you might conceivably project your own ideas about church and church-ness.

It doesn't help much, really, for Carr-Harris to tell me that he was brought up an Anglican. He may as well have told me he was brought up a carpenter.

During our conversation, he brings up Freud's suggestion that dreams, in their recourse to mercurial dalliances with substitution and transferals of image and meaning, are constructed like language. "Language," he points out, sounding like Ludwig Wittgenstein, "is the paradigm by which we imagine the world."

But at the same time, "there is a risk in placing too much emphasis on what the artist says as opposed to what the artist effects." And Carr-Harris is capable of saying utterly disarming, compelling things, right in the middle of a bout of theory: "At the moment of making, I think about the immediacy of the experience ... how light falls on a wall ... that sort of thing."

But then all that immediate experience gets built - into language, into objects, into models. Paradigms "teach us how to acquire language and how to play with it," he says. And he plays with it so seductively, you can't help wanting to join the game.