

Aaron Carpenter

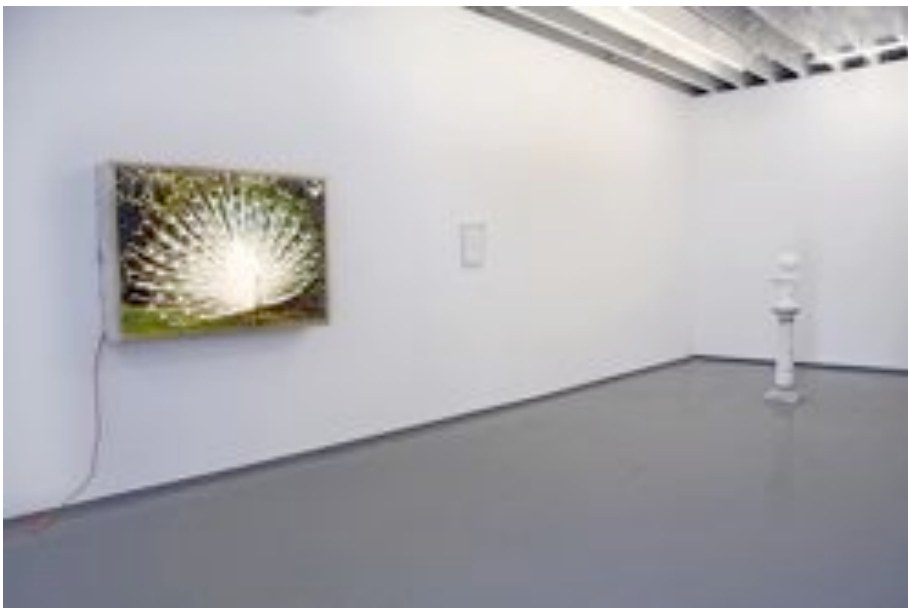
Selected Works 2007 – 2009



Niagra, 2009 Postcard enlarged and printed on transparency, pine lightbox, 66 ¾ x 40 ¼ x 10 inches

Niagra is a makeshift lightbox built from abandoned pine shelving. It displays a backlit image of a preading albino peacock, of that same name, which lives at Beacon Hill children's park in Victoria, BC. The image is taken from an old postcard that seemed to attempt to use the bird's exoticism to promote local tourism, here it is blown up to the point wherein the image begins to degrade, yet it is exalted by a dramatic and purposefully overwrought illumination.

Corin Sworn, May 18, 2009





Merrick (Bryter) 2009, diptych, coloured pencil on Xerox, 2@40 x 26 inches (detail)

....a reproduction of a black and white photograph of Joseph Merrick, the “Elephant Man,” grainy and soft in its accuracy of detail. Most likely this image is some exponential variation of a reproduction of a reproduction; the original photograph is probably Victorian and the present image’s distance from the original could be infinitely vast. The black and white photograph has been coloured, roughly but not carelessly. Perhaps in pencil, perhaps oil pastel and with little attention to three-dimensional modeling; fuchsia hues meld into lilac, then yellow, then turquoise, deep green and red. This unnatural pallet segments the body in a most expressionistic way. Perhaps this vibrant, distorted shading refers to Matisse’s Fauve portrait *La Femme au Chapeau*.

Then again it could be a wry reflection on the sentimental colour of tinted photographs. Always a slightly embarrassing aspect of photographic history, this inadequate assistance by the human hand does not complete a technological feat, not yet accomplished but seems to unmask an unsatisfied hunger for ideal representation.

Corin Sworn, May 18, 2009.

Aaron Carpenter’s new show at Lawrence Eng Gallery concludes a good run for him, having just been included in *How Soon Is Now* and a group-show at Artspeak. This exhibition includes a few sculptures, some watercolors, and some screen-prints. Carpenter’s work is often scattered and loose, in terms of its conception and execution, but the more of it I see, the more I think it works.

Aaron Peck, Akimbo (blog), June 25, 2009.



Homunculus, 2009, plaster bust, plaster of paris, concrete plinth

In *Homunculus*, Carpenter has taken the ideal sculptural form of the human body, in the shape of a mass reproduced Italian sculpture. He has de-idealized it with the addition of a formless sculpted growth but has also individualized it. Carpenter's artistic extrapolation upon the form returns it to the position of a singular work of art. However, this new form does not approach any general notion of a physical ideal.

Proteus syndrome (named after the Greek shape-shifting sea-god) is an extremely rare congenital disorder that causes skin overgrowth and atypical bone development, often accompanied by tumors over half the body. That Joseph Merrick, a young man afflicted with the condition should become an anxious image of the Victorian social body is perhaps not so strange. This was a period where Imperialism fed wildly upon foreign resources and mass-produced objects flooded newly industrialized cities. Perhaps Merrick's gorged limbs are an apt metaphor for Britain of the day?

Attention emerged in descriptions of subjectivity in the late nineteenth century as it suggested a means of recuperating instances of singular identity and experience amid the flux of mass production, equivalence and exchangeability. Expressionism could here be seen as the assertion of an individual subject position. Could this drive toward difference amid sameness be a wry celebration of novelty above ideal form?

Corin Sworn, May 18, 2009.



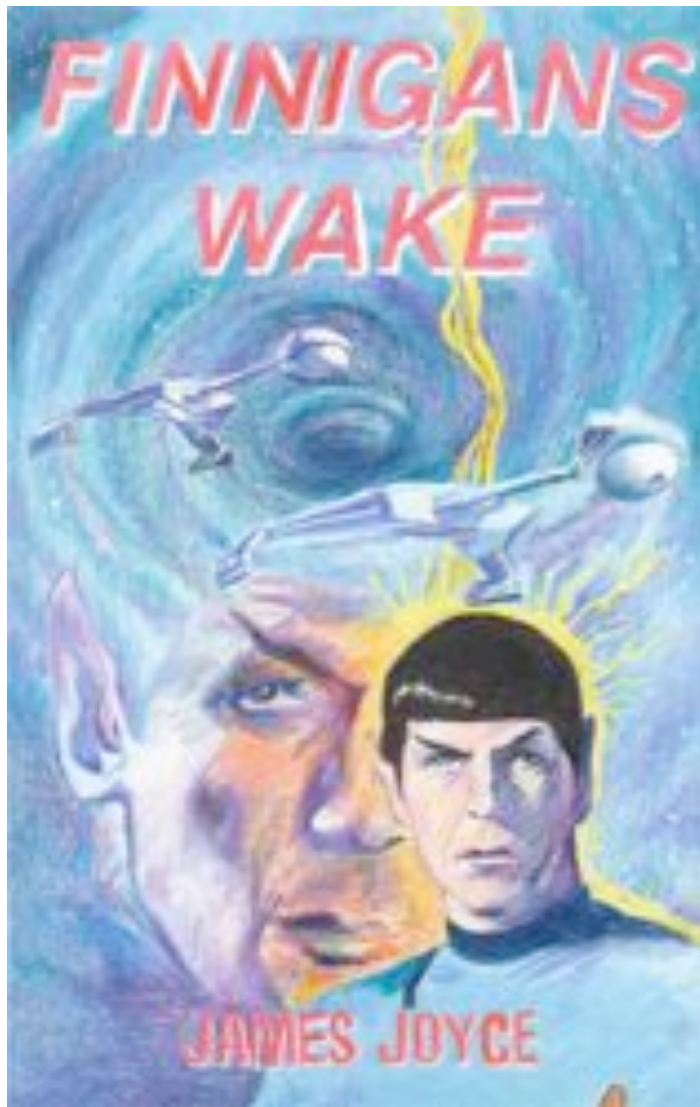
Finnigans Wwake, 2009, single channel video, 17 hours

As an OFFSITE extension of the Literally exhibition, Aaron Carpenter's new video, *Finnigans Wwake*, was shown on the Robson and Granville outdoor screens. In consort with his drawings for the exhibition, Carpenter has taken Joyce's text and rendered it as a dramatic text crawl akin to the one at the opening of the Star Wars films. Intrigued (and perplexed) by *Finnegans Wake's* multi-lingual puns, fractured dream narratives, and language experiments, Carpenter's work conflates Joyce's impenetrable opus with the disparately populist genre that is science fiction. Taking this notoriously difficult and experimental work of literature to filmic proportions, specifically referencing science fiction films, Carpenter sets up an interesting parallel; Joyce's work is meant to recreate the experience of sleep and dreams, and science fiction (as both a literary and cinematic genre) is a fantasy based on speculative scientific discoveries and parallel universes.

Melanie O'Brian, [Artspeak Gallery](#), May 2009.

Years ago, I went on a James Joyce tear. I started with *Dubliners*, worked my way through *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and then *Ulysses*. The last challenge was *Finnegans Wake*. Full of puns, verbal wordplay and made-up words, Joyce's last book has a reputation as a notoriously difficult book to read. Undaunted, I read on. Or, at least, I tried. Again and again, after a few pages, I was completely lost, unable to figure out what I'd just read. I'd heard that reading it out loud helped. So I tried that, too. I tried speaking the words outdoors and indoors. I even tried it aloud while sitting in the bathtub. Nothing worked. I hated to admit it, but I couldn't finish *Finnegans Wake*. My unfulfilled relationship with Joyce remained on hold until I received an e-mail the other day. It referred to Aaron Carpenter and *Finnegan Swake*. This caught my attention for several reasons, but especially because of that name: *Finnegan Swake*. *Finnegan Swake*, *Finnigans Wwake* and *Phinigins Wyake* are among the multiple spellings of Carpenter's art project, *Finnigans Wake*. He's done that in homage to Joyce and his liquid nouns, words that change their spellings for various literary reasons each time they're used. It's among the many reasons why the novel is so impenetrable. Carpenter's take on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* includes a one-minute video that will be shown starting Friday on the outdoor screens at the corner of Robson and Granville streets. What Carpenter has done is display the first page of the 628-page novel in the same rolling-text format as the beginning *Star Wars* (the original film, now called *Episode IV: A New Hope*). The video starts with Joyce's words describing the Liffey River running through Dublin: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay ." The words scroll against a starry background and recede into the distance, just as in *Star Wars*. Carpenter's cheeky approach both respects and makes fun of the aura around *Finnegans Wake*. On one level, he's turned Joyce's static words on a page into moving images. On another, he's taken a text revered by high culture and packaged it in a format used and recognized by popular culture. Given Joyce's own irreverence, he would probably approve.

Kevin Griffin, *Finn Again Awakes every three minutes*, [The Vancouver Sun](#), May 13, 2008.



At Artspeak are Carpenter's book covers inspired by Joyce's novel. Several of the paper works explicitly refer to Star Trek. In one, the image he's drawn includes several recognizable science fiction signs, such as a wormhole, Klingon-style spaceships and two portraits of Spock, the half-human, half-Vulcan character.

In addition, Carpenter has made a pair of Joyce reading glasses. One lens is covered in black felt, which mimics Joyce's eyepatch. The other is a multifaceted prism. When I put them on, the exhibition area was fractured into rainbow colours and cubist shapes. Like Joyce's own complex vision, the glasses give the wearer multiple views of the world.

Kevin Griffin, *Finn Again Awakes every three minutes*, [The Vancouver Sun](#), May 13, 2008.

"In their work, Aaron Carpenter, Joel Herman, and Roula Partheniou play with the representation and referentiality of literature and knowledge in humorous ways. Interested in both mimicry and the processes of research, the artists consider the formal and connotative aspects of the book and the printed word as readymades and as points for further fiction. The readymade titles used by the artists become fictions in their own right, as Carpenter's Polyglot drawing series and video point to. Carpenter's drawings are altered facsimiles of book covers in which James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is mentioned. In *Finnigan(sp) Must Die!!!*, Joyce's work appears as science fiction, rendered part of the fictional universe of space travel, the starship Enterprise, and Spock. Carpenter's related video extends the parallels between Joyce's text and science fiction in filmic proportions on the Robson and Granville video board...."

Melanie O'Brian, [Artspeak](#), spring, 2009.



Good Night, nylon fabric, 5' x 9', ed. 1 of 3 (1 AP), 2009

....walk past...Aaron Carpenter's *Good Night*, fluttering at the top of a little-used flagpole. Gaze at this nylon flag of bands of bright colour based on the standard television test pattern, and imagine you're one of a far-flung nation of late-night TV viewers, signing off in a communal, pop-culture salute to video calibration.

Robin Laurence, *How Soon is Now* a thrilling mix that spans manga ceramics, tattooed pigs, [The Georgia Straight](#), February 12, 2009.

In *Good Night*, Carpenter has revived a neglected flagpole on the plaza of the Vancouver Art Gallery to fly a flag for the first time in years. The brightly coloured bars of the flag are based on a standard television test pattern used to calibrate the video signal and typically broadcast in the early hours of the morning before a network signs on or off. At times blowing majestically in the wind, at other times flaccid and lifeless, the symbol of the flag carries an ambiguous message—perhaps, as the artist suggests, a sign of solidarity for late night television viewers.

Kathleen Ritter, [How Soon Is Now: Contemporary Art from Here](#) (catalogue essay), Vancouver Art Gallery, 2009.



REREMEMBERER, felt banner, 24 X 168 inches, 2008

Aaron Carpenter presents *Reremberer* (2008), a large fabric banner with REREMEMBER written in large coloured letters. Reminiscent of home-made banners used in public demonstrations, Carpenter's work plays on the formal construction and etymological roots of the word remember, suggesting that 're' as a prefix in the contemporary sense might be repeatable ad infinitum, that one might re-reremember, and so on. As a banner, the word takes on a political importance, making imperative not only the remembrance of history, but also its continual re-examination.

Jonathan Middleton, *Hold On, Or Gallery*, Summer 2008.

Carpenter plays on subtle shifts in meaning and modern language in a pair of text-based works. His UM, ER, and UH drawings re-empower the pauses in speech that add natural emphasis to colloquial conversation but are carefully edited out of media reporting and other formal representations of speech, including "the authoritarianism of text-based art." Similarly, Carpenter's banner work *Reremberer* takes the modes of standardized fluency to task, at the same time cheekily skewering at the current art-world trend of works based on re-enactment and restaging.

See It; *Hold On: West Coast Life Preservers*, [Canadian Art](#) (on-Line), June 19th, 2008.



UH, diptych, pencil crayon, 2@14 X 11 inches, 2008

“UM, ER, and UH (2008) are a series of drawings that continue Carpenter’s interest in language. The words are classic examples of speech disfluency, parts of speech generally thought to be without purpose, though occasionally used for dramatic tension or effect. Some linguistic experiments, however, have suggested that these utterances may facilitate language, as their removal from speech led to significant decreases in listener comprehension. Carpenter exalts these under-privileged words, rendering them in coloured pencil-crayon as a further means democratisation and as a general reaction to the authoritarianism of much text-based art.”

Jonathan Middleton, *Hold On, Or Gallery*, Summer 2008.

...Middleton observed that um, er, and uh can actually aid the comprehension of listeners. Carpenter further complicates notions of disfluency by filling his capital letters with different configurations of luscious colours and art-historical allusions. In UM, for example, bright patches of watercolour are reminiscent of early Paul Klee and August Macke. Carpenter also reminds us of the ways in which we are manipulated by different typographies. Again, Hold On may be about holding out.

Robin Laurence, *Hold On gives you time to contemplate the working world*, [The Georgia Straight](#), July 3, 2008.



Installation shot, *The Art of Richard Tuttle*, Helen Pitt Gallery, Spring 2008

But what does Tuttle, who was born in Rahway, New Jersey, in 1941 and resides in New York and New Mexico, have to do with Aaron Carpenter, who was born in Brandon, Manitoba, in 1976 and lives in Vancouver? Carpenter's thought-provoking project at the Helen Pitt Gallery seeks to replicate, duplicate, or imitate—you choose—Tuttle's work. It's a way, the younger artist told the Straight in a recent interview, to pay tribute to someone whose art he admires while coming to fully and deeply understand the whys and wherefores of Tuttle's "quizzical" practice.

Since April 11, Carpenter has been working in the gallery during its public hours. His unlikely aim has been to make a copy (not always to scale and often not identical) of each of the 317 works reproduced in a 2005 catalogue of Tuttle's art. Whatever their final number, the drawings, paintings, and low-relief sculptures that result will be mounted at the Pitt from Friday (April 25) to the end of the show on May 3. Tools, paints, wood scraps, sawdust, and other evidence of the first two weeks of his process-based performance will be cleared away.

Although Carpenter is uncomfortable with the term performance, it is a significant component of the work he is making in front of (or despite) gallery visitors. It's also an aspect of his interaction with the public. Again, as he explains what he's doing and why, his understanding of Tuttle's work is expanded. So is ours. It's an intriguing undertaking.

Robin Laurence, *Aaron Carpenter's work opposes idea of originality*, [The Georgia Straight](#), May 2008.



Installation shot, *The Art of Richard Tuttle*, Helen Pitt Gallery, Spring 2008



Installation shot, *The Art of Richard Tuttle*, Helen Pitt Gallery, Spring 2008

What also emerges here is Carpenter's thinking, especially his dedicated opposition to the idea of originality. Although it certainly challenges our fixed notions of authorship and authenticity, Carpenter's take on Tuttle is not about Sherry Levine-style appropriation. Nor is it a critical deconstruction of "high culture". Instead, it asserts that no art can be completely original and without precedent. All artists, Carpenter suggests, build upon the work of their peers and predecessors.

Carpenter's position is both engaging and provocative. Certainly, it flies in the face of received ideas about the breakthrough nature of genius and artistic creation. But perhaps it complements our understanding of the workings of the human brain. Our minds are drawn to metaphors: we seek out patterns and likenesses, it seems, as a way of making sense of our vast world and chaotic existence. The evidence of art history, and of Richard Tuttle's career, is that it takes a while for us to process the new. We're slow to understand and appreciate something that gives the appearance of originality—whether it is original or not.

Robin Laurence, *Aaron Carpenter's work opposes idea of originality*, [The Georgia Straight](#), May 2008.