



Left: Jim Love's *Little Elephant* (1959)
Below: Detail of *Tree* (1962)

Remembering Love

Jim Love: From Now On
Contemporary Arts Museum Houston
April 22—July 2, 2006

Reviewed by D.F. Brown

The joyously humorous gathering of Houston artist Jim Love's work on view at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston was no mere sampling; visitors could celebrate the breadth of Love's career at its depth in every scale, chuckle as they surveyed the thoughtful array of his artistic development, and share the full poetic range of the late artist's fertile imagination and intelligence. With nearly 200 works, the exhibit profoundly affirmed Love's master status in terms of materials, technique, and over time. All the important and early "put togethers" were present, as well as a full range of his later cast and cut pieces. The CAMH's parallelogram was abundantly filled with a posthumous tribute to Love, who died in May 2005 while organizing this show, but it was in no way crowded.

There were many routes through and into this exhibit. Chronological groupings clustered in thematic sets on large pedestals and in Menil Collection-style cases (echoing Love's long association with the de Menils) around a central core of early works. One sweet trip began at *Area Code* (a large, 1962 screen on loan from the Alley Theater that inventories most of the imagery Love would develop over his career) and then circled the exhibit looking first at the smallest pieces, bouquet to bear to practice cloud to belly button to bird, and then recircled at the next size of the same items, and then circled again at the next size, and so on. Mini, tiny,

small—it was a lesson in scale and proportion that reminded viewers that most things that are large in life may never be monumental. Even as it calls human designs into question, Love's art skillfully celebrates the quotidian, offering the beauty of daily items revealed and raised to a highly crafted echo of a child's trust in the world and in its critters, its crude emotional plumbing, its hieroglyphic screens, its vast aviary—those big reptiles turned small birds, trading scales for feathers and then learning to fly.

Love's touch transformed this vocabulary of images and gestures into exuberant totems that construct their own mythology as echoed humor and irony, carrying it into a rare, genuine, and alarming concern for post-industrial humanity. Using a tender humor, small scale, repetition, and evolution, Jim Love's work addresses 20th-century philosophical and political issues even as it draws attention to the gap between rhetoric and reality—that highly contested zone where thinking fuses image with its metaphors and range of interpretations, and where one hopes to step clear of cliché and trivia, the sentimental and the superstitious, to understand the noise the soul makes.

Rooted in surrealism, Love's later work often generates narrative impulses, even as it stalls those stories to ponder the juxtapositions each piece presents: warm metal, steel tenderness, language versus look, the cosmic joke or existential conundrum, inspiration or solace, triumph or survival. It is not difficult to see the icons in Love's images, but his work is so personal, courageously eccentric, and self-aware that it is complicated to label those images iconic. Love seems to have never

truly crawled away from the poetry of childhood optimism; he never lost that link to trust and never soured on people. Like Mark Twain, Jim Love knew that thinking opened easier as it smiled, and he left us life lessons in Texas existentialism that might help us abide during these dark days of political and military bluster. The works on display at the CAMH could bring you close enough to laugh at yourself.

The CAMH isn't the only place to see Jim Love's work in Houston. His public pieces are scattered across the city, and make an easy afternoon aesthetic pilgrimage; maps to these pieces could be picked up at the CAMH. *Can Johnny Come Out and Play?* waits patiently in the grass of the Cullen Sculpture Garden across Montrose from the CAMH, looking like a scale moon or a lost baseball. *The Portable Trojan Bear* sits in Hermann Park near the entrance to the zoo. Nearby on the campus of Rice University, *Paul Bunyan Bouquet #2* can be found in the courtyard of Lovett College. On the University of Houston's main campus, *Landscape with Blue Trees* shades the Cullen College of Engineering plaza. And many a visit to Houston begins unknowingly with the Jim Love piece titled *Call Ernie*. Sited at Hobby Airport between the parking structure and the entrance to the main terminal, the large, blue work mixes notions of flight with the familiar rags-to-riches symbol of the Texas oil fields and a convenient handle where the cockpit would be. This composite emblem of modernity proffers a talisman and a self-aware joke as a welcome to Houston.

Accompanying the CAMH exhibit is a splendid book, *Jim Love From Now On*, that contains all the pieces displayed in the

show in rich, crisp duotones, as well as biographical photos and first-rate evaluative and personal essays. This beautifully designed volume also provides important chronology, selected exhibition history, and a bibliography while connecting Love's role as one of the founding personalities of the contemporary art scene in Texas with his role as inspiration to two generations of sculptors. With this volume, as well as this show, the CAMH has done Love, Houston's art community, and that community's next generation a great service. ■

