Robin Arseneault & Paul Jackson: Taking Aim at the Art World, by Nancy Tousley

Hunting Blind, a new outdoor sculpture installation by Robin Arseneault and Paul Jackson at the Art Gallery of Alberta, proves an exception to the general rule that contemporary public art seldom takes the form of pithy narrative sculptural tableaux.

Located on the AGA's third-floor City of Edmonton Terrace, the recently launched installation is a theatrical work, with three parts and narrative complexities that are unusual in the genre. The AGA commissioned the piece in partnership with the Alberta Foundation for the Arts; after an invitational competition for the $150,000 project, the gallery selected Arseneault and Jackson's proposal from among five finalists.

Sited a few storeys up in the air and across the street from office towers, whose windows look down on the scene, *Hunting Blind* has the aspect of a stage set for theatre in the round. Squat and squarish, the matte black, powdered aluminum tower—an elevated blind on tall, thin legs—stands at the centre on a rectangular field of grey linoleum chips. Facing it sits a row of five mirror-polished stainless steel "shields" or "masks" punctuated by round gaping holes, which appear in ones or twos, suggesting eyes, mouths or other apertures. Behind the blind, on the upper level of the terrace, is a cluster of four black, oversized, cast-plastic plinths bearing *T*-shaped brass perches, while one other perch below links the upper and lower terrace.

The work's monochromatic palette of black, mirror and grey, and its cartoon aesthetic, remove it from the everyday reality around it, placing it in the realm of fiction, myth and the theatre of the absurd. The perches are comically like the plungers on detonator boxes in Road Runner cartoons, while the plinths are similar to the ones on which art objects sit in galleries and museums. The shields recall the theatrical masks of ancient Greek drama, the heads of cartoon ghosts and the hoods of Philip Guston. In the elevated blind, there are echoes of shooting galleries, Punch and Judy puppet booths, guard towers, water towers, frontier garrison forts and hand-built tree houses. The whole has an aura of cartoon violence, evoking Elmer Fudd versus Daffy Duck.

As a set for theatre, *Hunting Blind* begs the audience's interactions. Without viewers to animate it, the set is utterly still. Yet there are these tensions. Presumably the unseen hunters laying in wait for their prey can see out, if they really are inside. You suspend your disbelief: the tower holds men with guns. The main gun slit faces the masks, which stare back—is it in amazement or in horror? Given their mirrored surfaces, the watching masks reflect and distort the window grids of building façades around the terrace, with the reflections becoming their camouflage. The implication is that more watching eyes are trained on the terrace and its centrepiece, the hunting blind, which is itself not camouflaged, but totally out in the open. What self-respecting bird would alight on the perch extending at a right angle below its gun slit, unless by mistake? Blam! Blam!

A viewer of this stage set for slapstick becomes a player performing a

play within a play. The scenario that a player moving around the props constructs from them — blind, masks, perches — will be only one version of a narrative suggested by the tableau; the larger play, hinted at by the artists in the props and their relationships, is another. A possible viewer scenario might go like this: a hunter concealed in the blind has fired a shot and the birds have flown away, making a great flap, as the audience of masks gasps and grows round-eyed at the sound and sight. The viewer imagines the aftermath of a potentially death-dealing act that somehow has been averted. The hunters have failed; success has eluded them.

What if the set-up is not the aftermath of a sudden event but a perpetual condition, one specific to this site on top of an art gallery? Considered this way, *Hunting Blind* has all the marks of an allegory of success and failure. The ambiguities of the piece let the mind go this way and that, trying out a series of scenarios. But in playing the possibilities, it all comes back to failure and success, and to watching, looking and seeing.

Watching and waiting for something to happen, being in the wrong place at the wrong time (in a culture where being in the right place at the right time can make all the difference), miscalculation, failure to connect, failure to bag the game — the sweet bird of success — are conditions experienced by artists in an art world that equates success with money and fame. In the isolation of the hunting blind (as in the isolation of the studio?), the conflicted artist/hunter stalks success (getting shows, getting into collections, winning competitions) and yet works against the system, peering outward from behind what might be a psychological barrier raised in self-defense.

Like everything else in this work, the title suggests at least a double meaning. A hunting blind is not just an architectural device to conceal and give advantage to the hunter; it is also a phrase that speaks of hunting blind, that is, without sight, taking a shot in the dark at success, at a goal and reward the artist/hunter cannot see or visualize. What would success look like if it were on the wing in front of you? Dunno.

But artists are not the first art-world players you might think of in relation to the hunt. Hunting easily could be a metaphor for collecting. Perhaps the unseen hunters are curators or collectors. Hunting and collecting might even apply to the art gallery’s function of gathering an audience, or bagging art-world game to increase its prestige. In the art world, everybody watches everybody else. The audience of viewers looks on and the lookers, too, are watched, while they are looking, by the art gallery guards. And art galleries themselves are constantly under surveillance for who and what they collect, how much money they spend, how badly contemporary art offends the taxpayer, how many people go through the doors, etc.

Hunting Blind takes on the art-world system as deadly serious and as farce. It has an edge, and the audience at the August launch seemed to love it.

The installation, which belongs to the Alberta Foundation for the Arts,

will remain on view at the Art Gallery of Alberta for five years. “Hoots, Cackles and Wails,” a small exhibition of complimentary works by Arseneault and Jackson, with a catalogue essay by Diana Sherlock, is on view at AGA’s RBC New Works Gallery through September 25.