

*Pastel Pandora*

A Reaction to *Technicolor Dreambox* by artists

Nate McLeod & Cassandra Paul

Written by: Mary MacDonald



This month the XPACE Window Space is transformed into ground zero for *Technicolor Dreambox*, an explosive installation by Calgary artists Nate McLeod and Cassandra Paul. Frozen in time, the work features a dramatic spatial event just at the moment of climax. A white plywood box shoots forth three smaller boxes like a series of geometric matryoshka dolls. Suspended in mid air, the smaller boxes are enveloped in a cloud of sharp debris, small and brightly coloured pieces of wood fly forward into the viewer's space and it's too late to cover our eyes for protection.

We can't tear our eyes away. The pieces, densely packed, visually vibrate against one another. Green, blue, pink, red - it's an instant colour party for the eye. What are we looking at exactly? Are these shapes of something? Are they symbols? Questions swirl just like the pieces themselves and are never quite answerable, for as we move the pieces shift position revealing a totally new view of the work. *Technicolor Dreambox* is pure spectacle.

Guy Debord explored this idea of spectacle in his philosophical work *La Société du Spectacle* first published in 1967. In the text, he outlined the development of modern society wherein life has become a series of lived representations rather than interaction with direct experience<sup>i</sup>. In *Technicolor Dreambox* the symbolic shards burst forth from their enclosure. Forcing their way out of a representation, the box, they invoke a possibility of abrupt change. However, enclosed by the window itself this change appears frozen in time.

Debord described this idea of spectacle largely through the proliferation of mass media in contemporary society. In *Technicolor Dreambox* I can't help but to think of our culture's obsession with moments of disaster. Even in parody such as *Cool Guys Don't Look at Explosions*<sup>ii</sup>, a video by Andy Samburg and Will Ferrell, in which countless action stars walk nonchalantly away from billowing mushroom clouds of fire to musical montage the spectacle prevails. While television series, news sound bytes and viral Youtube videos play out actual moments of chaos - pause and repeat. From Chernobyl to 9/11 these historical moments remain frozen in time as images of crystalline disaster. We are caught like deer in headlights, in awe at the spectacle before our eyes.

In discussion with McLeod and Paul, the artists reference American painter Ben Grasso and British installation artist Cornelia Parker as important influences. Both of these artists also explore explosion. A thoughtful blogger by the screen name of Jpeg Critic had this to say about Grasso's work, "Explosions are great because they are as effective as they are celebratory. The destructive and the benign all served in one great visual and practical device."<sup>iii</sup> So an explosion is both shocking and spectacular. This sentiment certainly rings true in *Technicolor Dreambox*, as the artists employ rich candy-like color to the various shapes that make up the cloud of expanded debris. We are sucked into the vortex, seduced.

Movement also plays an important role in exploring *Technicolor Dreambox*. As one travels around the installation, the scene shifts dramatically. What was from a distance a two dimensional formalist plane has changed. Pieces slip under and over one another. We move

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around the work as if in bullet time.<sup>iv</sup> Nate McLeod states this as an important aspect of his work. In forcing the viewer to move from side to side, forward and back, their experience is mediated by the work itself, and we are given time to experience its implications. This movement recalls artist Cornelia Parker's seminal work *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991). Here Parker presented a view of a garden shed at the moment of explosion. Pieces hung in the air; scraps of wood, torn bits of paper, spoons and other ravaged domestic items. The gallery contains the charged event, its walls in danger of soon feeling the impact. While *Technicolor Dreambox* is a much more playful abstracted representation of an explosion, the movement and our sort of out of body experience remains the same. We are the ones in motion.

It must also be said, that this contained energy in a way reminds me of a black hole. Perhaps the pieces are being sucked in rather than pushed out. We can't be certain viewing *Technicolor Dreambox* in this potential frozen state. But movement in both ways is in fact implied. And so we are in a constant state of exploding/imploding. This is a strong metaphor, if indeed we as a part of the spectacle as Debord used the term. Constantly tearing down the past to build the new without any thought to why. This aspect of the work is reminiscent of earlier works by Cassandra Paul. Her site-specific installation, *Pile* (2009), is an evocative image that juxtaposes a pile of weathered old boards and her brightly painted ultra modern shapes. To what end is this construction? We're not sure of the answer but the work's peculiarity draws our attention.

Perhaps most striking about this work is how the artists were able to transform their individual interests into a cohesive project that speaks equally of both their practices. *Technicolor Dreambox* remains a punchy magical illusion that motivates a closer examination, a moment of surreal introspection. Here Paul and McLeod have crafted a powerful symbolic event, an explosion of formalism and a clever mapping of space - a pastel Pandora's box, that reveals itself at the height of its explosive climax. If so we are right in the mix moving around the work existing in a climatic purgatory of innovation and speed. *Technicolor Dreambox* is consequently an example of pure spectacle and perhaps even a fascinating take on our attempt to harness and control time itself.

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<sup>i</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Treason Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>ii</sup> Cool Guy's Don't Look At Explosions [Video]. (2009). Retrieved November 7, 2010, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sqz5dbs5zmo>. Originally aired on the 2009 MTV movie awards.

<sup>iii</sup> PaintersNYC. <http://painternyc.blogspot.com/2006/05/ben-grasso.html>. (Accessed November 7, 2010).

<sup>iv</sup> Bullet time is visual effect that refers to a digitally-enhanced simulation of variable-speed (i.e. slow motion, time-lapse, etc) photography used in films and video games. One of its first uses in this context was in the film, *The Matrix* (1999).