

JON KESSLER

**Meville Wakefield**

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Like dreams of a future already past, Jon Kessler's art is driven by a mechanistic poetics filled with nostalgia for things yet to come. The prophecies once held fast in the machine now seem but memories, slipping easily between past and future, the present, and the imagination. Kessler exposes the obsolescence of our dreams, reconstructing them within the derelict space of evacuated technologies and unrealized worlds. Sitting through the remains of the future he forces us to confront the prematurity of modern science, and with it, our homesickness for a world we have never known. Where Kessler's previous work seemed to take its cue from real-time transformations, his recent pieces withhold the privileges of such anthropocentrism. Premonition and aftermath but never presence determine this new field of dreams—one where objects and events coalesce at moments rarely witnessed.

Within the darkened gallery, the dozen or so object-assemblages became a funhouse cabaret staged for the ghost in the machine. Whirs and tics, barely perceptible and jarring movements, an electric-organ dirge and an impassioned exchange in Italian suggested a kind of mechanistic Tourette's syndrome—the involuntary convulsions of an automated language over which the superego of function has momentarily lost control. A plastic mealluminous and succulent suddenly disappears behind a shield of frosted Plexiglas. The slow rotations of a mechanized billboard advertise less the seductive authority of its three surfaces than the space between rotations its own condition of schizoid availability. A plastic-flower arrangement mixing the exotic with Chinatown schlock palpates querulously in a kind of electromagnetic Saint Vitus' dance. Two wall pieces take the tricolor separations of a single image, sliding them across one another with mechanized precision, reconstituting the image as the camera had before, only this time at the moment of its disappearance. Like votive offerings to a reality in constant flight, Kessler's technovoodoo bricolage is at once benign and menacing, tragic and comic: empty forms that hold out some vague promise as they speak the language of loss.

Perhaps the most convincing of these small, almost Joseph Cornelian worlds were also the pieces that seemed most autonomous. [\*Marcello 9000\*](#), 1994, consisted of two Trekkie-style simulated computers, standing alone in their own space. Initiating a jerky courtship ritual signaled by flashing lights and revolving spools they cautiously approached one another before breaking out into a torrid exchange of Italian, recognizable as one of the "life, love, and death" dialogues in *La Dolce Vita*, 1960. Formalizing the theatrics of the film in this way, Kessler's subtle anthropomorphizations return us to Federico Fellini's original work, itself staged not for and by actors, but machines--albeit the less obvious ones of cinematographer and sound engineer.

A similar tragicomic sense informed [\*The Last Birdrunner\*](#) , 1994, Held in a partial geodesic dome and bathed in the colored gels of nightlife, a stuffed bird choreographed a funereal lament to the pathos of technological estrangement. The bird's rise and fall to the elegiac organ melody suggested a Möbius strip of movement without destination, of time without causality. Like a premonition of a future locked in the present tense, it made for a strangely sad and moving confrontations vision of the decline of the West seen from the Pacific Rim. Held, like much of Kessler's work, at the equinox of Orient and Occident, of nature and artificiality, [\*The Last Birdrunner\*](#) brings to us the nemesis of Buckminster Fuller's utopian dreams in the guise of a lonely cockatoo wearing a life vest.