

Adam David Brown

by Dan Adler

Just how, you have to ask, does Adam David Brown manage to wow with such minimal means? He has gained a reputation for compositions that are reductive to a provocative extent, and yet somehow cast a remarkably wide and stimulating symbolic net. For me, this semiotic complexity is encouraged by his sparingly precise and exactingly careful use of an unconventional material (e.g., powdery pink pencil eraser) to starkly represent a single geometric shape or character (e.g., the letter I).

Brown's recent show at Toronto's MKG127 Gallery, "Infinity Plus One," was made up mostly of words and numerals. *Spell (Light)* and *Spell (Dark)* (works from 2011) are a pair of simply framed drawings, rendered on white and black paper respectively, that offer a familiar incantation. Each picture contains the word "ABRACADABRA," rendered in smoke three times, in a circle. I perused the grey and brown tinges of these formerly fiery little letters, repeatedly reciting the spell (loosely translated from the Aramaic as "What has been said shall be done"), taking pyro pleasure in this delicate soot, perhaps the remains of some séance that tested the integrity of the material support. On a neighbouring wall, I turned to an image of smoke itself on a video monitor. The burning fume in *Ghost* is fully isolated as a single stream on the screen. As with "abracadabra," the lack of context here connotes otherworldly smoke sources, rather than just a mundane match or cigarette. I was strangely compelled to chart the course of its flow as a statement made by an unseen flame, with an infinitely variable range of minute fluctuations and morphological nuances. Whatever



was ignited burned away for a while at an even pace, but eventually morphed from an elongated to a diffused stream, and then became a fluttering and billowing emanation. The smoke comes not just from a dancing flame. Despite its ascetic appearance, the *Ghost* and *Spell* works provoke thoughts of wispy phenomena that are material and immaterial—actual remnants of a protoplasmic presence—or imprinted signs of the beyond. In this sense they recall the works of Yves Klein, whose production of blue monochromes, 1961, and "Fire Paintings," 1961, similarly staged minimal imagery within a mystical context, albeit one far more reliant on spectacular effects.

Straying from the Zen-like restraint of such works, I relished the chalky cocktail of calculations pictured in *Infinity Plus One*. This palimpsest of dusty text and numbers on a blackboard is interrupted by five ovoid shapes, assertive in their smooth and bare blackness. Rendered like flying saucers advancing into our realm, I speculate that they derive from another plane of existence. Is it possible that theoretical, problem-solving speculation suddenly triggered an



inter-dimensional event, in which truly foreign beings emerged, swallowing "space" and "time," hence spurring us into redefining these notions? As with the *Spell* drawings, I closely inspected the work's powdery surfaces, populated by fragmentary formulas and terms such as *means*, *proof*, and *cantor's continuum*, the latter referring to a particularly influential hypothesis about the mathematics of infinity, with German roots. Georg Cantor's 19th-century contentions about limitless reality have continued to generate countless flurries of investigation by minds (and spirits) dwelling in a multitude of nations, on an endless plethora of papers and chalkboards. Brown's picture conveys this sense of an accumulated output of passionate braininess, paying tribute to those striving to come to terms with the unexplainable, to question what previously was held as proof and clinging to the faint possibility that the process might miraculously become prophetic. This profoundly subversive quality is expressed by Brown's preference for materials that lack integrity in the traditional sense: although he takes steps to ensure his work's longevity, the

use of chalk signifies the potential clearing away of accepted certainties. His particular interest in the imminently erasable or replaceable recalls the pedagogical rebelliousness of Joseph Beuys's 1970s blackboard drawings that similarly critique assumptions about what constitutes (artistic) knowledge.

Brown's largest work to date, *Mirror Mirror*, is also an assemblage of numerals and letters: the English alphabet and the numbers 0 through 9 are rendered as mirrors, applied separately to the gallery wall, along with the words *Yes*, *No*, and *Goodbye*. These are components from a Ouija board, and may indeed be employed to detect and communicate with paranormal forces. In addition, the work contains another set of these words and characters, but they are offered in reverse. Brown represents them diagonally and diminutively as if they were receding into space, perhaps another gesture towards an alternate dimension; this reflection of a mirror suggests a *mise en abyme*, or a chain of significations that is potentially infinite—as well as an allusion to three-dimensional existence. *Mirror Mirror* is reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg's "White Paintings," 1951, monochrome works with reflective surfaces intended to establish a dialogue with street-based, everyday reality, including ambient phenomena that are beyond conscious or deliberate perceptual awareness, and yet a potentially revolutionary source of new knowledge. Brown's project further recalls the sound-based investigations of Rauschenberg's friend John Cage, who shared a fondness for combining mundane phenomena—including realities normally dismissed as mere "noise"—with

minimal composition, and a mélange of mathematical and spiritualist sources, all in an effort to expose and investigate new levels of consciousness.

Theologians judged Georg Cantor's work, especially his theory of transfinite numbers, as a challenge to the uniqueness of the absolute infinity of God. Sacrilege is, I would argue, a suitable subtext for reading much of Brown's practice, which consistently combines references to the supernatural and scientific, moving fluidly and freely between spaces that include the living rooms of mystics and the hallowed lecture halls of technical colleges. ■

"Infinity Plus One" was exhibited at MKG127, Toronto, from September 10 to October 8, 2011.

Dan Adler teaches art history at York University and is writing a book about the aesthetics of contemporary sculpture.