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Machine Dreams: An Approach to Philip Price's Jube Space

The machine has become something more than a mere appendix to life. It has come to form an authentic part of human existence....perhaps its soul.¹

It is the Age of Machinery, in every inward and outward sense of that word.²

A racing car....is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace.³

In the 1950s America was a nation on the move, jet-propelled towards a dream of a utopian future. Anything seemed possible: having conquered the human environment through applied technology, the boundaries of the new synthetic empire appeared infinite. Space travel seemed less an impossible dream than an imminent reality, and popular science fiction writers mused optimistically upon themes of artificial inter-galactic civilizations, the inhabitants of which pursued lives of hitherto unconceived of leisure with the aid of 'user-friendly' machines.

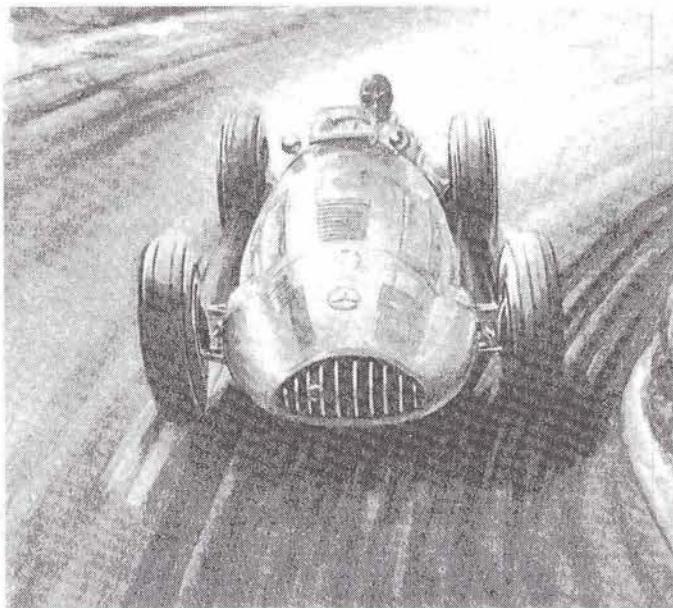
The futuristic impulse of the atomic age was readily translated to a domestic scale. Chrome-handled refrigerator doors became the cargo hatches of spaceships, coffee table legs ended in plastic ball feet reminiscent of models of atomic structure, while easy-care polyester signalled an end to domestic bondage. Nowhere was this drive to the future more apparent than in the field of transportation: automobiles sprouted fins, nose cones and sleek, chrome-enhanced aerodynamic lines which suggested terrain-based rocket ships.

Forty years on, the happy machine dreams of the fifties have soured into a technological nightmare. The vision of American fifties T.V. programme **Lost in Space**, with a friendly robot helping to wash the dishes on a strange planet, has been subsumed by the artificial-intelligence-and-alien-induced paranoia of director Ridley Scott's recent **Bladerunner**. The child's fantastic dream has given way to an adult nightmare battle with forces beyond human control. The dreams of fifties culture have remained dreams, a nostalgia for a time of lost youth, and the optimistic possibilities of Outer Space now inhabit the inner space of the fantastic.

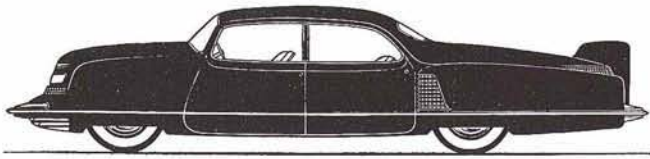
In a nineties context, fifties techno-aspirations fuel contemporary flights of fantasy for Philip Price's **Jube Space**, a voyage into the cultural subconscious of the recent past. Price approaches and appropriates the forms of fifties futuristic industrial design with a child-like appetite for the power and beauty of the machine rather than for its potentially destructive capacities. His rocket-like forms will not guide missiles, nor his **Big Nose** aeroplane drop bombs - the only projectiles Price's machines might launch are a shower of brightly coloured 'jube' sweets over

the heads of children waiting below. Like a child's plastic and balsa wood model, Price's works are functionless, yet allude to function. They are component parts of impossible machines, the functions of which are limited and described only by the boundaries of the imagination. These are dreams of machines, friendly gadgets on an endearingly domestic scale, structured with an optimistic sense of fifties aerodynamics, colour and material. **Broom Ba** seems to be a fuselage jettisoned from an aeroplane flying within the limitless blue skies of a child's fantasy world: brightly coloured and covered with fake leopardskin 'fun-fur', a child's sense of novelty and humour is superimposed over an adult reality. Within the head-over-heels world of the imagination, it is difficult to state which is the more 'real'.

In his assimilation of images and ideals from the popular culture belonging to children of the 1950s and 1960s, Price has tapped into a rich vein of sources and precedents: early T.V. monochrome superhero Flash Gordon's battle, armed only with chrome gadgets, against the dark forces of the Universe; the spaceship flights of cartoon and comic characters; the **Eagle**



Pre-war G.P. racer Mercedes-Benz, from **Eagle Annual**, ed. Denis Gifford, London, 1989.



Ford Edsel, from **Atomic Age**, Marc Arceneaux, San Francisco, 1975.

Annual's technical line drawings illustrating principles of combustion engines, jet propulsion, and elementary electromagnetism; plastic models of World War II aircraft; **Stingray** and **Thunderbirds**, children's animated T.V. series; the sugar-coated, highly coloured world of sixties juvenile films such as **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**, where sweetmaking is the end result of complex and fantastic technological process; and more recently contemporary American comedian Peewee Herman's manic world of gadgetry and perverse invention, to name just a very few.

While the wistful machine daydreams of youth culture from the recent past accelerate the viewer towards an appreciation of **Jube Space**, Price's work may readily be viewed through other more 'serious' and 'adult' contexts. A general common ground may be discerned in the images of 1960s Pop artists, with a similar appropriation of expendable, gimmicky, mass-produced icons from popular culture: a leaning towards a Pop sensibility can be seen in Price's brightly banal runway of repeating icecreams. On another visual level, Price's work shares a sense of structural aesthetics with the model-scale, polished aluminium 'engineering' constructions of Italian-Scottish Pop sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi (b.1924). Common themes are also located in the early Pop paintings of British artist Richard Hamilton (b.1922), which abstract formal elements of contemporary industrial design. From Hamilton's association of human and machine as a single entity, it is a short step to the work of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), particularly the seminal **Bride Stripped Bare by Her Own Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)** (1915-1923), which lubricates the functions of an imaginary machine with the machinations of human sexuality.

Like Duchamp, Price has created bachelor machines. The thrusting rockets and pointed darts of works such as **Candicote** proclaim the sexuality of the inanimate object. This tongue-in-cheek maleness is juxtaposed with 'female' breast-shaped forms which recall the headlamps of fifties cars, or perhaps even eccentric aeronautics engineer Howard Hughes' aerodynamically designed brassiere for fifties' screen goddess Jayne Russell - the machine is seen as a body, bodily functions as mechanical process.

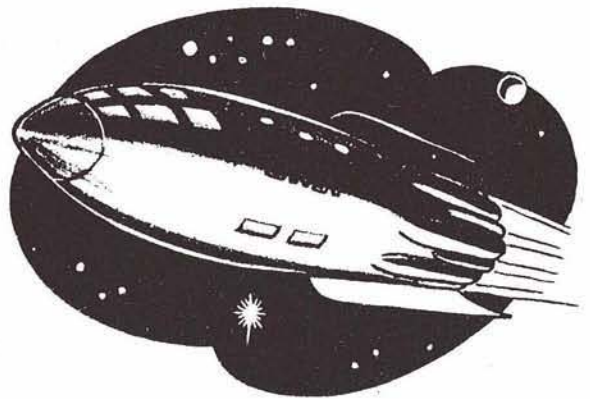
However, the sources for Price's 'machine bodies' are not only human. They also recall the organic predecessors of industrial design - the wings of a bird, the fins of a fish, the 'sting' of an insect. The two-tone form of **Hecta** simultaneously makes reference to the arc-ing trajectory of a leaping dolphin and the

streamlined petrol tank of a racing motorcycle; the one can visually be described in terms of the other.

Borrowing a design sensibility from animate natural forms, Price's inanimate and stationary objects imply the possibilities of movement: flight paths are described, trajectories are located, and so the placing of the objects within the given space is crucial - each takes up an imaginary space greater than the immediate physical presence, some extending on curvatures which pierce through the walls. Price's use of 'real' and 'unreal' space links his work to that of contemporary British sculptor Richard Deacon (b.1949), in which a similar sense of illusory movement borrows from the applications of industrial design to recreate the body in terms of technology.

Philip Price's work can thus be viewed in terms of the simply fun or the more fundamental; an abstraction of light ideas which run deeply through the structure of contemporary culture, the pieces refer to the everyday and imply the fantastic.

Lara Strongman



¹ Francis Picabia (1879-1953), quoted in **Art is Easy**, exhibition catalogue of 8th Biennale of Sydney 1990, Art Gallery of New South Wales, p.184.

² Thomas Carlyle, (1795-1881), from 'Signs of the Times', **Critical and Miscellaneous Essays**.

³ F.T. Marinetti (1876-1944), quoted in; The Tate Gallery, **Richard Hamilton**, exhibition catalogue, London, 1970, p.33.



Philip Price
Selected Biography

- 1965 Born in Nelson
- 1981-1983 Educated at Nayland College, Nelson
- 1984-1988 Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury
- 1986 Rosemary Johnson Muller Scholarship
- 1987 **Black on Yellow, White on Blue**, solo exhibition, CSA Gallery
- 1988 **Here and Now**, group exhibition, McDougall Art Annex
Set construction, Canterbury Opera
- 1989 Production manager, set design, Canterbury Opera
Technical assistant to Christchurch sculptor Neil Dawson
General Motors: Three Canterbury Sculptors, group exhibition,
Manawatu Art Gallery (with Steve Crene and Anton Parsons)
- 1990 Set design, Canterbury Opera
Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council grant