



Richard Holland **PRESSURE CHANGE**



Richard Holland, *Of Change*, 2004, installation detail

*heedless that the bell  
tolls our time away,  
we take the evening cool*

— Issa (Yataro Kobayashi, Haiku master)

There is an underlying poetic sensibility and material modesty in the installation projects of Chicago-based artist Richard Holland. Room-size installations comprised of found and fabricated objects and sound recordings seamlessly coalesce into environments that alter the pre-existing atmosphere of the gallery. Sounds conjuring elements of natural phenomena, such as waves crashing on a beach or thunderous rainstorms rolling across the Great Plains, permeate the gallery and transform it into what the artist often defines as a “meditative space” — a place where viewers can be mindful of the present. The exhibition space is further altered through the spare presentation of refined and graceful sculptural forms that appear strangely familiar in their curiously modified states. Through the minimal presence of three-dimensional objects and the ethereal qualities of light and sound, Holland creates introspective environments that encourage thoughtful contemplation of issues of memory, loss, and the passage of time.

In 2004 Holland designed and installed a large-scale work entitled *Of Change* for the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago. A single row of five evenly spaced windmills approximately eight feet high plotted the center of the long, rectangular gallery. Four were commercially produced steel windmills, with red-tipped blades — small-scale reproductions of the functional windmills commonly planted across Illinois farms. Among the row of steel windmills, however, was an exact likeness fabricated in acrylic plastic that interrupted the visual progression of the simple, familiar objects. Above the windmills was what appeared to be a sky of small, silver bells. Spanning across the entire gallery ceiling, orderly rows of bells hung evenly in a domed shape from stretches of stainless-steel aircraft cable that ran lengthwise, high above the gallery floor. One end of each cable was attached to small vibration units, mounted to the gallery walls, that responded to various frequencies from a looping audio track prerecorded by the artist. Broadcast via unseen speakers, the recording flooded the gallery with the familiar sounds of a thunderstorm — gusting wind, pouring rain, and clapping thunder. The rising decibel levels in the recording triggered the vibration units, causing the attached lines of bells to move and ignite. The intensity of the ringing bells varied depending on the volume level of the recorded storm. Thus, with every loud thunderclap, the bells magically burst with life as the thunderstorm passed through the gallery.

A sea of silvery bells was also an integral component in Holland's *What the water brings in, it also takes away* (2003), exhibited in the Common Wealth Gallery in Madison, WI. As in *Of Change*, Holland dressed the gallery ceiling with small, silver bells suspended from lengths of stainless steel cable; this time, however, the cables were arranged in a dramatic grid that ran across the length of the main exhibition space. The artist again connected the end of each line to vibration units, but this time employed an eight-channel recording, each channel consisting of sounds of rolling waves crashing on a shore. Resounding throughout the gallery on small speakers inconspicuously mounted to the ceiling, the individual channels were timed in 30-second intervals to create a continuous series of "waves" of sound, which then triggered the lines of bells. With each crash, the vibration units activated the wire and awakened the suspended bells. As a result, rolling waves of sound swept across the bells: an effect the artist has likened to water caressing pebbles along the shore as it recedes back into the sea. Centered in the gallery underneath the swell of bells and sound of rushing water rested a single, transparent table, reminiscent of a modest kitchen table. Spot lit by gallery ceiling lights, the table appeared to glow. At one end of the main gallery, Holland constructed a wall to enclose part of the space, creating a small room accessible by a low, wood door approximately five feet tall. Within this newly defined space were 44 fluorescent bulbs vertically installed on opposite walls — 22 on each wall — that emitted a powerful, bright light that enveloped the entire room. Suspended in the center of the room approximately one foot above the floor was a wooden kitchen table, the embodied counterpart of, and actual model for, the acrylic table in the adjoining gallery. From outside the small room, the table appeared to float: the room's intense light masked the thin metal cable that supported the table, granting the entire space an unearthly quality.



*Left and right top: Richard Holland, What the water brings in, it also takes away, 2003, installation detail*



The titles alone of these two works seem to foreshadow an investigation of the transitory nature of life. Light and sound appear to embody and permeate Holland's environments fluidly, fully, and without prejudice. Employed convincingly, the ethereal qualities of these elements subtly influence and alter the atmosphere of the exhibition space, which in turn directly affects the viewer's overall interpretation and experience. As a result, the space may no longer read as a traditional gallery, but more as an environment that encourages contemplation, reflection, and reverie.

The common sound spilling throughout both works is that of water. According to French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), water imagery found in nature, literature, and dreams often evokes the imagination and memory, quickly ushering us into a state of reverie. For a material element to engage our imagination, suggested Bachelard, it must possess a duality: water certainly does. It can suggest life, birth, and the rebirth of the soul, and can remind us of our beginnings in the womb. At the same time, it can disappear, evaporating into thin air, and it can destroy. In describing the maternal properties of water, Bachelard argued that since water is the only element that can rock, we associate it with our mothers, noting its ability to carry us and put us to sleep. "Water always flows,



always falls,” Bachelard stated, for “water is truly the transitory element.”<sup>1</sup> The undulating sounds of crashing waves in Holland’s *What the water brings in, it also takes away* elucidates Bachelard’s observation, “A being dedicated to water is a being in flux.”<sup>2</sup>

Coupled with the hypnotic sounds of water, the ringing of the bells also affects the space. As the volume levels of the recording move from high to medium to low, the force of the bells follows suit. The low hum of soft thunder, for instance, ripples the bells gently along their metal lines. Conversely, the violent crash of ocean waves against the shoreline sends a powerful force through the rows of bells, inciting them into a boisterous and alarming spectacle. Thus the variable tonalities of the bells, along with their resulting moods, are in perfect harmony with the literal and metaphorical unpredictability of water.

Bells are ancient and universal, and their sound carries myriad associations. They play significant roles in a broad spectrum of religious ceremonies and cultural festivals, and enter our collective consciousness in the form of folklore and myth. In the United States, it was once believed that ringing church bells during a lightning storm would not only disperse lightning,

but also protect the entire community from the evil spirits associated with lightning. In Japan, the popular sound of *furin* has ancient origins that cross cultural and religious borders. Typically made from glass, metal, or clay and frequently painted, *furin* are wind bells that became popular in Japan during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Street peddlers used them to announce their arrival to customers; they were also customarily displayed in windows and doorways of homes. *Furin* may date back as far as 2,000 years to China, where people hung wind bells and wind chimes in bamboo fields, and used them for fortune telling. Perhaps the most direct predecessor of *furin* is the type of large, metal bells used in Buddhist halls and towers in China and Japan.

In addition to his employment of live and recorded sound, Holland uses the ethereal qualities of light to alter the ambience of the gallery. In both *Of Change* and *What the water brings in, it also takes away*, Holland positioned gallery lights to reflect off the metal bodies of the bells. The resulting shadows cascade down the gallery walls and floors, creating fascinating patterns that evoke raindrops on concrete. The smell of rain is almost tangible. Similarly, the entire space of Holland's constructed room in *What the water brings in, it also takes away* is engulfed by the bright, white light radiating from the rows of fluorescent tubes, possibly suggesting a moment of mental clarity. Mounted vertically on the walls with exposed electrical hardware, the lights are visually reminiscent of early works by American artist Dan Flavin (1933-1996) as they alter the experiential quality of architectural space through light.

The glowing room in *What the water brings in, it also takes away* significantly contrasts to the dim gallery just outside the lowered entrance of the space. Because the door is low, viewers must bend down when entering and exiting the room. For the artist, the lowered doorway creates a transitional



*Left top and lower right:*  
Richard Holland,  
*What the water brings in, it also takes away*, 2003,  
installation detail

space that encourages us to be mindful of our physical (and psychological) passing from one room to another. This simple yet purposeful act can be understood in terms of the ancient Japanese ritual of drinking tea, *cha no yu*, commonly referred to as the “tea ceremony.” Central to this practice is the modest, refined aesthetic of the tearoom, which is traditionally made of natural materials such as bamboo and wood with paper windows and tatami mats covering the floor. Guests often crouch or crawl through a tiny door or portal to enter the tearoom, where the mood is quiet, simple, and void of any possible distractions. Outside of a hanging scroll or an arrangement of flowers, which often function as objects of contemplation, all nonessentials are eliminated to create a sense of spatial clarity.

Like the humble aesthetic of traditional Japanese tearooms, Holland’s objects carry a sense of elegance and refinement in their pared-down materiality. In their simplicity, the objects complement the meditative air of Holland’s environments, possibly suggesting repositories of memory, or the passage of time. The weathered kitchen table in *What the water brings in, it also takes away* appears to magically float in the center of the lighted room — a focal point of contemplation. Holland coated its surfaces and seams with a thin layer of beeswax, which can be detected slightly in the scent of the room. Holland used the kitchen table as the centerpiece for this space, and as a symbol for the home and family. This domestic object normally operates as the site of family meals, celebrations and intimate conversations. Publicly displayed in the gallery, however, the table exists as a material signifier of what is absent or what has been lost, i.e., home, family, privacy, or intimacy. Moreover, its status in the gallery as a wax-sealed, unstable object implies a nonfunctional household object that challenges common presumptions of home as a permanent, safe shelter. In the center of the adjoining gallery is the exact likeness of the wood kitchen table fabricated in acrylic. The clear, clean object appears cold and distant in its quietude. Perhaps it represents the ghostly afterimage of a table that once existed; it seems as though the positive space of the object has been replaced by its negative — an illusion of disembodiment. In this light, the translucent table functions as an object of remembrance, referring us to the absent referent — the family and the home.

One may see here an interesting connection between Holland’s use of found, domestic articles and the work of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo (b. 1958), who has been a notable influence on his work since their meeting in 1995. Through the physical transformation of domestic, personal belongings such as bookcases, bedframes, and kitchen tables, Salcedo probes the site of memory — the house — and its destruction and absence



Richard Holland, *Of Change*, 2004, installation detail

caused by horrific paramilitary crimes and the resulting disappearances in her home country. Salcedo's and Holland's work alike belong to the internal/private sphere: via reflection and personal memory, both artists ask viewers to retreat into the interiority of the self.

The sculptural objects in *Of Change* also add to the meditative aura of Holland's environments. Combined with the sounds of the recorded thunderstorm and corresponding chime of the tiny bells, the objects contribute to a landscape narrative that surfaces throughout his work. The row of steel, small-scale windmills, interrupted by one made of clear acrylic, appears pristine and graceful in its simplicity; the new and clearly manufactured look of the windmills does not direct attention to the history of their making, but leads us to consider their present state of being. Similar to the acrylic table in *What the water brings in, it also takes away*, the transparent windmill suggests an object of remembrance, charged with a sense of memory and loss. Among the metal windmills, it might be understood to prophesize their future disappearance, a visual metaphor implying the abandonment of old technology for the new. Throughout the Midwestern landscape, we regularly encounter old, dilapidated windmills

that have fallen into disrepair, symbolizing old methods that have given way to the modern. The acrylic windmill, in this light, stands as a memorial connoting loss and a time passed. Its allusive materiality allows the acrylic windmill to fade in and out of view as participants' perspectives change with their positioning in the gallery.

Holland effectively combines the ethereal, transforming qualities of sound and light with the modest display of objects to create a synergistic environment that encourages a state of mindfulness: or contemplation. Within this state, however, we quickly recognize its fleeting nature. It is ever challenging to retain a state of mindfulness; we are all too often distracted by the detritus of daily existence. Temporariness is a common foundation for all of life. We are aware of its presence and understand its meaning; we are familiar with its burden, and must enjoy its wonders.

**Christopher Cook** is Curator of the Sioux City Art Center in Sioux City, IA. Among his current projects is a traveling, mid-career retrospective on New Zealand artist Julian Dashper.

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (1942; reprint, Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1983), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

### **Richard Holland: Pressure Change**

Thursday, July 7 to Saturday, August 13, 2005

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**Barbara Wiesen,**  
*Director and Curator*

**Front cover:** Richard Holland, *What the water brings in, it also takes away*, 2003 (installation detail at Common Wealth Gallery in Madison, WI)



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