

reviews

Steven Cottingham: *Heat, Death*
 Wil Aballe Art Projects, Vancouver
 October 18 – November 17, 2018

by **Weiwei Chang**

Thermodynamics is a branch of physics that studies the relationship between heat and other forms of energy. As a field of study, it emerged in tandem with the development of the steam engine, the Industrial Revolution and the zenith of European imperialism. In Steven Cottingham's exhibition *Heat, Death*, the first principle of thermodynamic theory—that energy can neither be created nor destroyed but only transformed—becomes a metaphor for reflecting on the developments of these historical moments and their lasting reverberations into the present.

Whereas a decade ago, one might plausibly have argued that climate change was primarily a technocratic problem resolvable through tweaks to existing practices—tougher fuel efficiency standards, say, or more recycling plants—today such approaches feel inadequate. We are confronted with the totality of what is yet to come (or, rather, what is unfolding as we speak). Increasingly, there is a sense that capitalism is fundamentally incompatible with a sustainable planet and furthermore that ecological violence is also a form of human violence, as has been articulated by numerous Indigenous voices over the years. When rising ocean levels displace coastal communities, for example, or when resource extraction industries are given precedence over Indigenous land rights, issues that may have once seemed remote are brought into view as inherently political and social questions of justice.

The exhibition's title, *Heat, Death*, references another thermodynamic theory, this one about the end of the universe. "Heat death" refers to a hypothetical state of maximum entropy in which energy can no longer be extracted to perform work. Working against this imagined end, Cottingham argues in an essay accompanying the exhibition that capitalism is perpetually warding off entropy, recuperating energy by putting it to work for further productivity gains. The title thus has two meanings, equating the death of capitalism with the death of the universe and implying a relationship between heat and death via a strategic comma. Heat is not merely an adjectival modifier but also an allusion to rising global temperatures, warming oceans, burning forests—the equivalence of heat and planetary death we are witnessing today.

Cottingham's work, then, nestles into a rapidly growing field of discourse entwining environmental decay, capitalism and colonialism. How to make sense of the convergence of these issues that are complex unto themselves? For Cottingham, energy and its flows bear the conceptual burden of linking these processes and structures. By relying on thermodynamic theory, he strategically eschews the particular in favour of the general. The metaphor—of all energy being finite and subject to perpetual transformation—evades the weight of concrete circumstances, so loaded as they are with

Steven Cottingham, *Every commodity is inscribed by the mode of its production, all matter is contiguous with itself*, 2018, twin vase sponges on aluminum foil, 25.4 cm x 48.3 cm x 45.7 cm; installation view from *Heat, Death*, 2018, Wil Aballe Art Projects, Vancouver
 PHOTO: STEVEN COTTINGHAM; IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND WIL ABALLE ART PROJECTS



specific histories and narratives. Instead, thermodynamic principles—unchanging, universal and universally accepted—become a base upon which to re-evaluate the conditions afflicting us.

Formally, this effort manifests as a series of sculptural assemblages made from found objects and industrial materials. Cottingham's object selection, however, isn't interested in the nominative gesture of the artist or in exposing each object's social history. Rather, objects are used metonymically, as signifiers of more complex phenomena. Aluminum stands in as the material embodiment of the workings of capitalism, its heat conductivity analogizing capital's tendency to control, subjugate and strategically dissipate entropy. Throughout the gallery, prefabricated aluminum objects, including baking foil, heat sinks and extruded bars function as display surfaces for seemingly inchoate things like desiccated sea sponges, pyrolyzed bread, antifreeze reductions, a rusty bell-clapper and flat screen monitors displaying Schlieren videographs of hot air. The pristine quality of so much of the aluminum in this show—the delicate fins of the heat sinks, the creaseless foil surfaces, the sleek angles—highlights how seductive and potent capitalism is as a construct. In one work, *No failure but the properties of matter* (2018), molten aluminum has been poured over a sea sponge, collapsing its internal structural integrity and legible as a reflection on the corrosive effects of capital on organic forms of life. Floating like islands or planets in the abyss, each pairing seems to constitute a closed system of endless repetition in which energy flows back and forth between aluminum and object.

An exception to these unyielding dialectics is a mound in a front corner of the gallery, the remnants of *Value form phase transition* (2018), which was at one time a large block of ice flecked with misshapen molten aluminum. Subjected to the heat of the sun through a window and compounded by the body heat of visitors moving around the space during the opening reception, the ice block melted over the course of sev-

eral days, its water seeping beneath the floor tiles and pushing them upwards to form a low mound, a kind of volcanism. Paltry and exposed, the small aluminum lumps that lay scattered atop the mound vacate the material of its slick surfaces, alluding to the distortion of capitalism under environmental and social duress.

Fredric Jameson once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism; judging by the apocalyptic tenor that underscores so much anti-capitalist climate discourse, this remains the case today. What differentiates and refreshes such themes in *Heat, Death* is the metaphor itself. Reducing the immensity of capitalism to a method of energy diversion and control, the work avoids proselytizing as well as the panic and political lassitude that accompanies environmental concerns in the public sphere. Spare, restrained, quiet, it offers no consolation or solution, preferring instead to ask what it means to have capitalism (aluminum) as the base upon which things and persons act, and what conditions may be produced to disrupt its seamless governance of energy.

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Mike Goldby: Silver 35
Sibling, Toronto
November 17 – January 5, 2019

by **Emma Sharpe**

I first encountered Mike Goldby's *Silver 35* through Instagram. Being out of town until the final days of Sibling's inaugural exhibition meant that I watched its rollout via social media, catching glimpses of hanging frames and subtle colours in the garage-cum-gallery of Little Sister's newly-branded and relocated project. But the nine photographs hanging in *Silver 35* seemed to elude documentation, as the highly reflective surfaces of their frames created deceptive layers of content. I could never quite tell what the pictured photographs were actually *of*—what was a reflection and what wasn't—until I was in front of them.

That's because the seven 60 cm x 91 cm and two 91 cm x 121 cm framed digital chromogenic prints that lined the gallery walls were treated with a special film: *Silver 35*, earning the exhibition's title. The 35 refers to the percentage of light let through the UV

protectant film, with the remaining 65 bouncing back. This off-kilter ratio between image and reflection had the two constantly competing for attention. Through the crisp reflections of the gallery space itself, with the frames from the opposing wall creating a sort of infinity mirror effect, we see slices of busy urban scenes. Taken from low vantage points, the photos often centre on an anonymous body, almost always in motion. We see suits and blurs, smartphones and totes, a hand on a weary back.

Goldby often ventured to the downtown core and financial district of Toronto, seeking a sort of chaotic oasis away from his west end home. I couldn't help but romanticize the artist's process: I pictured a broke bohemian floating through the bustling crowds as observer, never participant (other than libatious splurges on \$18 glasses of wine). The text that accompanied the