

Exploring freedom through a dorky joke

GRAHAM

and from Page RB8

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And Graham's use of
hardly as interesting
matter.

2003 film *A Reverie In-
the Police* features the
g from the left onto an
le stage, handcuffed
in a striped prisoner's
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raham is permitted to
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of music highly remi-

niscent of avant-garde composer John Cage's compositions for prepared piano. As we listen to the music, the relationship to Cage becomes clear, as he relates to the idea of freedom, however brief, from whatever restricts our personalities. Cage wanted to give up the control that a composer normally has over music. Graham's music is delicate, smart and melancholy. But unlike in Cage's music, Graham's attention to silence, to delays between notes, isn't out of respect for the natural music of space, but rather a tense avoidance of the piano, which can be interpreted as either his punishment, or his brief reprieve from jail-time. Both in Cage's music and

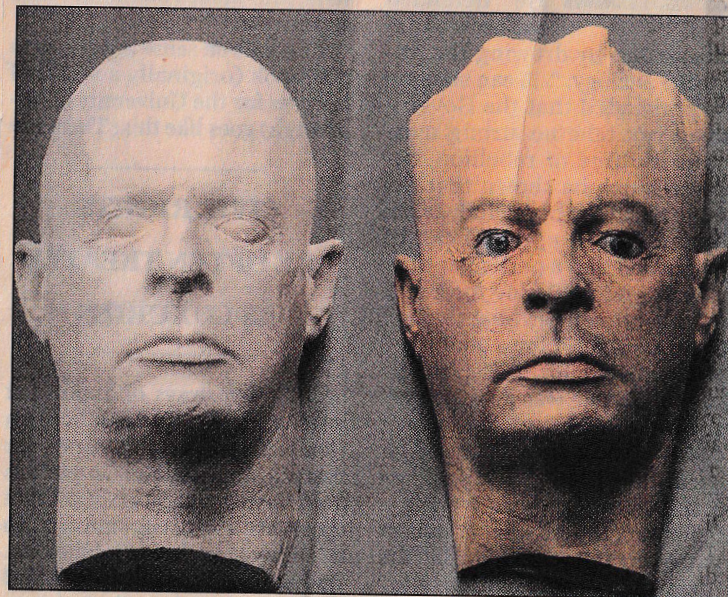
Graham's, silence is the ultimate freedom, but each artist intends that freedom to mean something different. And of course Graham is going to play something that sounds like Cage while dressed like a man in prison. That's the kind of dorky joke Graham loves. This time, though, the joke, the loop and the subject matter are synchronized in a way Graham has rarely before managed to achieve. Once Graham is finished the tune and is forlornly removed from the stage by the policeman, the curtain closes — though we know it will open again in a second and the action will begin exactly as before.

As Graham has said himself, "Artists tend to be not very well-

rounded people. They bring everything into their work instead of having things outside of it that they might do for leisure or relaxation." *A Reverie Interrupted by the Police* is a great distillation of the artistic process. The question novelist William Gaddis raises in his 1952 novel, *The Recognitions*, fits the falsely mortal and artificial denouement of Graham's film, where as an artist he exists only when he's on stage, in a kind of funny purgatory of repetitive creation. "What's any artist," writes Gaddis, "but the dregs of his work? The human shambles that follows it around. What's left of the man when the work's done but a shambles of apology."

■ Lee Henderson is the author of *The Broken Record Technique* (Penguin Canada).

National Post



Masks from Rodney Graham's work *City Self/Country Self*, 2000.

ART » RODNEY GRAHAM

An absurdist Canadian gauge of w

BY ELIZABETH RENZETTI LONDON

Rodney Graham has been many things in his artistic life: a shipwrecked pirate, a piano-playing jailbird, a troubadour-cowboy. But his latest role is easily his highest-profile. In fact, you'll have to look way up to spot him as he'll soon be perched atop the London skyline, subject to the vagaries of English winds. One of Canada's most celebrated conceptual artists will soon be one of London's shiniest weathervanes.

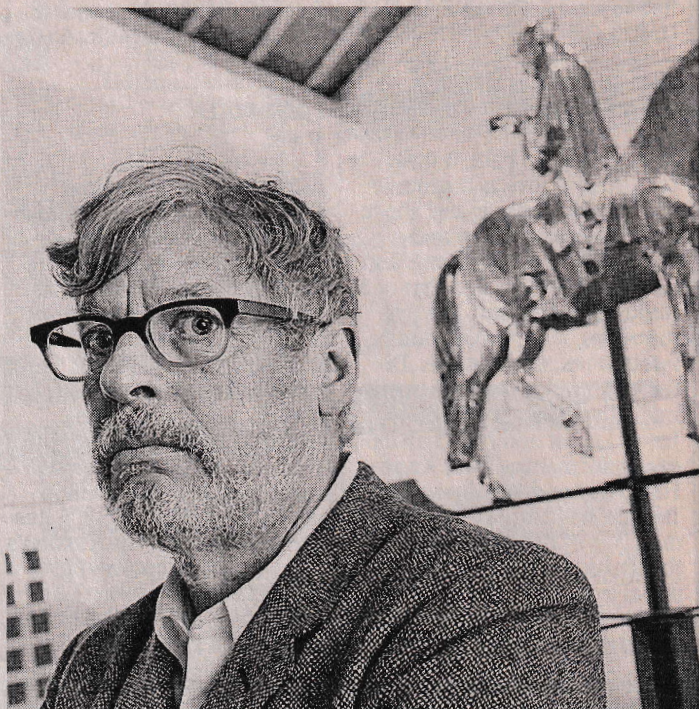
It won't be Graham himself swaying on top of the Whitechapel Gallery, of course. But the Vancouver-based artist is well known for inserting himself into his photographs and videos, often costumed and usually with an absurdist bent. This time, in his new weathervane, he's the great humanist scholar Erasmus, cloaked and reading a book, sitting astride a horse. Except, this being Rodney Graham, he's riding the horse backward.

"It looks a bit garish at the moment," says Graham, with an eye on the large copper weathervane on the day it was unveiled at the Whitechapel. "It looks a bit like a new penny, doesn't it? But it'll change colour with age."

The weathervane is still inside the gallery, which is undergoing a major renovation. By the end of the year, it will be installed on the gallery's soaring dome, in the dead of night.

(This is not to thwart thieves, although the price of copper does make that a possibility; it's because busy Whitechapel High Street will have to be closed to traffic.)

A few years ago a Dutch curator approached Graham with the idea that he might



create a work based on Erasmus, the 16th-century Dutch scholar. When he began doing research, Graham was struck by the story of Erasmus riding through the mountains of Europe, reading his book *In Praise of Folly*, on his way to visit Sir Thomas More.

"I was struck by that image," Graham said. "How do you even read while you're on a horse? And then it became riding in one direction and looking in another."

Other influences came crowding in, notably his film *Photokinetoscope*, which features Graham dropping acid in Berlin's Tiergarten and then riding around on a bike. The first step in the process was a photo, *Allegory of Folly*, featuring the artist as Erasmus wearing a fur robe, reading the Vancouver Yellow Pages and sitting the wrong way round on a mechanical horse that

Rodney Graham stands in front of the Whitechapel Gallery which features a horse, a tribute to Dutch humanism

Art Canada

Ann MacIntosh Duff

Watercolours & Wood Engravings
Exhibition to November 27, 2008



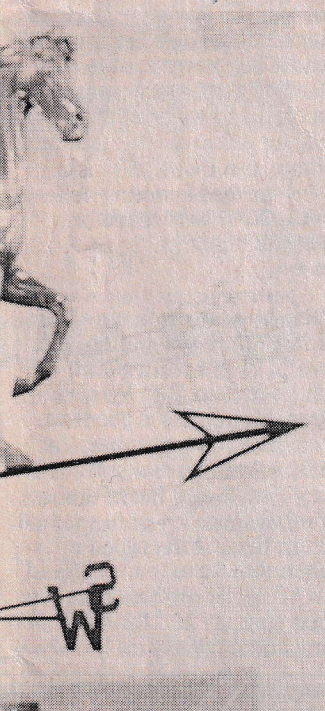
Lunar Eclipse, February 20, 2008
22 1/2" x 29 3/4", watercolour on paper.

Ann MacIntosh Duff, RCA, was born in Toronto. She studied with Peter Haworth and others at Central Tech. She also studied with André Biéler and Caven Atkins at Queen's University, Kingston. She exhibited at the Picture Loan Society and at many galleries in Toronto and

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What blows over London



the weathervane commissioned by
res the artist riding backward on
writer Erasmus. ANTHONY UPTON/PA

had once been used to train jockeys, and which Graham borrowed from the Hastings Racecourse in Vancouver. A friend did a drawing of the photo, which was passed to the foundry that cast the weathervane. Graham supervised the process but didn't interfere: "I don't have that kind of technical know-how."

The weathervane is truly being given pride of place: Not only is the Whitechapel one of London's most influential galleries, but its building is a treasure guarded by English Heritage.

It was the conservancy that insisted that the gallery's renovation include a weathervane, which had been promised in the original 1890s architectural drawings but never implemented. When it's bricked into the roof, the weathervane will overlook the east end of London, including the financial hub of the City and, directly below, the neighbourhood where Jack the Ripper stalked his victims.

For gallery director Iwona Blazwick, Graham was the natural choice for the job. The

Whitechapel held an exhibit of Graham's work in 2002, and Blazwick knew that he'd already designed one weathervane (that one featured him sitting backward on a bicycle). When she saw Graham's Erasmus photo, she thought she could see the outlines of her gallery's crowning glory.

"I love that it refers to the Enlightenment, but also that it's absurd. He's going around, not forward," she says. "And of course this city has a great tradition of equestrian statues, so in that way it fits right in."

On one level, she says, the work refers to Graham's fondness for circularity – his videos are often repeating loops – and on another level it works as a dig at art world fashion, which changes with the wind.

Finally, though, it's just a reminder of the relationship we used to have with the weather.

"We're so digital now, and we're always following weather reports," Blazwick says.

"But here you get to look up at something so simple and beautiful that also tells you which way the wind is blowing."

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VISUAL ARTS

Playful new sculpture set for takeoff near Sta

Rodney Graham's work resembles a model airplane sent through a malfunctioning S

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN

VANCOUVER SUN

A new public art work based on rearranging the parts of model airplanes is being installed at one of the city's highest profile sites by the Stanley Park causeway.

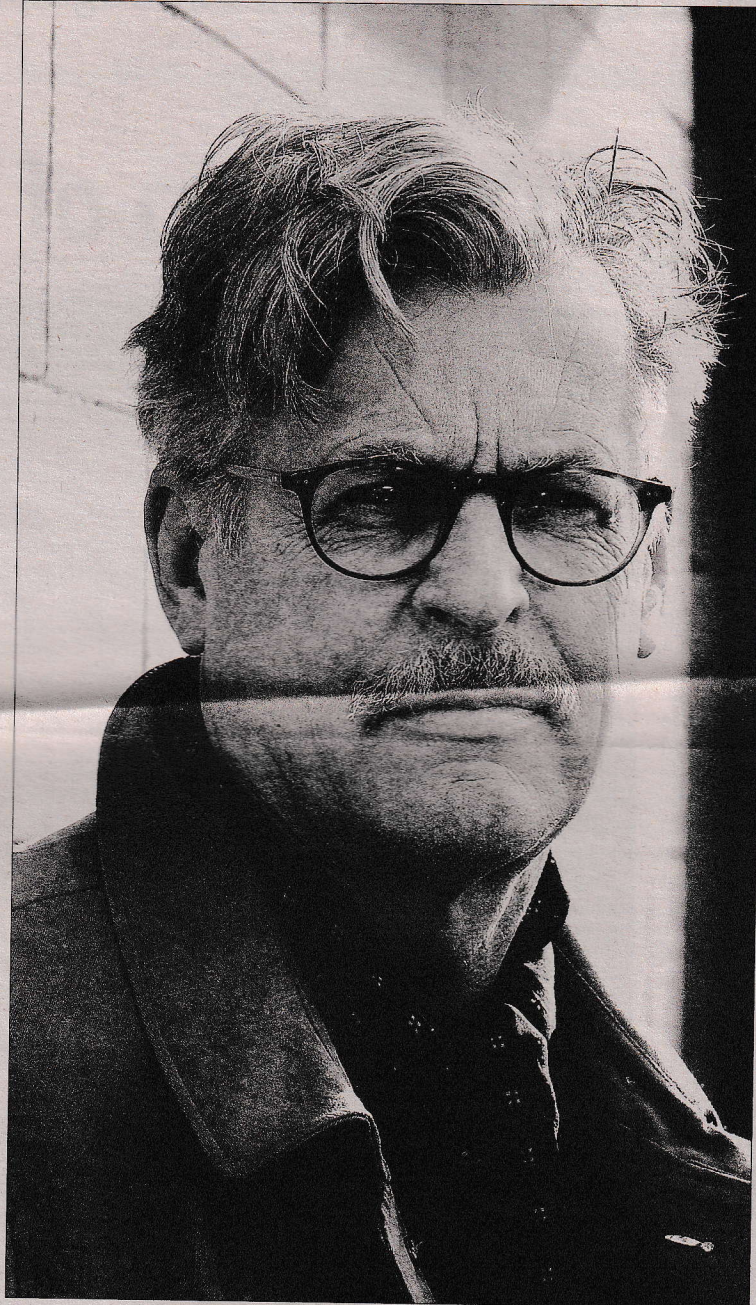
The spot is on the northeast side of West Georgia just before the pedestrian underpass. What has been used for several years as a circular planter is being transformed into the base to hold *Aerodynamic Forms in Space* by Rodney Graham, one of the country's leading artists.

City workers started in late December to prepare the site to hold the 12-metre high sculpture, which should be fully installed by early February. Graham's work will likely be immediately recognizable by anyone who has ever made model airplanes out of balsa wood.

In making the model, Graham took the parts from three different model airplane kits and rearranged them. By deliberately not following the written directions in the packages, Graham has created a sculpture that resembles a model airplane sent through a malfunctioning transporter from *Star Trek*. It has all the recognizable model airplane elements except nothing is where it's supposed to be.

Graham's work will be made primarily from stainless steel with the superstructure of partial wing, fuselage and tail painted to resemble balsa wood. The wheels and propeller will be painted bright red. Like the models on which the work is based, the propeller will spin but not because of the release of energy from an elastic band: It will move in response to the wind.

The work is playful in several ways. In particular, the spinning propeller resembles clown-like beanies with propellers. One glance at the ungainly sculpture and you can tell that it really doesn't match the title and has no aerodynamic forms slicing through space. Without being heavy-handed about it, *Aerody*



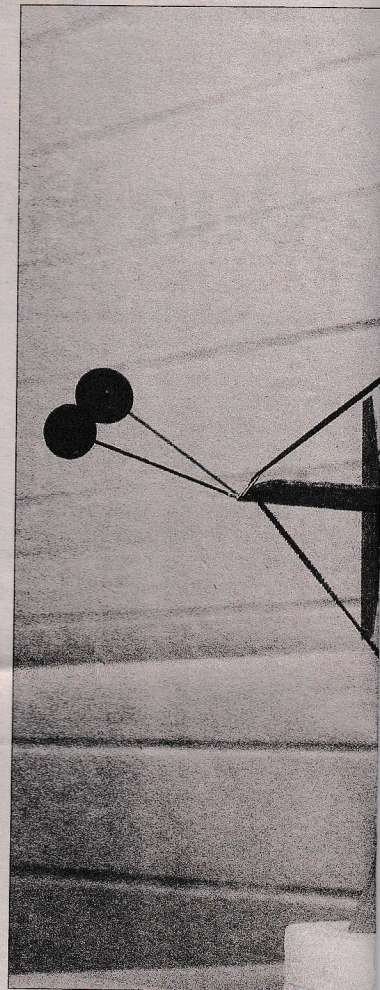
Rodney Graham became known as a performance artist in 1994.

Aerodynamic Forms is based on a series of photographs he did in 1977 of incorrectly assembled airplane models. When he was asked to submit a proposal for the site, he went back to his earlier work.

Known as a conceptual artist in the earlier part of his career, Graham has become more of a performance artist, or at least an art

vehicle's windows the city's lights and buildings flash by as a kind of visual representation of the dreams of the slumbering Graham, who is driven from a motel on Vancouver's outskirts to his home nearer downtown.

In 1997, Graham really broke into the international big time when he represented Canada at the Venice Biennale.



Model of Graham's *Aerodynamic Forms in Space* installed along West Georgia by the

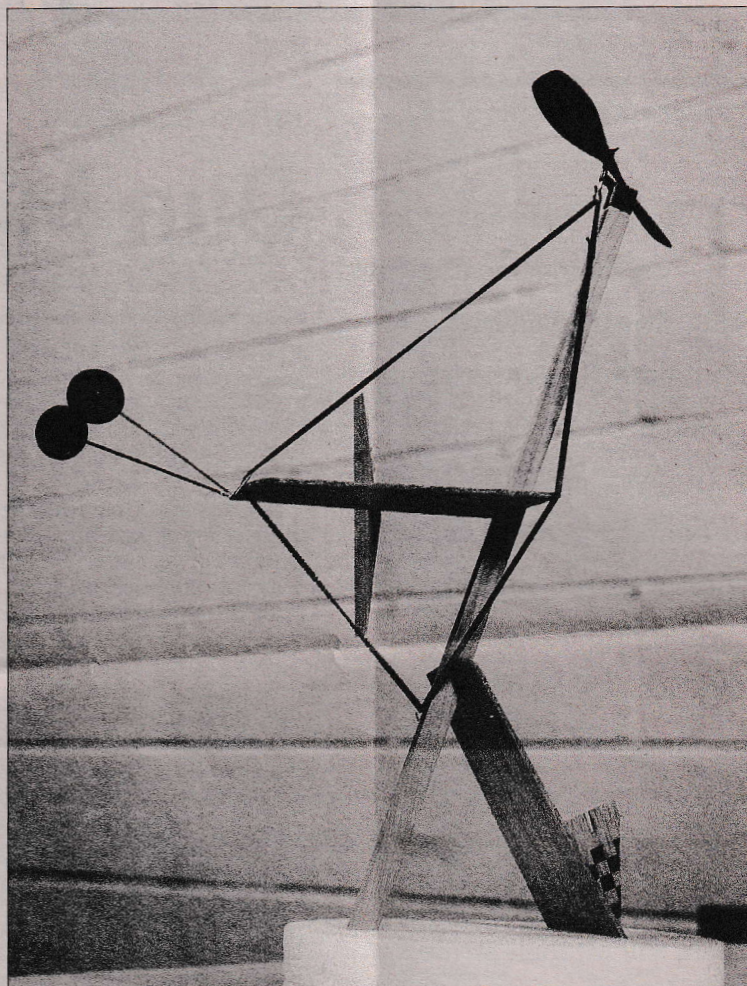
in an endless loop.

Besides playing a trickster figure in his videos, Graham has explored the history of art and mined the conventions of modernism, especially the idea of how much or to what extent an artist is the author of his own creation. *Aerodynamic Forms* in part explores that by basing much of its forms on pre-fabricated model parts.

During the next few days, the individual pieces will be brought to the site and assembled – much like the model planes on which the work is based. When it's finished, there will be a bench around the work for people to sit on and a plaque made to look like those on

r takeoff near Stanley Park

ent through a malfunctioning Star Trek transporter



Model of Graham's *Aerodynamic Forms in Space*, which is being installed along West Georgia by the Stanley Park Causeway.

in an endless loop.

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Art Program. Graham admitted that it was a “little nerve-racking” to think of the thousands of commuters and tourists who will see *Aerodynamic Forms* every day.

“I was sensitive to that,” he said.

“I wanted to make something that would pop, but not too overwhelming in scale. I’m sure some people will be offended by anything that interferes with the natural environment. I wanted to make something, but in a really traditional sculptural mode: something you stand and look at, not something that you interact with. It is more an object of contemplation.”

kevingriffin@vancouversun.com

NDSDAY/VANCOUVER SUN
in 1994.

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Conceptual mijinks are artist's forte

**EXCLUSIVE | Best of Vancouver school's
Rodney Graham on view at VAG**

BY LANTHIER
VANCOUVER SUN

most conceptual artist can't get his cellphone kept by its persistent to turn the ringer off. you can see him wish- think the thing off. Gra- leas and he's good at to realize those ideas. l artist. He thinks. He errant devices. dling through the Van- y during the final week ning of his major, mid- ive. Two floors of the spun into a labyrinth ouse the artist's video ons, music, large pho- orks and sculptures. n't bother to look e third mounting of the g broke records at the ery last spring, and it ed to acclaim at L.A.'s mporary Art. Graham

analyst's style of dream analysis, Freud's prose style, and the visual appearance of the original English translation, Graham inserted new material into one of Freud's botanical monograph dream.

Then there's his film installation *Rhein-metal/Victoria 8* (2003), featuring a large antique film projector that projects an image of a vintage typewriter in all its graphic beauty — until a fine white powder descends upon it, eventually smothering it like snow. It's been called an elegy for the culture of the written word. So perhaps I could hire a professional photographer (as Graham has used, even for his inverted trees) to capture a profoundly composed image of my silver cassette recorder, and present only that on this page — as emblematic of the conversation we had.

Or maybe I might turn to other forms of mediation, as Graham has. In 2001, during a year-long art residency in Berlin, Graham made *Phonokinetscope*, a film which shows him dropping acid and tripping through a park on a bicycle to the tune of his own song inspired by Pink Floyd acid



Still from *Vexation Island*, 1997, 35 mm film transferred to DVD.



been interested in research that leads you on a path away from something."

Art theorist Shephard Steiner writes in *Rodney Graham: A Little Thought*, "I come away from Graham's work time and again with the feeling that the art flows directly from a life lived."

"I generally follow my own interests," acknowledges Graham, "and this sense of incorporating all I do into my work, partly because recent art history has provided a context for so many different kinds of work. It can be done. It doesn't have to be separate."

Graham has said that his method of working derives from of "a lack of technique" because he did not study painting, sculpture or photography. "I even dropped out of studying art history. Conceptual art and the tradition, established by artists like Judd, of having your work fabricated by someone else, made what I am doing possible," he has said. "All art is about interpolating yourself into a tradition in one way or another."