

Carole Itter

GREY RATTLE

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GABRIEL SALOMAN

Artist's Statement (1994)

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Gabriel Saloman

Carole Itter (born 1939) is best known for her assemblages of found, discarded and decomposed materials transformed into large combines, sculptures and installations, a few of which have been installed in the nearby wilds of BC's Lower Mainland. Itter was an integral part of Vancouver's counter-cultural art scene of the 60's and 70's as a prolific artist, writer, performer and filmmaker, often collaborating alongside her partner of many decades, artist and musician Al Neil. Itter was active as a visual artist and a writer whose aesthetic interventions shared the concerns of various then emergent art movements including Fluxus, performance art, land art and feminist art practices. Like many of her peers, Itter's work was often ephemeral and resistant to commodification, and much of it is intentionally auto-destructive, designed to decay and fall apart over

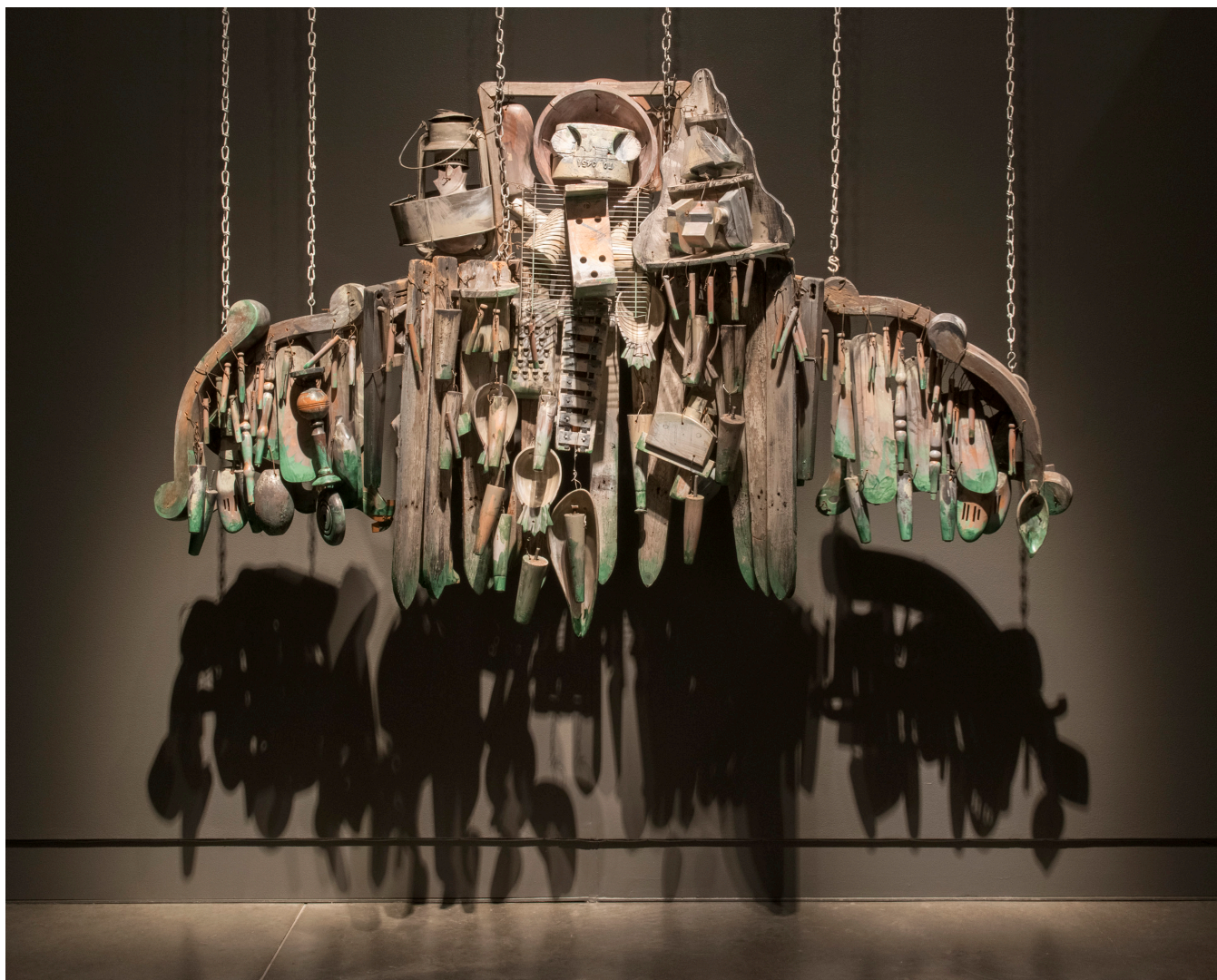
Carole Itter
Grey Rattle, 1986 - 1994
wood and metal with paint
(129.6 x 188 x 50.877 cm)
SAG 2011.04.01
Gift of an Anonymous Donor
Photograph by Scott Massey

time. Yet Itter's formidable work has found its way into the collections of public institutions (including the Surrey Art Gallery, the Canada Council Art Bank, the Vancouver Public Library and the Vancouver Art Gallery) and has been presented regularly in groups shows, including *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Vancouver Art Gallery, 2008) and solo exhibitions such as *Rattles* (Western Front, 1984), *The Float* (Or Gallery, 1995), *The Pink Room* (grunt gallery, 2000), and *A Fish Film* (grunt gallery, 2007).

Itter worked with the writer Daphne Marlatt to compile an oral history of Strathcona, the

Vancouver neighbourhood where she has lived for over three decades, published in 1979 as *Opening Doors: Vancouver's East End* (since republished by Harbour Publishing). She has also been published in various anthologies and literary magazines including *Cradle and All* (Faber & Faber), *periodics*, *Brick* and *Room of One's Own*.

Itter's work evokes a simultaneously mystical and material relationship to land and art making. It is infused with a politics that challenges assumptions about human relationships to nature, our use and abuse of it's "resources" and attempt to re-imagine

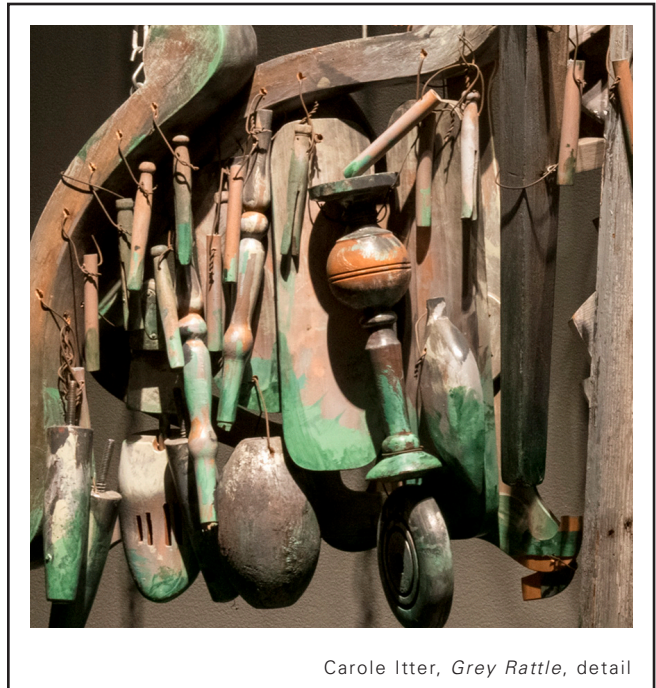


Carole Itter, *Grey Rattle*, 1986 - 1994, wood and metal with paint, (129.6 x 188 x 50.877 cm)
SAG 2011.04.01 Gift of an Anonymous Donor. Photograph by Scott Massey

an artist's relationship to processes of taking and returning materials from and back to the land. Much of her work was created in the area around the cabin in Dollarton which she shared with Neil,¹ and much of that work has likewise been changed through exposure to the immediate environment, its weather and rainfall, moss and mycelial growth and the ebb and flow of waters of the Burrard Inlet itself. In many ways the natural world and its powers of entropy and transformation are collaborators with Itter in her works, shaping and changing their material forms through the forces of time and the elements. Speaking to reporter Eve Johnston in 1984, Itter addressed some of this work saying "... that wood has gone through a lot of processes... it's been milled, rough-cut, kiln-dried and often turned... I like taking it back to the trees." It is this element of reciprocity, a returning of the human-made thing to its place of origin embedded in cycles of growth and decay, that reflects not only an ecological way of thinking, but a way of art making that is influenced directly from the land itself and the indigenous cultures that have emerged from within it.

Itter's work also situates itself in the post-war neo-avant-garde tradition of assemblage, evoking the worked, painted and destroyed readymade combines of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. At turns her work seems to respond to the masculinist interventions into landscape of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Robert Smithson and Richard Serra, arguing for an art that can peaceably live inside of landscape, rather than carve it with stone, metal and cloth. Such is the case with *Grey Rattle: Desolate Combination of Objects, No. 6*, a large sculptural work whose form has been expanded, re-oriented and re-purposed once since its first appearance as an installation at the Surrey Art Gallery in 1987.² Suspended like a gothic skeleton by an array of white

and matte grey chains, the assemblage itself is a single body in three parts resembling a large carrion bird with outstretched wings. Its form is made up of an irregular assortment of found objects - fence pickets, cheese graters, xylophones, dish racks, kerosene lanterns, shovels, chair legs - a selection of bric-a-brac and refuse combined into a structure that

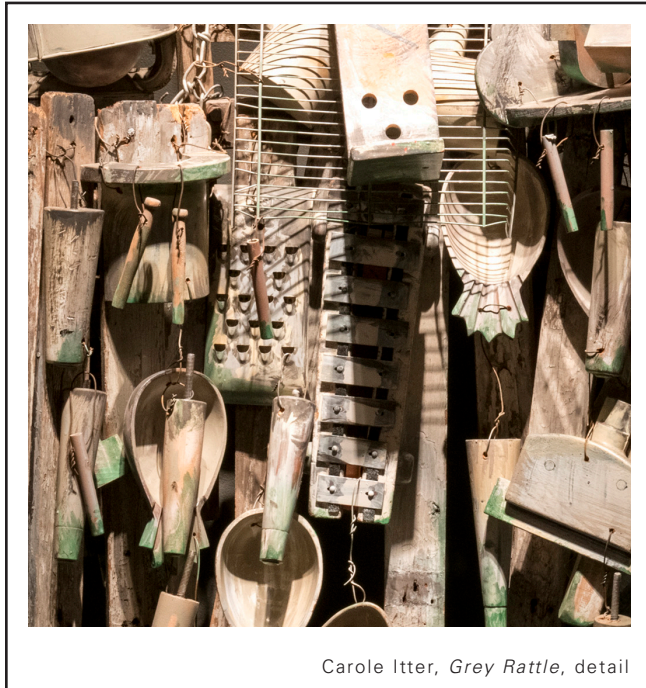


Carole Itter, *Grey Rattle*, detail

looks as much like an unearthed religious artifact as it does a backyard storage shed turned inside out. The surfaces of its various parts are roughly marked by exposure to the elements and a patina of white-wash, greys and rusted copper green. The sculpture presents a mythic figure that doesn't appropriate from northwestern indigenous art forms so much as live alongside them, clearly derived from a similar belonging to place and inspiration found in the alive world outside her own door.

Grey Rattle is the keystone piece of a long series of "rattles" called *Desolate Combination of Objects*

with *Long Assemblage* made of similar slender means, the first ones dating back to 1977 which Itter formed out of scavenged materials from the alleys of Vancouver's Chinatown. The first rattles made an appearance in her 1984 solo exhibition at the Western Front, more anthropomorphic and vertical in



Carole Itter, *Grey Rattle*, detail

orientation, and in new iterations and recombinations at Pitt Gallery in 1994.³ Al Neil incorporated them in multi-media performances, making good on the promise of the name. When *Grey Rattle* was exhibited in combination with *Long Assemblage* three years later in Surrey, some gallery goers felt equally compelled to explore the sonic potentials of the work:

Two of filmmaker David Rimmer's best students at the time, Michael Smart and Tom Chartrand, made an 8 minute documentary in 1987(...) of this piece at the S.A.G. [Surrey Art Gallery] which included two classes of school children hiding behind the Long Assemblage and rattling it like crazy.⁴

For Itter, an artwork is a living thing demanding to be interacted with and affected by its audience as much as the elemental forces outside the gallery. In preserving her work institutions like the Surrey Art Gallery are contravening her intentions even as her works contravene the conventions of an art world that seeks to lock into perpetuity works that have come out of specific times and places. Yet works such as *Grey Rattle* offer unique aesthetic pleasures and profound revelations that demand their continued exhibition and preservation, even as they long to return to the earth and waters outside the gallery doors.

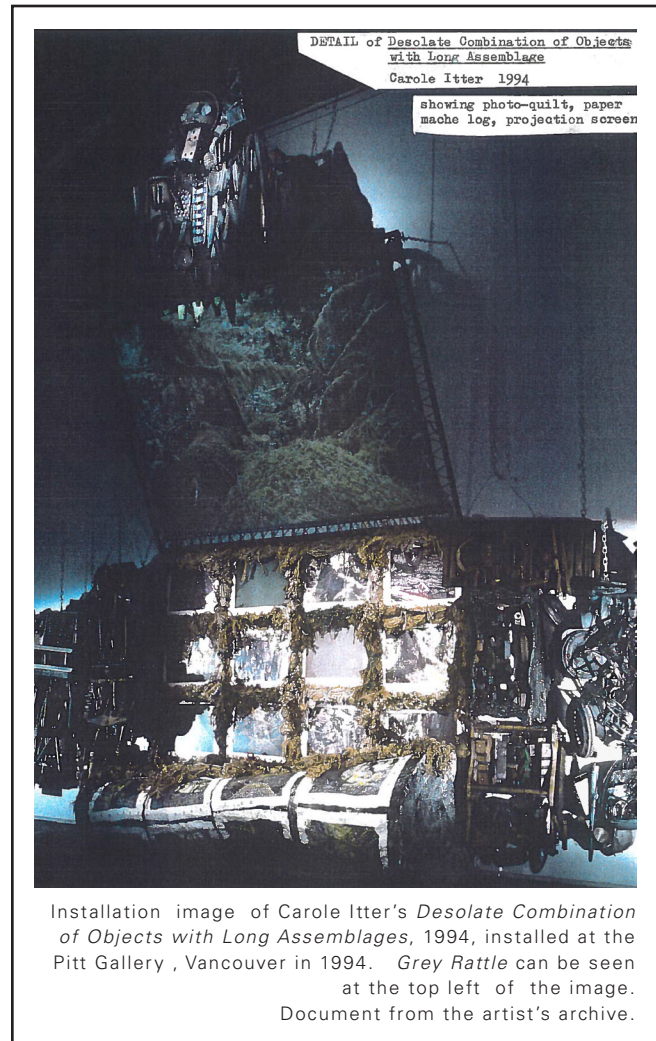
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1. This cabin was the last of several structures belonging to a North Shore community that had included writer Malcom Lowry, artist Tom Burrows and marine researcher Paul Spong, and many others. With considerable resistance from the Port Authority of Metro Vancouver, the cabin, an excellent example of an early settler's dwelling, was carefully removed and is currently in safe storage. The remainder of the area, including thirty to forty years of assemblages by Al Neil and Carole Itter, was bulldozed and destroyed. See: <http://grunt.ca/vision-for-al-neil-and-carole-itters-blue-cabin/> (Accessed November 3, 2016). This settlement has been commemorated by artist Ken Lum in his public artwork from *shangri-la to shangri-la* (2010): <http://projects.vanartgallery.bc.ca/offsite/exhibit/ken-lum/> (accessed November 3, 2016).
 2. *Moved By Other Cultures: Lin Golden, Gloria Masse and Carole Itter*, Burnaby Art Gallery, October 22 - November 22, 1987.
 3. Now Unit/Pitt Projects; <http://www.helenpittgallery.org/exhibitions/past/archived-events/carole-itter-desolate-combination-of-objects-with-long-assemblage/> (accessed November 3, 2016).
 4. Carole Itter, email correspondence with Jordan Strom, 2014.

Artist's Statement

"In this huge new metropolis of Vancouver (possibly the largest clear-cut in all of British Columbia), I gather up the discarded materials from our perpetual need to renew — from thrift shops, second hand stores, back alleys, dumpsters, anywhere that stuff has been abandoned. Just about anything has potential for art making and the reason to gather borders on obsession. I leave the city frequently to walk narrow trails in tall forests, feasting on the magnificent intricacies of abundant natural growth.

In my dreams or that place of partial sleep and partial wake, there exists unfolding and unrolling images of dwelling places, dens, interiors that are also exteriors, shelters and places of refuge amidst a profusion of unexplainable sequences, an irrational configuration of objects that encompass protectively within intricate panoramas. And there is a curious absence of language that could possibly explain or give reason for all this imagery."

The above quote is an excerpt from an artist statement first published in the book, 'Witness to Wilderness', Arsenal Pulp Press, 1994.



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