

The soul in the object

Everyday artifacts like dishes and belts serve as François Morelli's medium for exploring being

HENRY LEHMANN
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Home Wall Drawing/L'Art de manger; a show by major Montreal artist François Morelli, has turned the main room of Optica gallery into a kind of giant cupboard, brimming with blue and white dinner plates. Running diagonally up one wall is a series of 12 plates carefully mounted in wire holders. Spaced at equal intervals, these plates together suggest a stairway, leading to nowhere other than the gallery ceiling.

Other plates claim a large part of the gallery floor, where they are distributed seemingly in random fashion. More are contained in a wire structure vaguely recalling an inverted baby carriage. Its wheels are linked to metal tracks fixed to the ceiling. That the ride provided by this ungainly contraption might be less than smooth is indicated by the condition of some of the plates: they are cracked and broken.

From a distance the dishes tend to look alike; but seen up close, they turn out to be decorated with depictions of all types of objects, living and inert — airplanes, people, scissors, beasts, etc. So do we look at each of the plates as an individual unit, or do we gloss over the nuances and differences and see the dishes as generic parts of a greater whole — i.e. the entire constellation of dishes and the wire container?

On one aesthetic level, the

works by Morelli. In the case of an entirely unique series called Beltheads, the artist tilts the balance between part and whole, tending a bit toward the latter. Suspended from the ceiling are numerous bulbous, knotted objects consisting of thin strips of leather or plastic punctuated by shiny metallic patches. Inevitably brought to mind are piles of writhing snakes, though, in fact, what we behold are clusters of belts. Acquired by the artist in second-hand stores, these belts are cast-off records of someone's body image.

As with the plates, however, the original role of the belts — to hold up clothes and possibly to hold in a stomach — has been subverted, overridden by their new "art" role. Now they function as both pattern and as raw material crudely "woven" to form large mitts. The challenge we are invited to accept, after having inserted our hands into the mitts, is to grasp a pen or pencil and try to draw. The mitts are flexible prostheses, but they interfere with rather than facilitate a one-on-one rapport with pencil and paper.

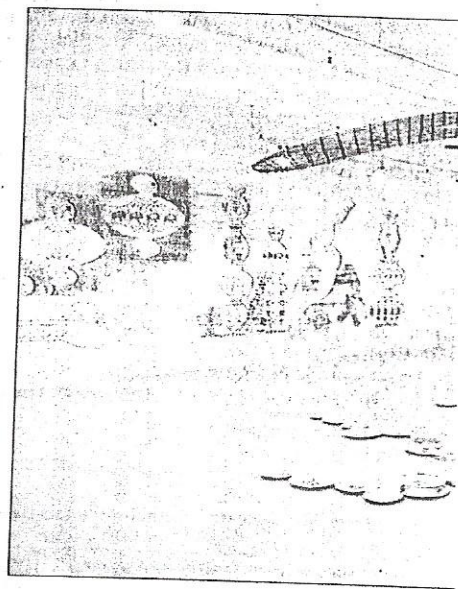
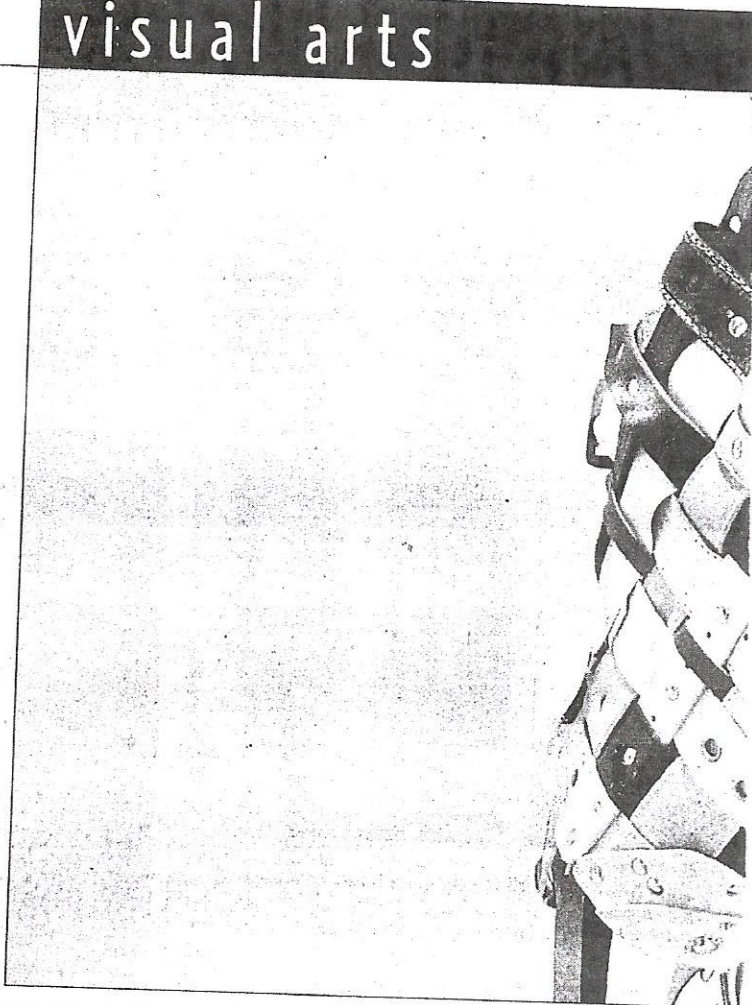
However, in "getting in the way," the monster gloves demand that we shift our focus to them as art objects, portable works with conceptual links to experiments with itinerant art in the early 1970s. There's a witty rightness to the way the belts, by definition meant to travel through their attachment to people, now make up a

In Beltheads, the artist uses second-hand plastic and leather belts with metal

larger notion. The mitts, themselves three-dimensional objects, aspire to the status of body installations.

Perhaps Morelli's main achievement is in balancing art as sculptural object with art as open-ended process. His best work becomes, even as we look, an open-ended idea, a sequence of allusions and inferences intentionally never quite leading to a conclusion. Morelli's works have to be seen as riddles.

François Morelli's Home Wall Drawing/L'Art de manger is on view at Optica, 372 Ste. Catherine St. W., Room 508, (call 514-874-1666), and his Faire à sa tête is on view next door at Galerie Joyce Yahouda, 372 Ste. Catherine St. W., Room 516 (514-875-2323). Both shows end Oct. 14.



A view of François Morelli's Home Wall Drawing