

THE WAY I ARE

*Curated by Katie Bethune-Leamen.
Featuring Valerie Blass, Anthony
Burnham, Robert Fones, Martin
Golland, Jen Hutton, Kelly Jazvac,
John Massey, Elizabeth McIntosh,
Planningtorock, Tony Romano
Blackwood Gallery at the University
of Toronto Mississauga.*

by ALEX SNUKAL

The Way I Are, on view at Blackwood Gallery this winter, took its title and inspiration from hip-hop producer and artist Timbaland's 2007 single of the same name. Featuring 10 artists working in a variety of media, *The Way I Are* considered the relationship between artistic practice and informal speech. Katie Bethune-Leamen, the exhibition's curator, used the song's awkward title as a starting point from which to argue for a specific conception of slang and its use as an interpretive method. The show's central concern with slang arouses the potential to frustrate the act of communication itself. Regardless of the specific meanings of slang, its deeper significance lies in the speaker's refusal to accept language and signification as fixed and impersonal. Slang is a creative and political intervention into formal language and its use, and therefore declares a personal and often combative stake in communication (take Caliban's famous retort in *The Tempest* for example: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse"). The purpose and risk of this creative intervention is that it can be easily misunderstood or not understood at all. Communicating through slang is then always fraught with a multiplicity of possible meanings and outcomes.

Yet, for an exhibition ostensibly concerned with slang, no work in the show directly referenced informal speech or its place within language and culture. Rather, the show used slang's potential for ambiguity as a means to comprehend various formal or conceptual practices. Revelling in her own inability to pronounce "the way I are" when describing Timbaland's song to others, Bethune-Leamen chose a series of works that reflected the title's (and slang's) ambiguity. Perhaps then, *The Way I Are* may have been a more illustrative title given the show's focus on the instability of slang and Blackwood Gallery Curator/Director Christof Migone's assertion that coherence may not be "equiv-

alent with rigour." This slight alteration of the title shifts the emphasis of the show towards the kinds of miscommunications and ambiguities that Bethune-Leamen so appreciated in Timbaland's *The Way I Are*. Indeed the exhibition, like slang, was precariously balanced between the will to communicate and the drive for forms of expression that themselves may not be fully coherent. Some works succeeded in this context more than others and it was sometimes difficult to fully grasp what elements of slang were actually at work in the objects, images and videos in the show. There were some interesting and successful choices; in particular, works by Robert Fones, John Massey and Kelly Jazvac stood out within this curatorial framework.

Robert Fones' *Leviathan #5* (2008) brilliantly evokes the confusion in the exhibition's title. As one of two works in the show that included actual text, the piece provides an illustrative link between slang's ambiguity in the linguistic realm and problems of representation in the visual. *Leviathan #5* is part of a larger series of panels across which Fones has "designed, sculpted, painted, then photographed" the first two lines of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651). Displayed without punctuation or spaces between words and truncated by the sides of the panel, Hobbes' text disappears into an abstracted and barely legible series of letters. Yet while Fones' laborious process of representation has rendered *Leviathan* illegible, it ironically provides an insightful reading into the original text. In the first two lines of *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes the imitation of nature by "the art of man" and reduces life to a mechanistic "motion of limbs," which man imitates in such things as watches and other engines. Over the course of the opening paragraph, Hobbes goes on to describe the State (*Leviathan*) as a complete body with joints (the judiciary) and nerves (the correctional system) and other characteristics of the human body. This artificial social and political body is invested with the power to act on behalf of all the bodies that make up the State. In *Leviathan #5*, Hobbes' holistic and mechanistic representation of the social body, with its total aversion to contradiction, is confronted by Fones' idiosyncratic representation of individual letters. As words run into each other or are broken up by the edges of the panel, the works shifts the emphasis of representation to the particular and the incomplete. More importantly, Hobbes' argument is radically de-