

Nile's multi-media show prefers content over form

By Robert Reid
Record staff

All the world's a visual pun. This might not be Shakespeare, but it is an apt description of the work of Toronto artist D. Nile.

Nile's felicity with visual puns is evident in *Mud Is Motivation*, an installation featuring eight multi-media works on view at the stART Gallery through Jan. 30.

Born in Montreal in 1956, Nile graduated with an honor's degree in philosophy from the University of Western Ontario before attending the Ontario College of Art.

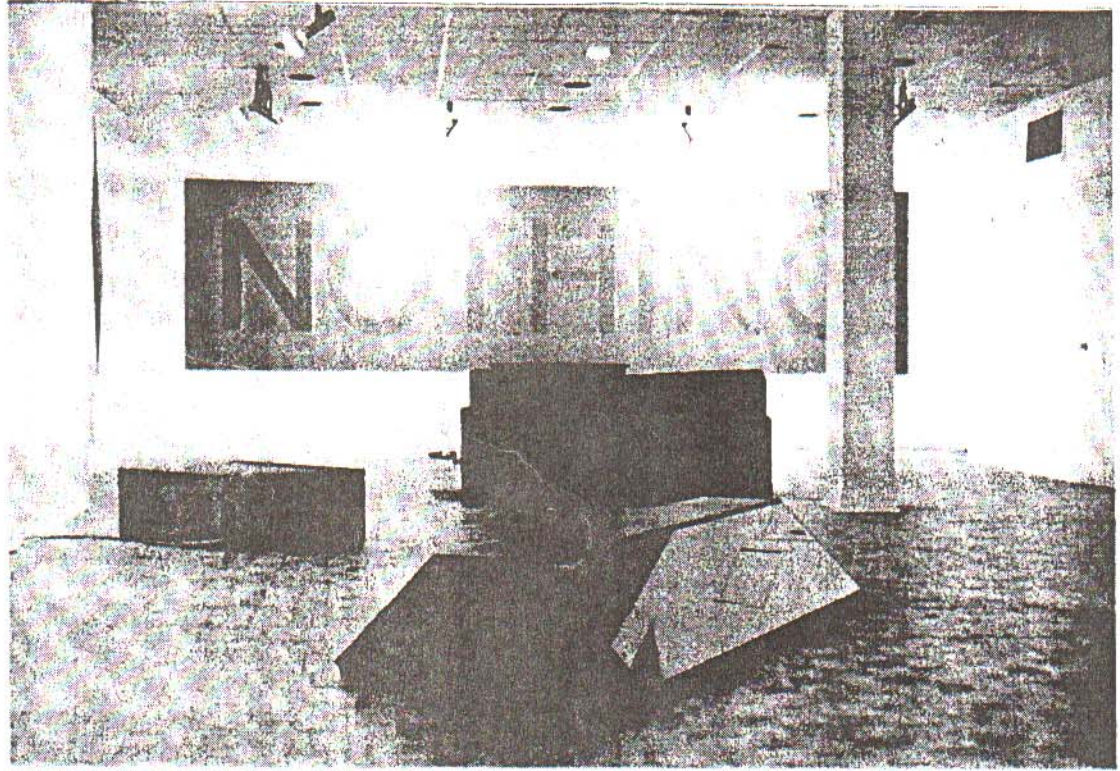
His philosophy background is an important influence on his art, which examines such themes as the relationships between language and meaning, and technology and art. Although Nile has some fun parodying the imagery of pop art — for example, Noland's *Bright Ray* — his art is essentially concerned with content (social commentary) rather than form.

Most of the works deal with various aspects of self-image. Nile interprets contemporary society as narcissistic in the extreme. Images of uncritical self-absorption and self-aggrandizement abound.

Venus consists of a square panel covered in red felt circumscribed by a bevelled mirror. A series of words related to self-image (attractive, sensual, erotic, etc.) is painted on the mirror.

Image Conscious consists of a mirror with an electronic message board mounted on top. The board's text is a lengthy list of exhortations, from the kinds of things parents tell their children "Fix your hair" and "Eat your dinner," to unconscious promptings such as "Hide your lust" and "Be your self."

Concrete Desire gives new meaning to the term concrete poetry. Consisting of a slab resembling an actual concrete block and a message board, the text of the board is a series of one-liners in the form of a poem. The lines vary from "If this man had a concrete desire/He would set the world on fire," to "Lying in cement/Wasn't what I meant/These



Although Toronto Artist D. Nile has some fun parodying the imagery of pop art, his art is essentially concerned with content (social commentary) rather than form

heavy shoes/Going home in a crate."

Nile turns his wit to television in the installation, *Nothing Sacred*, which features the word "nothing" painted on the gallery wall in large, garish pink letters against an institutional green background, a television set with a couple of beer bottles tossed through the picture tube and a couch empty except for a few empty beer bottles.

The problem with this piece is that despite the humor (haven't we all wanted to do something similar at one time or another?), it verges on the banal. While it might be argued that Nile employs hackneyed imagery to satirize a trite medium of communication, the effectiveness of the commentary is compromised by the literalness of the imagery.

In contrast to much contemporary art, which is deliberately obscure

rather than merely difficult, Nile intends his work to be accessible. However, he seems to overcompensate by making his work so literal that it actually discourages the viewer from searching for deeper levels of meaning.

A case in point is *Watch Your Step*, a small four-sided construction (the ends of which resemble a triangle with its top cut off) that sits on the floor. Two mirrors are mounted on the 45-degree-angle sides, enabling the viewer to watch his steps as he walks past the piece. The ambiguity of the phrase, "watch your step" (literally, what he does when he walks past the piece; figuratively, as a warning) is too conspicuous to belabor.

Really Visual is a wall-mounted piece consisting of three horizontal colored bands (red, yellow and blue) and a horizontal mirror the same

width as the bands. Series of words are stencilled on the color bands suggesting levels of meaning — for example: "see, inspect, squint" or "discover, peek, mark."

Image Conscious, *Venus*, *Really Conscious* and *Watch Your Step* are related in that they are concerned with the concept of self-image — from head to toe.

The exhibition's title piece, *Mud Is Motivation*, consists of a pile of pungent chocolate shells behind which a large orange panel with paper cut outs of gardening trowels is mounted on the gallery wall.

Whether the piece portrays modern society as a hill of beans, or whether it is a reference to what social philosopher Jean Baudrillard terms "excremental culture," it is the artist who wields the trowels and makes art from the detritus of society.