

Have you ever read Milton, captain?
—Khan to Kirk

arts

INTERVIEW

Catherine MacTavish is a Toronto-based artist and 1973 graduate of York University. She is one of the artists participating in the current *Toronto Painting '84* show at the Art Gallery of Ontario. She has exhibited and travelled extensively. Articles and reviews of her work have appeared in numerous publications. *Excalibur's* Henry Sum recently posited some questions to MacTavish, who responded in written form.

Q. How do you feel about participating in the Toronto Painting '84 show?

A. It's an opportunity for paintings to be seen by people. For me, this is the important consideration. There are always reservations about group shows, the risk of being labeled or misrepresented. In this show the "figurative" is segregated from the "New Image" paintings, the children from the adults, as if this tired old rumination is again relevant. It is hardly what is at stake for me. Generalizing limits interpretation. Does it have anything to do with understanding pictures, or is it the impulse to create the illusion that things are under control, that it all can be boiled down to just this and that? The complexity and seeming arbitrariness of reality, in this instance local painting, can be hard to integrate, to live. Artists essentially do what has been given, and deviation from that, say, for intellectual reasons doesn't always pan out, or resonate. Painting that panders to fashions in magazines reproduces effectively, but doesn't necessarily make it as painting. That's the old museum-without-walls context. There is more to it than conscious appropriation of styles. Like doing anything well, and creatively, painting a picture is a very difficult thing to do.

Q. Abstraction, as Western art's main contribution—is it making a comeback? Will it become mainstream? It seems that the great promise of abstract art, as a substitute for the human figure, has not been fulfilled. Could you comment on this?

A. Abstraction was around before Western art even got to the mudpie stage, and as a substitute for the human figure, well, prohibition didn't last long either. It is dismaying that the tired, old, either-or issue about abstraction and figuration as mutually exclusive criteria for authenticity gets dragged out over and over, when it has been so thoroughly worked through. This is a symptom of Babylon. For me, abstraction and figurations are processes basic to our consciousness, and as pictorial levels of operation, they are significant not so much as ends in themselves, but as language, and, hold onto your chair, revelation of content.

It is tragic that people get so out of touch with their feelings and beliefs, that they need other criteria for accepting a work of art as art. Recognition of art is as direct as recognizing a face in the street—you don't think about it, you just know who it is. One face stands out. You

love it. You want it all to yourself. You chose to live together. That face is more than just pretty as a picture. You can think of many reasons why this person is special, but when you catch sight of your love, you just know.

For those who look carefully at world art, the abstract/figure dichotomy is not an aesthetic issue, but is linked to economics, to the politics of Western art. In analysis of a work, to untangle manifest content from latent content, one is free to take into account what is happening on an abstract level, and what is revealed through representation.

We will not be postmodern until we assimilate and integrate our own tradition and heritage. At a time when Western art has arrived at a potentially enlightened point of view, when artists are at liberty to make use, or uselessness, of a range of media hitherto conceivable only to Antonin Artaud, there is danger that the position will be lost in a mayhem of nostalgia and decadence.

Q. Your enormous 16-foot piece was elaborately decorated with sequins and swirling red seed shapes. It came as a bit of a shock to this viewer, the title you had given it, "Arms Race." Could you comment on this?

A. The title works in many ways, the most blatant being the reference to nuclear weapons. The title says, "As a citizen, the artist's responsibility to keep the arms issue alive in public consciousness overrides theoretical reservations about aesthetic purity."

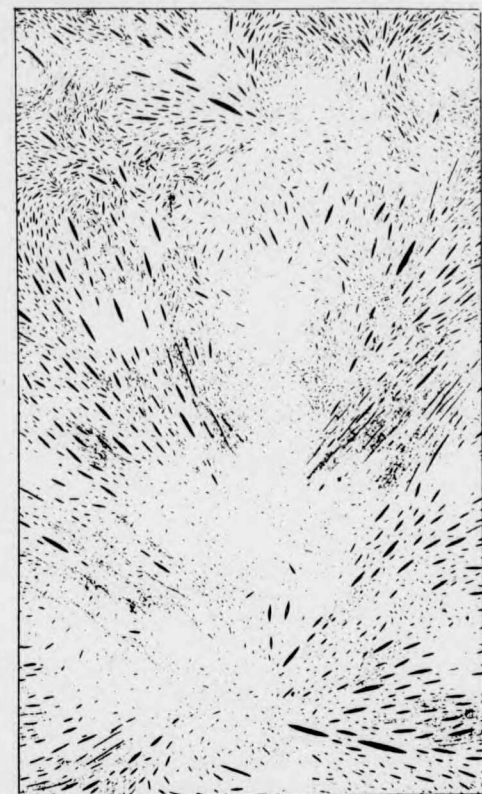
"Arms Race" is linked to another series of paintings called "The Bathers," which took a stand with regard to fundamental painterly problems: the figure/ground, illusory space, representation, symbolism, edge, composition.

Q. In your piece "Both Sides," did one side develop as an accident or afterthought?

A. It was consistent with a simply unifying principle that had intrigued me for a long time—the reconciliation of opposites. I worked up to "Both Sides" slowly, with two separate, antithetical series of paintings which now would make an interesting show. One side had to be everything the other was not. That's all there is to it, but the interpretations are infinite because everything has both sides.

Q. Like many of the artists in the show, your pieces are monumental, particularly "Arms Race." When conceiving such a piece do you work from a number of preliminary sketches or make spontaneous decisions on the finished product?

A. Both. From beginning to end, both. The main point is that the thing has to be seen, visualized entire, before beginning. Otherwise I wouldn't know what to do. If I couldn't recall an appearance, I was certain that it was memory anyways, and pretended that memory informed the intuitive decisions made in rendering. The canvas was a screen upon which a synthesis of memory and desire was projected.



Arms Race, Catherine MacTavish. Acrylic, mixed media on canvas. 487.7x304.8 cm.

Q. Could you comment on the meticulousness of your work?

A. It is no longer to be taken for obsessive compulsion, or even perfectionism. These things are at play, however they only take art so far, and then have to be worked through. The question is always, "Does that picture need a mark, or do I need to make one?" or worse, "—do I need to make a mess?" If it is the latter, to make skid marks on a gym floor is more appropriate, than to wreck a painting. It's the same in music—"Is a sound meant to be there, or do I need to be heard?" This question sets art apart from therapy, forestalling ambiguity of intent. The meticulousness was also because I was genuinely interested in what goes on at that level of visual acuity.

Optical events at a high level of resolution, which you identify as "meticulous," can appear geometrically symmetrical, evocative of Platonic number and harmonic principles. These configurations are rich with symbolic and allegorical implications of a classical nature. Because archetypal patterns speak of fundamental, natural forms, shapes with beginnings, ends, a point, climax, rhythm, reflections, opposites, everybody sees stories in the picture. In subject matter, many of the stories differ, but they share structures, as they originate from the structures in the painting. An interpretation, or story's content, reflects, and is a projection of the individual's personal experience. A painted plan which guides the attention in this way, maps the interface of inner and outer vision.

Transformations at different focal lengths

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Catherine MacTavish

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