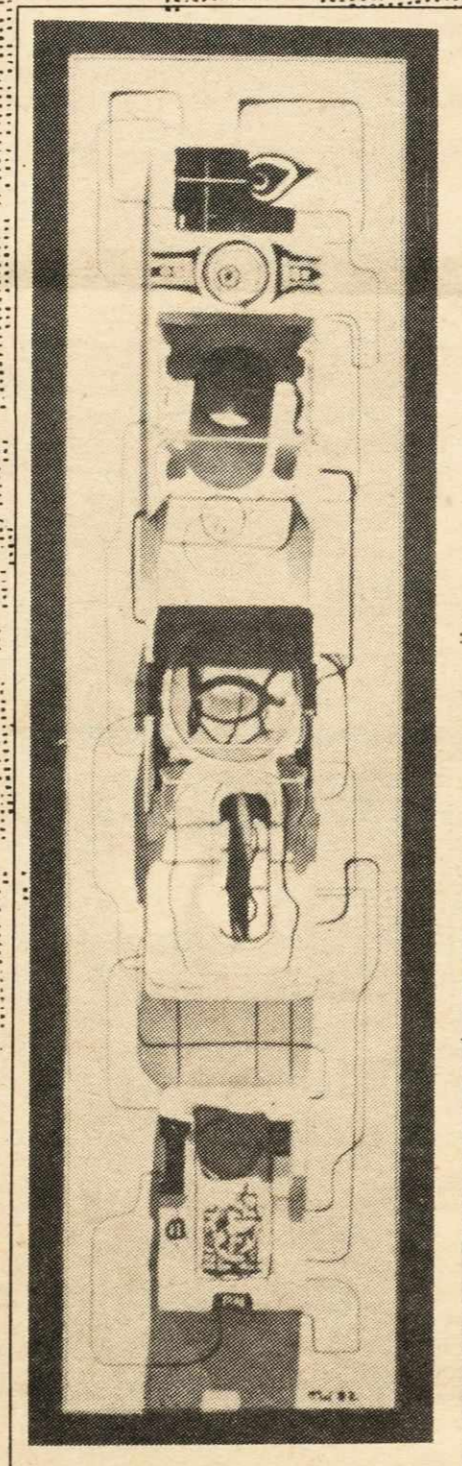


Peter Thomas McGuigan - Neophytes Gauguin



Dr. Michael Wilkinson - Family Totem



Kenneth M. Vaughan - Dad

Art by and for everyone

by Ken Burke

Any art exhibit as broad as "The 29th Annual Dalhousie Student, Staff, Faculty and Alumni Exhibition" (on display at the Dal Art Gallery until January 30th) is going to be an uneven experience. Not unpleasant, mind you, but that uneasy area of inbetweenness that *uneven* is.

With 132 works displayed and 59 artists represented — most of them "hobby" artists — talent varies throughout the exhibit from acceptable-nice to work worth of serious attention. Unfortunately, there isn't that same kind of variety of form and style in the exhibit. Judging from the exhibit, Dalhousie's artists think almost exclusively of painting, drawing, and photography. There was no video, no sculpture to speak of at all, no conceptual art and only intermittent signs of eccentricity and innovation. But, as the exhibit's an open collection of contributed material, I guess that's just Dalhousie, eh?

What Dalhousie is, judging by the exhibit, is a lot of fairly traditional subjects (landscapes, people in chairs, still lifes, regional motifs) seen and rendered in fairly traditional manners. The exhibit's layout and design also adds to this impression, as the works are plainly placed on the walls, with an appropriate space between frames.

The works individually rarely fall below the level of "okay," and are quite good considering the fact that the majority of people represented are untrained and the work was done spare-time. But a few works still stick out as excellent and could be seen at the Art Gallery in a different type of exhibit quite easily.

Among those peering from the pack is Bob Marchand with three large, very Japanese-styled paintings. Done in grey, misty colours with an assured touch, Marchand's work inspires the same feelings of calm reflection that Japanese wall hangings do, although modern (or less familiar) subject matter would likely make his work more original and challenging. "Sonnet 60," a seascape, shows marvelous control and beauty in its feel for the ocean's rhythms.

Another artist to anticipate more work from is Hester Lessard, who also contributed three works to the exhibit. Her subjects are windows, doors and reflections — open glimpses of people's lives through peepholes for the outside world. The paintings have some of the same static quality of Alex Colville's paintings, without his heavy sense of impending doom or hyper-realistic style. Lessard's work is fairly detailed, although by no means photographic.

Her "Reflection," oil on masonite, is a beautiful rendition of home-life peace and ease with nature. By de-emphasizing the woman's reflection in favour of the foreground flowers, the woman is placed all that much more in focus. She is set easily in her environment, mirroring the contentment of her expression in the painting.

Chris Straetling's three contributions also command attention in his mastery of styles from xerography to oils to colour etchings. He interchanges colours and shapes to present a vaguely hostile, but calm mood in the work, at once projecting its own personality.

Peter Thomas McGuigan's "Neophytes Gauguin" has personality also, but that personality isn't McGuigan's. The painting is no *homage*, but instead a stroke-for-stroke copy of Gauguin's Tahitian style. To be sure, it's a remarkably accurate rip-off, but in the end this copycat work is nothing more than a clever mechanical task.

Highlights from the exhibit would also include at least three other works. Kenneth Vaughn's coloured pencil portrait "Dad" shows great skill for subject insight, making one feel the subject is known, merely by viewing the picture. Dr. Michael Wilkinson provides a subtle allegorical painting-sculpture entitled "Family Totem" which has the sense to be experimental without being overly reliant on old Freudian symbolism. "Strata Chiusa" (photographs by Rita Risser) is the best photographic work of the exhibit, simply framing graffiti, scaped-off posters and carvings from walls on open streets and creating something beautifully new from the decay of the scenes.

For the reasons above and also for curiosity's sake (what can Dal artists do?), the exhibit is worth attending. If it gathers more attention, maybe next year's collection will include a greater variety of works.

Photos by
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