

Art exhibition from Ontario now at Canada House Gallery

BY RALPH TURNER

A year ago, Ralph Turner, Head of Exhibitions at the Crafts Council in London, was invited to select for an exhibition from Ontario, to be shown at the Canada House Gallery and then toured. This is his account of the search, plus a brief description of the work of the four artists he decided to feature.

The exhibition, called *Art by Design*, was organised by Visual Arts Ontario in Toronto and the Canada House Gallery in London. It will be at the Gallery in Trafalgar Square until 2 October, before touring other galleries in the UK and elsewhere in Europe.

Viewing hours at the Gallery are Monday to Friday 10.00 to 5.30; late night Thursday until 7.30; Sunday 12.00 to 5.30. Admission is free.

Crafts are notoriously difficult to define. The word itself denotes high standards, sweat and skill. These can be found almost anywhere – on the factory floor, hospital theatre, hairdressing salon, potting shed or hotel kitchen.

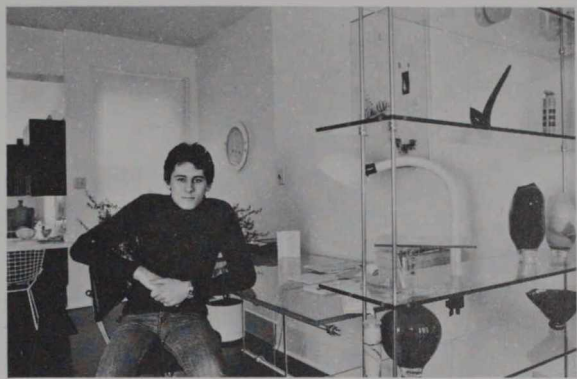
When Bill Boyle (then head of Visual Arts Ontario) asked me to select an exhibition from Ontario, I had certain reservations. My knowledge of the crafts there was limited to a handful of names and impressions gleaned from books, magazines and exhibition catalogues. It is one thing to know your home ground, another to take on the role of intrepid explorer.

The brief was straightforward – come to Ontario, see what's going on and select a show for the Canada House Gallery in London. Eventually I decided to go, reassuring myself that if my knowledge of Canadian crafts was sketchy, perhaps I did know what would have appeal here in the UK. I was even more reassured when I learned that Linda Beatty, the co-ordinator of the Ontario Project, was to be my right hand.

Linda Beatty's first challenge was to organise a crash course of introduction to the full spectrum of current work. We devoted almost two days to thousands of biographies and slides at the Ontario Crafts Council in Toronto. This was to form the foundation of my work, giving me the broadest possible view of every discipline across the province.

Meeting the makers

Gallery visits were arranged to see exhibitions, while studio and workshop visits provided first-hand experience of a variety of working situations – with the added advantage of meeting the makers



1.

Photo courtesy Visual Arts Ontario



2.

Photo courtesy Visual Arts Ontario



3.

Photo courtesy Visual Arts Ontario



4.

Photo courtesy Visual Arts Ontario

1. Max Leser
2. Ian Symons
3. Kai Chan
4. Barbera Astman

themselves. Many private collectors and museum curators were generous with their time, allowing me to look through their acquisitions and answering many questions that were to give me a much clearer and informed view of both the immediate ancestry of Ontario crafts and the current situation.

After so much frenetic activity, a clearer picture began to emerge. It occurred to me that the state of professional crafts in Ontario differs only in degree from that of the UK. Potters top the list in number and invention. Weavers and other textile artists work to their own designs, successfully attracting major commissions from industry and commerce (rather more so than their contemporaries in the UK, due primarily to the prevalence of corporate purchasers across Canada).

As one would expect from a land of forests, woodworking is also popular, although, with some notable exceptions, the work tends to be traditional. However, there is confident experiment in glass, metalwork and jewellery, and (as in Europe) many crafts people have shifted their loyalty from function and tradition to question the separation and distinction between art and craft.

This was the area that I decided to represent in my selection for *Art By Design*, believing it to be timely.

Finely crafted sculptures

Max Leser's exciting glass furniture is proof that innovative use of materials does not necessarily deny function. A glimpse of his own home reveals his passion for order and logic.

Ian Symon's work is in the vanguard of the current movement in studio ceramics. Possibly,