William Ronald, swamped by fans at ManuLife Place opening last Thursday night.
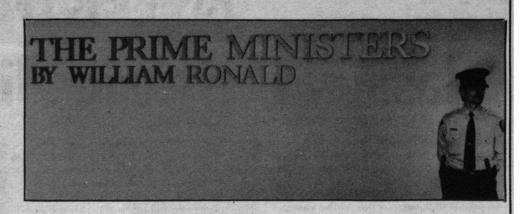

The artist talks with admirer before portrait of Joe Clark (left). The two-panel portrait, divided by strip of Tory blue, was "a charitable act," describing "a young man who made an incredible leap from no-where, then skidded to a halt."

THE PRIME MINISTERS
BY WILLIAM RONALD

When William Ronald's manager handed him the latest Canada Council grant application seven years ago, Ronald signed on the dotted line. When his manager told him he had gotten the grant, and asked Ronald what he was going to paint, Ronald hesitated a minute, then answered, "I'll paint all the damned Prime Ministers."

The completed exhibition opened in Toronto last year, and the current installation at ManuLife Place is the show's first appearance west of Ontario.

The exhibit's funding marks a first for both Manufacturers Life Insurance and for William Ronald. For ManuLife, providing an entire floor of vacant office space for the show afforded a unique opportunity to revitalize the cultural life of Edmonton's downtown core. For Ronald, this is the first time in 33 years of painting that he has received private funding for an exhibit.

William Ronald was a founding member of Painters Eleven, who introduced Canada to abstract expressionism during the 1950's. After graduating from the Ontario College of Art, Ronald moved to New York in 1955. In 1957, at the age of 31, he became the youngest painter ever to be represented in the Gugenheim Museum. Today his works belong to the permanent collections of some seventy museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian Institution, and the National Gallery of Canada.

Though his move to New York brought him international recognition, Ronald refused to forsake his Canadian roots. He moved back to Toronto, where he has lived since 1963.

The sixteen works in this exhibition are mostly consistent with Ronald's trademark style: bold blues and reds, with soft, underwater-like backgrounds in some pieces. Ronald is at a loss when it comes to explaining the uncharacteristic white that pervades the series, though: "this strange whiteness seems to haunt them," he says. The white is clearly a reflection of the country's character, but Ronald denies that it represents a void, preferring to think of it as a potential, waiting to be fulfilled.

The exhibition's catalogue gives an indication of the research and thought that went into each painting. For example, after summarizing Joe Clarke's political career, Ronald concludes that Clarke was "a young man who made an incredible leap from nowhere, and then skidded to a halt." The Clarke painting, a mere twenty-seven inches wide by eight feet high, was "a charitable act," according to Ronald.

Overt symbolism makes some of the abstract portraits immediately recognizable. Almost everyone recognizes Pearson's portrait because of the string of red maple leafs crossing the canvas — the symbol that became our national flag under his reign. (The last in the string is blue and white, indicating the artists' preference for Canada's colours.) Running along the bottom of the John A. MacDonald triptych is a rough set of interlocking black lines, suggesting the trans-Canada railroad that our first Prime Minister was instrumental in completing.

Each painting represents not just a man, but a country and an era as well. In Richard B. Bennett's portrait, for example, the central swath of yellow evokes the prairie, where Bennett made his inroad into politics (he served as M.P. for Calgary intermittently from 1911-38). The ominous blue above the horizon line in the same painting reflects the dark days of the depression (Bennett served from 1930-35), and the bold matador figure at centre-canvas reflects the loneliness and the power of a man who came from a poor New Brunswick family to becom the richest Prime Minister ever.

The exhibit's official opening last Thursday was a lukewarm reception for an internationally acclaimed Canadian artist. Premier Lougheed couldn't make it, Joe Clarke wired his regrets, and Edmonton's mayor couldn't find the time to make even a token appearance.

Lukewarm, however, is a radical improvement in our city's reaction to modern expresisonist painters. When Dennis Burton, a contemporary of William Ronald's, was commisioned to paint a mural for the Edmonton International Airport in 1963, his work was continually defaced, and Burton finally left in disgust when a disgruntled local took a swing at him while the artist was touching up his completed work. When the airport was officially opened in Feb., 1964, it was not graced by a Burton original; the airport executive, in its ignorance, decided that the painting did not live up to their taste. Without consulting the artist, or the National Gallery, they simply had the invaluable work of art destroyed.

Abstract expressionism has made a few tentative appearances since the disgraceful airport episode, but the ManuLife exhibition's unusual blend of politics and art is bound to attract a wide spectrum of viewers. While the exhibit is politically educational (how many people can name the sixteen P.M.'s up to and including Trudeau?), even the most inartistic viewer will also gain an appreciation of the subtle artistry that imparts an emotional power to these canvasses.

The Prime Ministers carries a $million price tag, and that includes the rights to a work in progress. Ronald plans to go on painting Prime Minsiters "as long as I'm around," and all future additions to the series are included in the price.

Ronald has always been a prolific painter, and his artistic ingenuity does not come to an end with painting the Prime Ministers. He has mounted six one-man shows while working on The Prime Ministers, and plans to continue pursuing other artistic interests while working on future Prime Minister portraits.

The Prime Ministers is at ManuLife Place, third floor, until Jan. 13. Admission is $2.00 for adults, $1.00 for seniors and students. Tickets are available at all ManuLife retail outlets, the Edmonton Art Gallery, and the Robert Vanderleelie Gallery. For gallery hours, phone ManuLife at 420-6236.

Lounge lizards warm up the opening last Thursday night, with matador-like image of Richard B. Bennett, Canada's richest-ever P.M. in the background