

Roundup 88: A testament to Toronto's art scene

By LEN-CLER CUNNINGHAM

"There is a pall hanging over the Toronto art scene . . . If we're lucky, and if the past is any indication, things might start to pick up again sometime in the early 1990s."

—Christopher Hume, *Toronto Star* art critic

The art world is often divided between critics, artists, galleries, and the public; with critics often possessing an overwhelming share of the power. Fortunately, they often display an ignorance that leads the public, and artists, to wonder if these priests-of-the-temple know what is occurring outside of the handful of galleries and museums which tend to dominate the Toronto art scene. From John Bentley Mays' belated discovery that Queen street had an active art scene, to Hume's prayer for the '90s, one wonders if these critics can transcend their insularity and ignorance to realize that "things are happening now."

The "thing that is happening now" is Roundup 88, involving 78 artists opening up their studios from Parliament to Lansdowne, and Front to Dupont. The event runs from May 10-15, and involves a

diverse and eclectic gathering of artists whose only connection is their youth, and the fact that they are tired of waiting a year or two for shows at established galleries—if they can get them at all.

Each gallery in Toronto receives between 500-600 applications a year, but only have 10 or 11 shows in the same time period; combine this with the hundreds of people who graduate from Art College each year and you have a situation ripe for activity. Events like Roundup 88 have an honoured place in Toronto art history: *Monumenta* (1982), *Chromaliving* (1983), and the *New City of Sculpture* (1984). *Chromaliving* was the more exciting of the three, with more enduring consequences; a six person artists' collective centred upon figurative art at a time when it was decidedly uncool, and decidedly ignored by the galleries and critics.

Hume's display of incipient nostalgia (for the early '80s already?) always occurs when critics diagnose the health of galleries as being the health of Canadian contemporary art. Commercial galleries have never been an indication of aesthetic or artistic well-being, but of dominant tastes and styles. Galleries pay rent and overhead—therefore it does not require a business major to realize that the artists they select have to be

relatively popular, and this popularity is indicated by the sales receipts at the end of the day. An example of this is that one of the best forums for contemporary art, the Ydessa Gallery, closed because the market was so poor, not because the art available to the show was poor.

An artist whose situation illustrates the reason Roundup 88 ever happened is the talented Mitch Fenton. Fenton, 26, has been out of Ontario College of Art (OCA) for two years and within that time has supported himself by building maquettes for sculptors, and working as a technician at his alma matta. Fenton's witty and whimsical sculptures set up an excellent counterpoint to art's obsession with the latest intellectually top-heavy theory. The first piece dominates the floor of his studio: an oversized table made of Southern Ontario pine with seven equally oversized salmon made out of expanded steel covered in canvas. The illusion of fish swimming under a table is juxtaposed against their traditional placement—on top of the dinner table.

The homey feel of the table is suggestive of family, and the visual analogy created by the fish of returning home to spawn and create a family is clearly a bit at the current wave of marriage and family-oriented

mentality. Salmon return to spawn and die, people are increasingly returning to the familiarity and security of marriage and childbirth—yet most marriages die in divorce.

The second piece is a large dock, set on the floor, with a massive black dog sitting upon the edge and waiting for his ship to come in. It is obvious that the dog must be fairly anxious for he possesses an equally massive erection. (Perhaps he is waiting for Bill C-54 and all the attention his penis will receive.) The dialogue is not only political, it is also self-referential: those who push the boundaries of morality in their art are predominantly male. From Canadian experimental filmmaker Bruce Elder to performance artists such as Otto Muhl and G.G. Allin, it seems that it is always men and their penises which seek to push the boundaries. Elder masturbates on film, Otto Muhl pours food over his penis or films a chain gang of sodomy, and G.G. Allin places a microphone in an orifice that Mary Brown wouldn't appreciate. Fenton responds to this situation by giving experimental art yet another penis to play with.

The fact that Roundup 88 organizer Teresa Dobrowolska was able to corral 78 artists from across the

city is a testament to the vibrancy of the contemporary art scene in Toronto. None of the other events involved as many people; *Monumenta*, *Chromaliving*, *New City of Sculpture*, and even Montreal's *Aurora Borealis* (1985), entailed cliquish groups of like-minded young artists. Roundup's rejection of having a certain style or medium dictate the content of the show reflects the current plurality in art. Critics like movements to achieve cultural hegemony so they can either attach their names to it, or bash it all to hell; galleries like their piece of pie which always accompanies a popular movement; alternative spaces always pant for anything which means more grant money; and the public always seems to be the forgotten factor.

By skipping the arbitrators of taste, Roundup allows the public to become an active participant in the artistic dialogue. With the artists in their studios when you visit, it's as if each day is opening night and, happily enough, Christopher Hume is left at home communing with God until at least 'the early 1990s,' and John Bentley Mays is either: sniffing through the archival dust of museums; putting on his black turtle-neck to wing it to the latest Art Fair; or just sipping cappuccino in some hot Queen street gallery.



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