

Canadian art goes on the road

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In the world of art, the 1970s have yet to be named. The trends toward realism, or the return to the image, characterize many works by contemporary Canadian artists. However, the proliferation of former modes of the '50s and '60s (abstract expressionism, color-field, lyrical abstraction, hard-edge) continue into the '70s, particularly at the hands of artists whose reputations were established through works in these styles which reflect their individual vision and sensibility.

At the request of the department of external affairs, the Canada Council Art Bank has originated a major exhibition of contemporary Canadian painting which is being sent on tour to Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Western Europe. It is the first time an exhibition from Canada will travel so widely. Known as *Seven Canadian Painters* it comprises 26 paintings which range from the non-objective, through the abstract and the semi-abstract, to semi-realist modes of expression.

A selection of 13 paintings from the exhibition can now be seen at the Saldye Bronfman Centre in Montreal until Dec. 10 prior to its departure in the spring on the three-year tour. Each painting is hung so as to take on an added dimension by being in proximity to others with which it interacts environmentally.

Paterson Ewen's unique construction, *Forked Lightning* (1971), conveys the power and dramatic intensity of an electrical storm through the artist's personal use of materials: gouged and painted plywood, which retains its primitive rough quality, and appliqued angular streaks of metal lightning which crackle against a dark sky. Canvas clouds hover overhead. The minute landscape elements below suggest the vastness of space in contrast with our earthbound environment. Ewen, whose interests are also scientific, explores meteorological and cosmic events, the vigor of which are echoed in the gouged plywood. The sky and the space refer to the new landscape of the space age.

By contrast, Charles Gagnon's *Marker No. 3* (1973), with its subtly modulated grey tones, recalls the broad space of sky on a dreary winter day.

it evokes a sense of calm and contemplation; a kind of serenity prevails. The surface is articulated by subtle uncontrolled drips of paint, lending emphasis to the depth, the emptiness, the infinity of space beyond which engulfs the viewer. Hard-edged borders define the area. With an economy of means the artist has produced a work that holds its own next to the dramatic complexity of Ewen's unusual image of a storm to which it is in proximity.

Gershon Iskowitz, in *Seasons No. 2* (1975) also looks up and is inspired by the softly colored droplets that float above the earth, prismatically reflecting the colors of light from the sun. His lyrical abstractions suggest the desire to be free of earthbound cares as soaring high above the earth, we share the artist's experience of weightlessness. He utilizes all the ingredients of nature: color, space, light, atmosphere, and has said "my paintings are not abstract, they're very very much real. I see those things."

Space is also the concept with which Guido Molinari deals in his familiar language of stripe paintings. He expresses the dynamics of the relationship of color to plane, echoing the structure of the world which the individual continuously experiences in space and time. In *Vert-brun* (1976), the stripes have been widened to become shapes, the colors of which interact, pushing back and pulling forward and quietly eliminating the surface and actually creating space itself.

Claude Breeze's paintings explode next to Molinari's cool calculated statements. His "Canadian Atlas" series is the result of nine trips by car in 4 years from Vancouver to London, Ontario. In the series his highly charged landscapes convey, through the distortion of form and the vibrant use of color, the emotional excitement he derives from his experiences, rather than a naturalistic depiction of the places he saw.

An over-all grid is introduced in *Spacing No. 5* (1974-75) in an attempt to stabilize or bring order to an otherwise chaotic experience of nature. Strange forms float on top of and behind the grid which holds them in place. *Black Snake Line* (1974), but for a cursory acknowledgement of nature in some clumps of grass, looks like a tic tac toe game bent

by the chain lightning in another of Paterson Ewen's constructions, *City Storm with Chain Lightning* (1971) which hangs nearby. Breeze's work is expressive of all the excitement and liveliness that might accompany such an event. A curved stroke slashes its ways across the top, proclaiming the surface and the presence of the artist through his gestural act.

Ron Martin's all-over surface action paintings are part of what has been termed 'Body Art' because each work affirms his existence in the world at the moment of its creation. In *Bocour Green* (1971) by using dramatic swirling strokes of green - the brushstroke given definition by dipping in black - an overall surface of frantic activity proclaims the mood of the artist, the extent of his reach, and all the other particulars of his act.

John Meredith's huge triptych *Japan* (1972) stretches across one wall of a frequently used theatre lobby and reception area, the slashing, uncontrolled brushstrokes echoing the bustle of activity that takes place there. His strong sense of black and white contrasts are enlivened as his forms are translated into contrasting primary colors of red and yellow creating a great sense of energy and movement.

If this collection were to represent trends in Canadian painting in the '70s, giving examples of the various modes of expression with which artists are preoccupied, and not simply to reiterate the personal signatures of seven of its most accomplished artists, some acknowledgement would have to be made, and representation given to those artists who are working within the confines of illusionistically detailed realism, exploring and exploiting aspects of the phenomenal world, be their realism of the magical, high, super, hyper, or photo variety. It would add greater diversity to and constitute an appropriate closing quotation mark for this Canadian statement to international audiences.

The selections from *Seven Canadian Artists* can be seen in Montreal at the Saldye Bronfman Centre, 5170 Cote St. Catherine Rd. until Dec. 10.