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Sharon Reilly

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Robert Kell and the Art of the Winnipeg General Strike

Sharon Reilly

IN SEPTEMBER 1985 WINNIPEGERS had their first opportunity to view the work of Robert Kell, a Toronto artist who had devoted over a decade of his life to the creation of a series of paintings that commemorated the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. Sponsored by Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, the Manitoba Federation of Labour, and the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, the exhibit was opened in conjunction with Winnipeg's annual Labour Day Festival.¹ For the first time since beginning his "Winnipeg 1919" series in the early 1970s, Robert Kell briefly enjoyed the attention of public officials, labour leaders, and media representatives, and thousands of dollars worth of his paintings and posters were sold. The exhibit was a fitting culmination for the artist's work and one that represented a public recognition that, unfortunately for the artist, was a long time in coming.

Robert Kell's first note of recognition came in 1974 when Barry Lord identified him, along with a few others, as a contemporary Canadian artist engaged in the creation of "a people's art." Lord's *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward A People's Art* was published by the Toronto-based Canadian Liberation Movement (CLM). His controversial interpretation argued that Canadian art (like the Canadian economy) had long suffered under the successive influences of French, British and, more recently, American imperialist control. It called for the creation of "a people's art" that went beyond the recording of familiar places and personalities to the depiction of the working class and its struggles. It was through Barry Lord that, almost a decade later, I came to meet Robert Kell and later to organize the 1985

¹ Also seen in conjunction with Robert Kell's 1919 exhibit was a series of paintings entitled *Work Station* by Winnipeg artist Eleanor Bond.

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Labour Day exhibit of Kell's work in Winnipeg.

Born in 1935 into a Nova Scotian family temporarily living in Boston, Massachusetts, Robert Kell grew up in Halifax after the family's return in 1940. While in high school he attended evening art classes at the Nova Scotia College of Art. He later studied commerce at St. Mary's University, and during these years spent his summers getting to know Canada by travelling coast to coast on the trains working as a waiter. After university Kell took a job as an accountant and eventually moved to Montreal, where he married into a wealthy New Brunswick family. In 1961 Kell resumed his studies in fine arts, first as a part-time student at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia) and then on a scholarship as a summer student at Banff. Kell then went to obtain an honours diploma from the Montreal Museum's School of Fine Art and Design, where he studied with former Group of Seven member Arthur Lismer. It was during these years that Kell was first exposed to leftist artists working in different media who were attempting to integrate their politics with their art. Particularly influential among these people was a group at the National Film Board of Canada, notably Martin Duckworth, who later co-produced a number of political films including *As Friend and Foe*, a documentary on the Canadian labour movement. In Kell's own life, however, art and politics remained as separate entities. In 1966 he welcomed the opportunity presented by an inheritance bequeathed to his wife to travel abroad with her and the couple's two young children. Kell spent a year at the Contemporary Film School in London, England, where he was amazed to find filmmakers out in the streets recording political marches and demonstrations. Time spent the following year at the famous Atelier Hayten in Paris, studying graphic art, was dull by comparison, and Kell left the program to seek out artists he knew of in Paris, Stockholm, and London who were creating political art and holding exhibitions of their work on factory shop floors. Unfortunately, the artist's enthusiasm for these experiences was dimmed by the disintegration of his marriage. In 1970 the couple returned to Canada and Kell left Montreal to settle alone in Toronto.

Kell's return to Canada coincided with a growing nationalism that was experienced across the political spectrum from the still warm glow of Expo '67 and "Trudeaumania" to a vehement nationalistic anti-Americanism. Opposition to American military interference in Vietnam was at its height, both within the United States and beyond. On Canadian university campuses, students rallied against Canadian industries supporting the war industry and in opposition to American control of Canadian industries, educational institutions, and unions. At the same time, the struggle for "a Canadian culture" emerged among educators, writers, and others. Artists like Greg Curnoe produced strongly anti-American, nationalist art (for example, *Close The 49th Parallel*, and others, from *The True North Strong And Free* series, 1968). In 1971, the Canadian Artists Representation (CAR) was formed, with the purpose to organize and represent Canadian artists. Among a small but ac-

tive group of CAR members, who also were involved in the Canadian Liberation Movement, it was hoped that the new organization would promote artists' involvement in what they perceived as a "growing national liberation struggle."²

Finding himself in the midst of the political activity and nationalistic fervour of this Toronto-based group, and inspired by his experiences in England and Europe, Kell soon put his non-political artwork of the 1960s behind him. "During those early 1970 years of national fervour or spirit that existed in Toronto," Kell stated, "I became aware of: 1) a change in the content of Canadian painting, and 2) a change in my own attitude towards Canada vis-à-vis the United States, its culture, and its monopoly in this country."³ The artist appears to have been strongly influenced by the ideas presented in Barry Lord's writings. He became convinced that "art has been directed by a certain class, for a certain class" and that, as a result, "the art of the past is being mystified" and "we are being deprived of the history that belongs to us."⁴ It is "depressing for me," he commented, that as a result of this class bias of art "a great number of workers do not know or care about art. They don't give a shit about art really."⁵

In an attempt to help redress this situation, Kell decided to pursue an artistic theme that would help to correct the prevailing imbalance of Canadian art history and that would also attract the attention of Canadian workers. After attending a CLM sponsored series of lectures by Canadian labour historian Charles Lipton, he decided to concentrate his efforts on the theme of the Winnipeg General Strike. Using this "high water mark" in Canadian labour history, the artist hoped to produce not only a monument to the events of 1919, but also a body of work that would instill within the viewer a sense of ongoing struggle. Although one of the most prominent events in Canadian labour history, the Winnipeg General Strike, like most other aspects of Canadian working-class history, had never before been identified as a subject for artistic rendering. But to Kell, the six-week struggle, which involved some 30,000 workers and their families, and virtually shut down the city of Winnipeg, appeared as an ideal focus.

Kell spent the following months at the University of Toronto, and writing to the Provincial Archives of Manitoba and other sources, gathering visual material and other information about the strike. Unlike other historical researchers, he made a point of finding out what the weather was like on Bloody Saturday, "the day that they sent the Mounties in" because, he explained, "I wanted to know if there were shadows cast that day."⁶ Im-

² Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward A People's Art* (Toronto 1974), 215.

³ Robert Kell, "Artist's Statement," n.p., 1985, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

mersed in this material, Kell was hesitant to move beyond the research phase. "I found it very difficult," he explained, "to actually sit down and paint and formulate ideas, and found it much easier to do research, to look up these photographs, to have them copied, to make notes and to make notes about notes and so on."⁷

As a result, few paintings were completed through the mid-1970s. In an attempt to end this stagnation, the artist began to incorporate actual pieces of research material, segments of copies of archival photos, into his drawings. (See Illustration 1). This was not, says Kell, "because I couldn't draw things like the streetcar that was to be kicked over, but because I wanted a type of narrative that would move in and out of the present."⁸ The work proliferated and began to take on a Pop Art dimension and to flow in an unexpected direction. "The Winnipeg General Strike" emerged as both content and form, with the words being repeated again and again in dozens of drawings and acrylic paintings. (Illustration 2). Other media were explored as well, including ceramic pieces and quilts (Illustration 3) and needlework, which Kell designed and had others produce for him.

In many of these works images appear, usually from a photo of the strike leaders, taken shortly after their arrest, (Illustration 4 and cover photo), or of the well known street scenes of Bloody Saturday when the strikers pushed over a scab-operated streetcar and Royal Northwest Mounted Police broke up the demonstration by riding into the crowd on horseback, armed with pistols. (Illustration 5). For the most part, these works also feature the stencilled lettering of the words, "The Winnipeg General Strike" and the date, "1919." (Illustration 6 and 7). The continuous repetition of these images and words in painting after painting was deliberate, explains Kell. What was intended was an exploration of "variations on a theme." With form and content clearly established and conveniently combined, the artist was free to pursue his chosen theme, his interpretation of struggle, from a graphic perspective. As a result, what differs in these works is their presentation in terms of form and colour or, in the later black and white pieces (Illustration 8), in the pattern created by the positive and negative effects of the ink on the white ground. Most are arranged in a vertical or square format and size varies from lithographed 13" x 17" images to acrylic paintings of 4' x 6'.

Most striking in these works is the artist's use of colour (Illustration 9). Rather than utilize the symbolic meanings of various hues and shades, he deliberately used colours in a saturated form and in combinations intended to create the greatest sense of contrast - or conflict - possible. At times, wide bands of vivid primary colours appear, each jarringly juxtaposed against its complement - blues against oranges, reds against greens, yellows against purples, and so (Illustration 10). In other paintings, the artist began "with a

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

blue, and variations on the blue going right through the whole spectrum." The intended effect, says Kell, to create a sense of movement, of action or struggle, within each painting. In some of the works, lines appear that intersect and intersect again, sometimes forming squares and squares within squares, in order to draw the eye to various focal points and add to the sense of motion. In discussing one large scale painting (Illustration 11) of the strike leaders, which featured thick bands of reverberating colours, Kell commented that, upon completion, he set the piece on a wall where it faced him as he ate his meals, but "every night the things would be bouncing off the wall, it was so strong . . . I had to take it down."⁹

These large acrylic works were followed by a series of smaller watercolour paintings done in a similar manner, with a single basic image repeated again and again, using contrasting warm and cool colours (Illustration 12). The artist also produced a similar series of pen and ink drawings in which cross-hatching, scribbling, and bleeding effects were used to achieve a positive and negative effect and thereby a sense of motion. Kell likens the effect he has created in these works to music, and enjoys referring to the paintings as "visual songs." But these are not sweet, harmonious songs - they are more like explosions. The desired effect, says Kell, can be compared to that of "an orchestra, in which some members are playing down the scale and the other group is playing up at the same time."

Occasionally, Kell's paintings take on a narrative form as a result of the inclusion of photographic images or, sometimes, because the artist has chosen to recreate a scene from the strike. The intention here was to create "some sort of a classic form" and not to enter into story-telling, even though, Kell acknowledges, the latter is what people generally prefer to see. In one such painting (Illustration 11), a monumental Roman Gothic structure, complete with a series of two-storey high arch-ways running along both visible facades, dominates a threatening blue skyscape which spans the upper third of the piece. From this striking image of socio-economic power, armed Mounties come galloping, their ominous figures silhouetted against a pale ground. In the centre, dark smoke billows upward from the ill-fated streetcar - symbolizing the hoped for defeat of the bourgeoisie. To the side, engulfed in a shimmering light, the strike leaders stand on a raised platform addressing an attentive crowd.

Although the artist may never have intended to portray anything other than symbolic images in this painting, even he could not avoid the narrative when he finally viewed the scene of the events of Bloody Saturday at firsthand. "I was out in Winnipeg after working on (the painting above) four or five years. I walked around and I looked up, and there was my bloody building. I could not get over it - fantastic!"¹⁰ The building portrayed was,

⁹ *Transcript of Slide Presentation given by Robert Kell, 8 August 1985, Cape Breton, 2.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

in fact, an appropriate choice as a symbol of wealth and power, for it housed the western headquarters of the Royal Bank of Canada, and even today remains as a branch of the bank, situated between City Hall and the "bankers' corner" of Portage and Main. Long before his visit to Winnipeg, however, Kell became fearful that an unintended interpretation might be placed upon narrative pieces such as this, and retreated to his experiments with shape and colour. The artist, however, is not entirely unwilling to "paint for his audience." He candidly admitted that when one editor, who had expressed an interest in publishing some of his work, commented that "if you do black and white it is much better for us . . . because we can print the images cheaper," he undertook a whole series in black and white.

The strong graphic quality of Kell's artwork is typical of the 1960s and early 1970s - one thinks of the late Andy Warhol's use of repeated photographic images and other multiples, or of the repetition of numbers in the work of Jasper Johns. This style differs considerably from the more painterly approach adopted by many Canadian and American artists beginning in the mid-1970s and no doubt partly reflects Kell's early training.

Kell's approach also has been strongly influenced by the work of British-born Canadian artist, art historian, and critic Kenneth Coutts-Smith, who died of cancer in 1981. A Marxist, Coutts-Smith argued that the issue confronting artists is to "undermine the commodification of the art objects and demystify the ascription of meaning to them" by "returning both the content and the practice of art to social criticism and a commitment towards social change." Coutts-Smith hoped to realize this goal "by creating work that the art market would reject, but that would retain its value as artwork . . . through the content of the work, rather than through innovation in formal or stylistic terms."¹¹ Coutts-Smith's "Artexts" thus incorporated excerpts from the writings of Marxist art critics such as John Berger, and segments of his own writings.

Whatever Kell's intent, the value of repeating the same words again and again is open to question, especially for the uninformed viewer. The words "The Winnipeg General Strike 1919" simply do not have the strength or universality of the symbols used in the great political art-works of Picasso, Goya, Diego Rivera, or Kathy Kollwitz. Of course, few artists will ever achieve the heights of giants such as these. The truth is that good political art is difficult to make and harder still to sell. The twentieth century has been periods of strong political art in the 1920s and 1930s, and again in the 1960s, but this work has never enjoyed widespread recognition and its patrons have been middle class leftists, not factory workers.

Kell stands firmly by his decision to avoid the perceived pitfalls of the narrative form, despite its more popular appeal. This latter fact became,

¹¹ See Sara Diamond "Kenneth Coutts-Smith," a review of a retrospective exhibit at the Western Front Gallery, Vancouver, 5-28 September 1985, in *Vanguard* (Dec/Jan 1984/85).

perhaps, somewhat painfully evident when the Winnipeg exhibit in fall 1985 resulted in an impressive number of sales, but sales, primarily, of his more narrative works. Similarly, of two posters Kell had made of his paintings in a fund-raising effort the year before, the one featuring the arrested strike leaders was more eagerly sought after than the equally colourful rendering of "The Winnipeg General Strike 1919."

The artist's reticence regarding the narrative in art appears to be somewhat at odds with his desire to create art that is of interest to working people "because its subject matter is important to them." But it would be naive to suggest that the means to cultivating a healthy appreciation of art by working people rests with finding the "correct" artistic style. Clearly, much more is required before the average working person can be comfortable with "fine art," much less enthusiastic about it. And the task is too great for any given artist, or perhaps even the whole of the left arts community, successfully to tackle on its own. After spending more than ten years on the "1919" series, with only one major showing, several smaller exhibits in the Toronto area, and little financial gain, Robert Kell's early idealism has taken on a pragmatic edge. Indeed, more of the artist's energy in recent years has been spent trying to find an audience and financial support for his work than in painting. Following the Winnipeg Labour Day exhibit of his work, Kell found willing patrons in the exhibit's sponsors, and several of his finest pieces now hang in the halls of the Manitoba Legislative Building, the Manitoba Federation of Labour, and the Manitoba Government Employees Association. As well, the United Auto Workers of Canada purchased some \$2,000 worth of his posters. Unfortunately, support such as this is the exception rather than the rule.

The major obstacle he faces, says Kell, and facing others who wish to produce labour and worker-oriented art, is the lack of structured support for such work.¹² Instead of having to work as a substitute teacher in order to survive as a political painter, he argues, it should be possible for him to exist by working as an artist. Since the traditional wealthy patrons of the arts have little interest in worker-oriented art, it must be workers' organizations, namely, the trade unions, that provide this support. At present, however, labour's commitment to the arts is sporadic at best. No permanent structure exists within the Canadian labour movement to promote cultural programs or events. Instead, education staff (themselves often relatively new) take on cultural activities as time and budgets permit.

By contrast, Kell points out, unions in Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, and Great Britain have standing arts officers who are responsible for ongoing programs. Perhaps most remarkable among the achievements of these groups is Glasgow's 'Mayfest,' a major cultural event instituted in 1981 by the Scottish Trade Union Congress and a number of affiliated unions. One

¹² Interview with Robert Kell by Sharon Reilly, Toronto, 27 January 1987.

also thinks of the many achievements of 'Bread and Roses,' the outstanding cultural program of New York's District 1199 Hospital and Health Care Employees Union, directed by long time labour activist Moe Foner.

In Canada, efforts are more modest, but they are underway. The culturally-oriented Labour Day Festival, at which Kell's "1919" series was presented in Winnipeg, began as an annual event in 1983 and sprang from a 15-month long, cultural and educational program called "Concerning Work: Change in the Nature of the Work Process in Canada 1850 - 2000," sponsored by the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature with considerable support from the Province of Manitoba, the Manitoba Federation of Labour, and the Manitoba Government Employees Association. The project culminated in a national travelling exhibit which only this January completed its coast to coast tour. In Toronto, the first annual "Mayworks" cultural festival was held over a week-long period in 1986 and plans are underway for the current year's festivities. Encouraging though these developments are, it is clear that a great deal more support is needed from labour if the dreams of artists like Robert Kell are to become realities. In the past year, Kell has approached all provincial federations of labour, several union organizations, and a number of other groups in an unsuccessful search for a sponsor. During the summer of 1986, he produced a series of sketches featuring Toronto women's activist Maria Ociepka (1957 - 1985), founder of the Mothers' Action Group, in the hope that his work would be used in an Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) anti-poverty campaign. Much to the artist's chagrin, the campaign never materialized.

Ideally, Kell would like to produce a series of murals in labour centres and other sites across Canada, each focussing on the major themes of each region's particular labour history. One such mural, proposed to the president of St. Francis Xavier University in Cape Breton, would deal with the history of the co-operative movement in Nova Scotia. Thus far, however, the artist has met with little success in obtaining either the consent or the support necessary for such plans.

Kell compares the reluctance of labour to recognize the rights and needs of artists and to give them the support necessary to the public reaction to the move by teachers to unionize in the days when his father taught high school in Halifax. The general attitude they encountered, remembers Kell, was that teachers should be doing their job because they were dedicated, and not be demanding money and rights for their services. Today, he says, a similar attitude is held with regard to artists trying to create political work. But if such artists are to survive, Kell warns, then labour must take an active role in changing this reality.