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Exhibit Review: Dundas Street Haunts, East and West at the Art Gallery of Ontario

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Figure 1: Dundas Street Haunts, East and West, 1967-1968
Source: Art Gallery of Ontario N-12448 #1, Photo, Carlo Catenazzi

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at the Art Gallery of Ontario

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Scholars of urban history may not normally frequent the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) as a research institution, or, if there, may not consider a single painting as a primary source. The current exhibition, "Dundas Street Haunts, East and West," in the AGO's Canadian historical galleries may change that. In this one-painting installation, Curator Anna Hudson has brought a major work by Ontario painter Frederick Hagan (b. 1918) into focus, situating the canvas among historical photographs and an audio commentary by the artist, and demonstrating the richness of visual evidence and archival contextualization. The minimal size of the exhibition means that it has no catalogue and virtually no public profile, but may be an incidental pleasure for some gallery visitors during its run (April 25–Fall 2002).

Hagan is an established Toronto painter and printmaker whose works are well represented in the collection of the AGO and other major public galleries. Based for nearly all of his life in the city, Hagan taught printmaking for nearly four decades at the Ontario College of Art and Design. Hagan's subject matter has ranged from the tough urban experience of workers, to inhabited northern landscapes, to pure religious vision. His expressive, symbolic but always representational style has often seemed out of step with prevailing trends of abstract painting in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Some viewers have also perceived a peculiar difficulty with Hagan's mode of expression: his figures often appear ghoulish or tortured, in contrast to the usually placid or playful explanations that their creator may supply.

Circa 1967, when he conceived of "Dundas Street Haunts", Hagan felt a need to address his Toronto roots. In the catalogue to a 1976 retrospective exhibition he discusses the intensely personal nature of the painting: "More than four decades of experiences had been passed in Toronto, growing up near Dundas Street... The endless parade of changing experiences possible in the centre of a busy city added to the necessity of finding paths for expression."¹ Completed in 1967–68, the work is a monumental diptych (183 x 122 cm), custom-framed in rustic wood with its title carved along the bottom. The "East" panel, on the right-hand side, suggests a child's view of his neighbourhood through a handful of built landmarks and a tangle of family and community characters. The "West" panel, set around the AGO and the Ontario College of Art, concerns the artist's self-discovery as a young man, and is peopled by the artists, living and dead, who shaped Hagan's maturing style.

Hudson's installation must deal with a difficult gallery space, essentially a short corridor located at a crossroads between the popular Henry Moore Sculpture Centre and the Canadian Historical Galleries in one direction, and the contemporary galleries and the AGO Members' Lounge in the other. Potential viewers are inevitably on their way somewhere else, and must be persuaded to stop. Hudson has made a good attempt at arresting the spectator, placing Hagan's painting as the lone item on the south wall, facing the exit to the contemporary galleries. On the opposite wall, a long, tightly spaced row of archival photographs flanks the same exit. Hagan's recorded voice, low-key and discursive, is audible to any who pause, providing an invitation to stop and listen. Hudson's explanatory wall text is kept to a concise minimum, barely

stating her theme ("Hagan's painting reveals a personal connection of art and life in the city").

The twenty-four archival photographs, ranging in date from the 1930s to the 1970s, are drawn mainly from the collections of the City of Toronto Archives, with additional images supplied by the AGO Archives and the Audio Visual Centre of the Ontario College of Art and Design. It is fortunate that Dundas Street is so richly documented in official photography, in this instance particularly through the activities of the City of Toronto Department of Public Works, Housing Authority, and Planning Board. Hudson has chosen images which loosely mirror Hagan's painted landscape, providing a few common points of reference (All Saints' Church at Dundas and Sherbourne, the entrance to the AGO) but for the most part proceeding in an independent sequence from east to west.

Chronologically, the order of photographs is erratic, skipping back and forth between different decades. The result forms an interesting complement to Hagan's painting, which also plays freely with chronological sequence and reduces geography to a handful of personal and remembered landmarks. The photographic sequence perhaps emphasizes the disconnect between Hagan's East and West by including images of the central stretch of Dundas which Hagan excludes: the bright commercial signage of Yonge Street and the broad expanse of University Avenue are well documented in the photographs, but absent from Hagan's imaginary streetscape. Conversely, visual art looms large in Hagan's painted vision, and is much less evident in the photographs. There are some subtle connections: the self-portrait of a bandaged Van Gogh, perhaps the ultimate figure of the tormented artist, appears in the background of the "West" panel; while the chosen photograph of the AGO features the long lineup for admission to the Van Gogh exhibition of 1961.

Although the painting reflects a specific urban landscape, it is also deeply personal, and the viewer can find it difficult to navigate Hagan's iconography. This is where the audio recording is a tremendous help, as Hagan leads us through the sections of the painting and explains its imaginative landscape. A woman in green, we learn, is Hagan's wife Isabelle, whom he met at All Saints' Church. A grotesque skeletal figure in the "West" panel is the shade of Tom Thomson, his popular success still plaguing Hagan's mentor John Alfsen. Some prominently placed characters remain unsettling even with explanation, such as the contorted figure on stilts who represents Hagan's older brother at play, or the slouching, faceless nude who is Alfsen's model.

Hudson's exhibition reminds us that documentation can be vitally important to understanding certain works of art: personal iconography usually requires explanation, and a specific time and place, once gone, can be partially recaptured through archival records. While many viewers may find that Hagan's painted world remains unwelcoming, even with documentary explanation, this small attempt at exposition is both articulate and engaging.

Note

1. Grimsby Public Library & Art Gallery: *Hagan: The Mind and the Hand* (Toronto: Macdonald Downie, 1976): p. 68



Figure 2: *Dundas Street Haunts, East and West, 1967-1968*
Source: Art Gallery of Ontario N-12448 #2, Photo, Carlo Catenazzi