

The Heart of London

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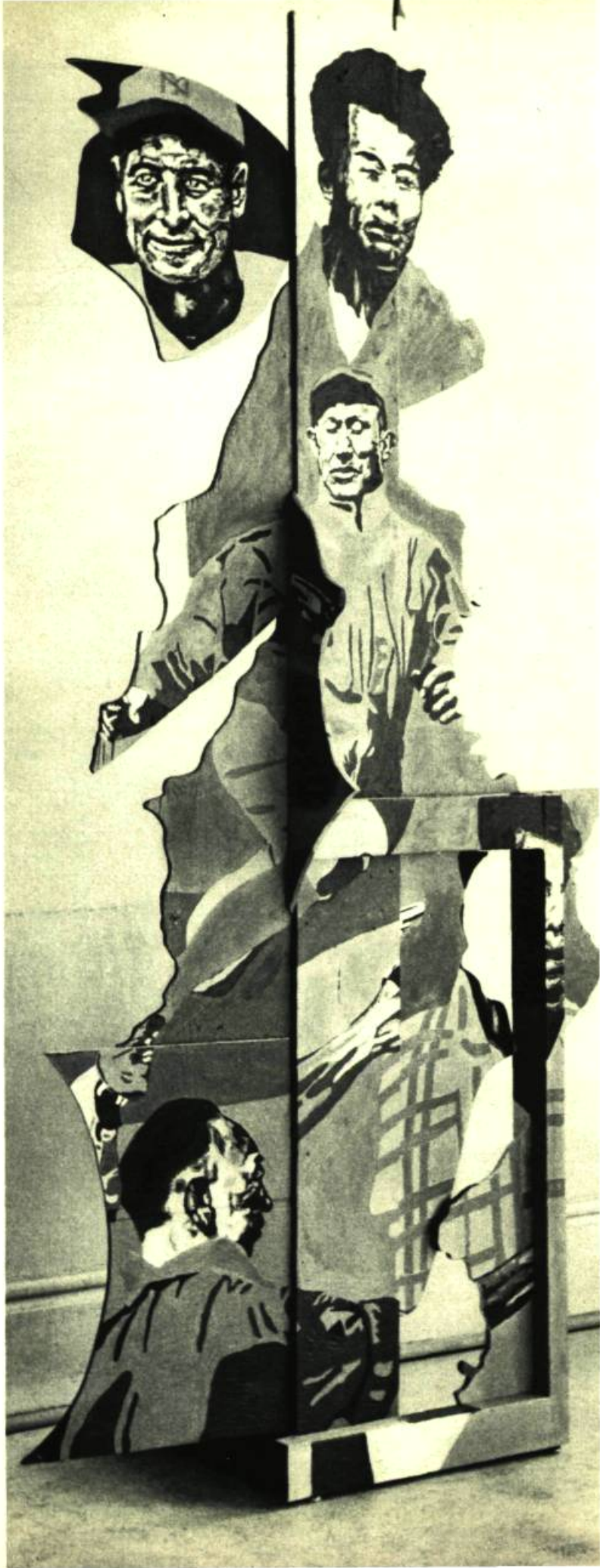
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THE HEART OF LONDON

by GEOFFREY JAMES

London, Ont., and its sleepy surroundings are rich in eccentrics. In St. Thomas, a farmer named Dan Patterson built a shrine out of Carnation milk containers long before Andy Warhol discovered the Campbell's soup can. In Goderich, another farmer named George Laithwaite executed stone and cement figures of the Queen of Sheba, Hitler and Mussolini. And in London itself, art cognoscenti are likely to be stopped by the wife of a local minister and shown her latest work in progress — perfect portrait miniatures executed, in the traditional manner, on ivory. Yet London does not seem to cherish its eccentrics, much less the colony of artists who manage to subsist there) and even an outsider can quickly sense the indifference, and sometimes the hostility, that the community displays towards its most creative element. Looking at old editorials in the Free Press (a journal that perfectly illustrates the dictum that no Canadian community is as dull as the newspaper it reads), one is left with the feeling that the mere wielding of a paint brush is somehow subversive. Nor is there much support from the London Public Library and Art Gallery, a staid institution whose purchasing committee seems to be guided by the motto "toujours la politesse." Yet surprisingly, the city's population of 215,000 harbours one of the most vigorous and interesting art scenes in Canada, a fact that was recognized recently by the National Gallery when it assembled *The Heart of London*, an



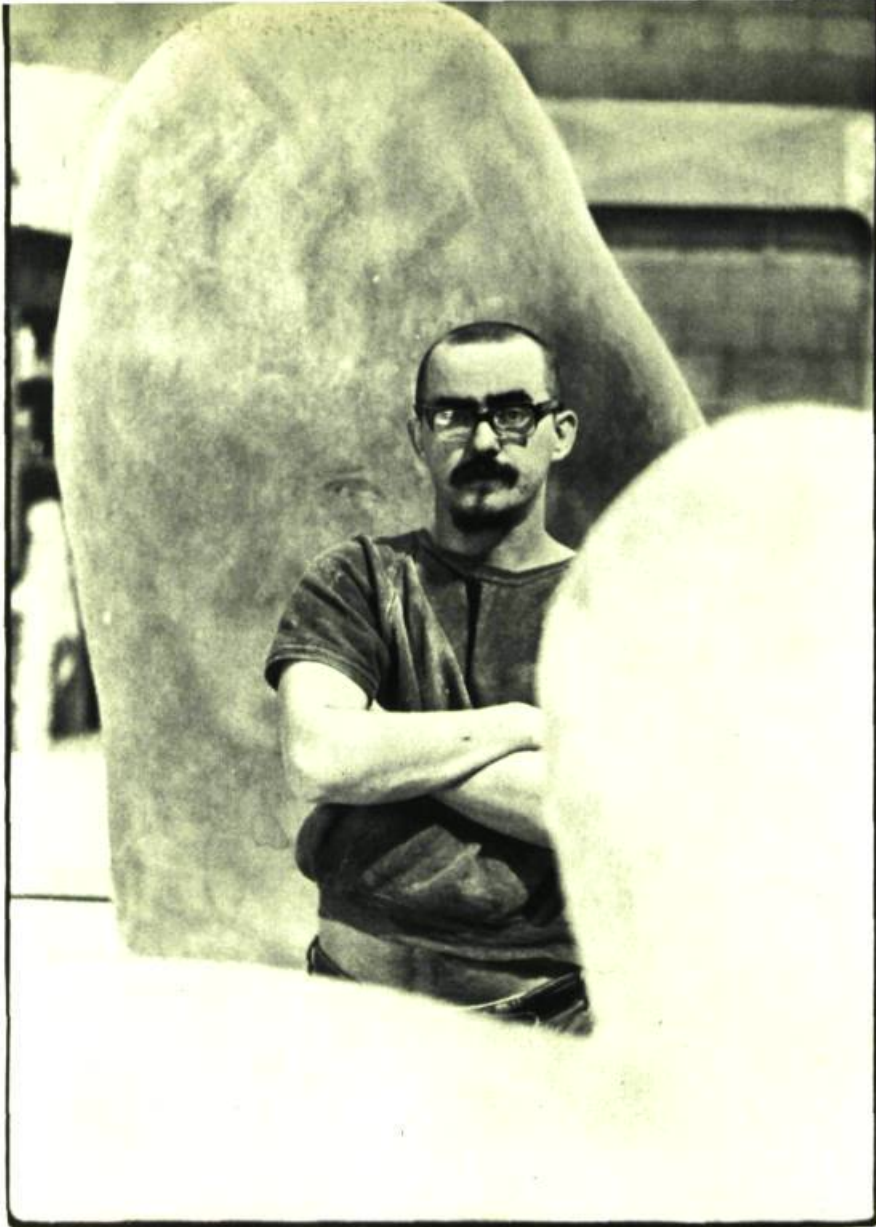
1. John Boyle. Indictment of Baseball. Huile sur toile. 92¾" x 43" x 23" (235,6 x 109,25 x 23,45 cm). Appartient à l'artiste.

2. WALTER REDINGER.

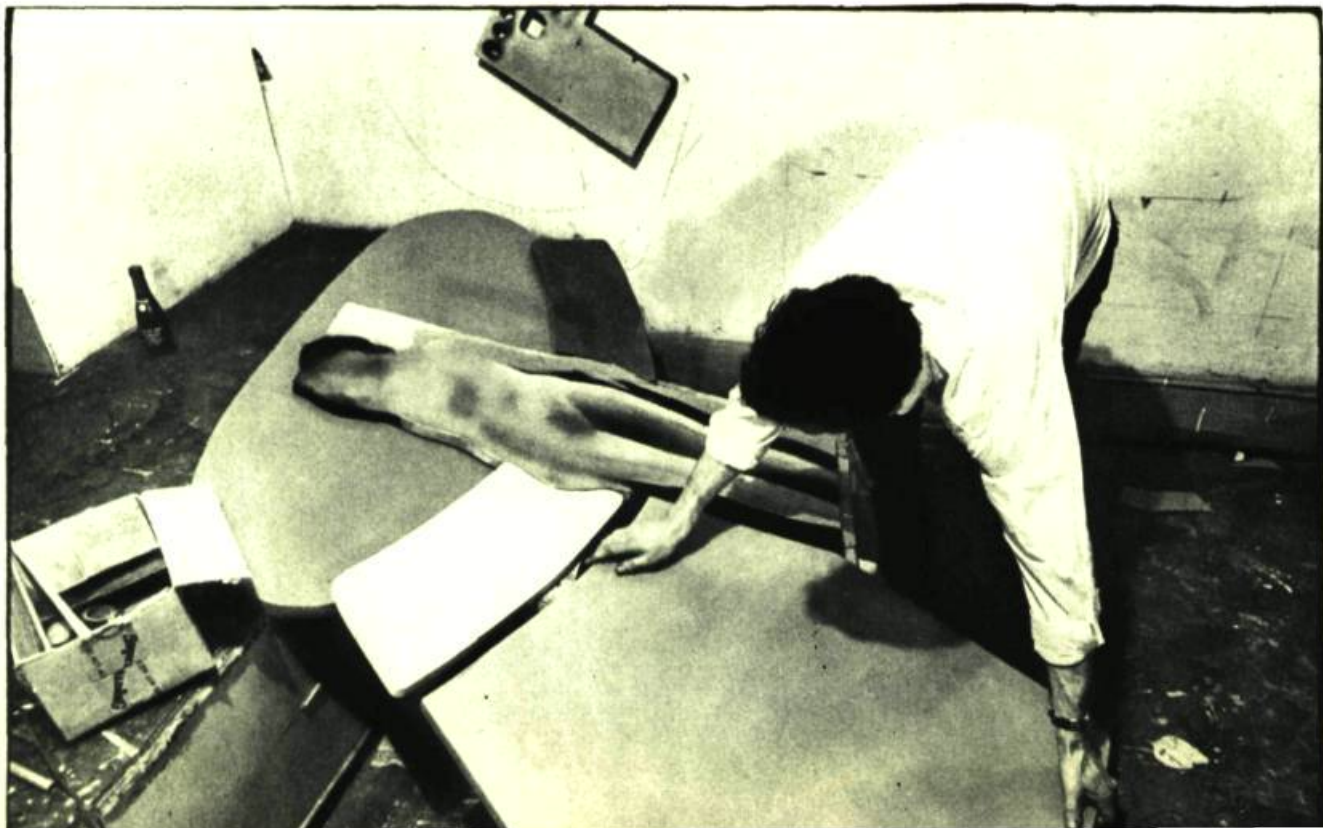
3. MURRAY FAVRO.

11-man show that will move from London itself to Kingston, Victoria, Edmonton and Charlottetown.

William Seitz of Brandeis University, who travelled across Canada in search of paintings for the National Gallery's Seventh Biennale, found that London is "a reminder that the increasing interdependence brought about by instant communication need not pulverize regional experience into international homogeneity." That is not to say that there is such a thing as a regional London "style", even though the artists form a tight little community and do many things together. On most Monday nights, for instance, at least



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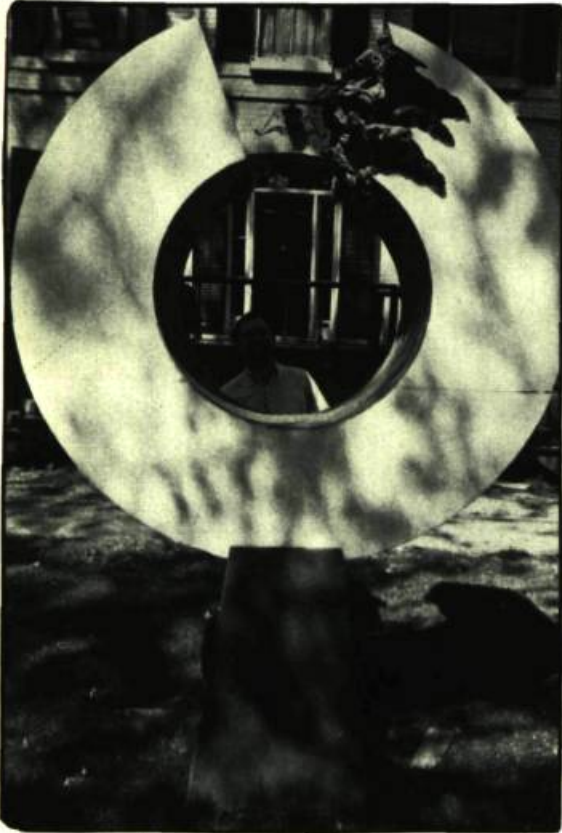
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half of those in the show get together in the Ladies & Escorts room of the York Hotel for the weekly outpourings of the London Nihilist Spasm Band. There, beneath rose-colored wall-paper, plastic ivy and a mural of Venice, Greg Curnoe the painter leads the band on his modified, electrified, multi-colored kazoo. The music, a high-decibel cousin of New Thing jazz, is pure

noise therapy, a loud raspberry blown right in London's face. Curnoe is also one of the many presidents of the Nihilist Party of London, "the only party that takes the word party seriously." Once a year its members meet for a picnic, complete with a tug o' war, races and speeches. Pierre Théberge, the assistant Curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery and the man responsible for the show, was at the last picnic "where I gave a speech in French that was well received — very well received — in the manner of Charles de Gaulle." Such Neo-Dada happenings apart, the artists also cooperate on the 20/20 Gallery, where, as Murray Favro puts it, "we don't make any money but it

is a place to show." The group can also find literary expression in a well-written mimeographed monthly, 20 Cents Magazine ("25 cents in Canada, free elsewhere.")

Despite their strong, almost defensive sense of community, the artists share little, if any, stylistic affinity. Three of those in the show are in their thirties, the rest are still in their twenties, and understandably it is the older men who lead. The undisputed guru of the group is Curnoe, a gentle anarchist who shows a real concern for his fellow artists. He founded the spasm band and the party, and seems to bear the brunt of the local Establishment's disdain. As can be seen in the show, Curnoe's work has been following



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three directions. As a collage-maker, he uses the detritus of London — bar bills, bus tickets, a voting ballot for the Huron Diocesan Bishop election — within frames shaped like a human face. As a painter, Curnoe employs a dead-pan Pop approach, frequently embellishing his paintings canvases with written references to London, his friends and his hobbies. (He is a boxing fan and a member of the Wingfoot Lighter-than-Air Society, a group devoted to the delights of the blimp and the dirigible.) More recently, Curnoe has been doing "word-paintings" in which he simply uses stencilled letters on a colored canvas to describe his feelings or a landscape. At a recent show in Edinburgh, his word-paintings were well received simply as handsome objects. Curnoe would prefer them to be read.

Like Curnoe, Jack Chambers is a London native, although he spends much of his time in Spain. In the homes of many of the artists, one comes across Chambers' marvellous drawings, small understated landscapes using a delicate pointilliste pencil technique with no discernible



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4. ED ZELENAK.

5. TONY URQUHART.

6. Tony Urquhart. Opening Box Rococo. 1968. Acrylique et bois. 20" x 11" x 10" (50,85 x 28 x 25,45 cm).

7. RON MARTIN.

8. GREG CURNOE.

9. JOHN CHAMBERS.



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line at all. In the show, Chambers has moved on from his nostalgic, neo-Edwardian sepia paintings to silver negative-positive canvases that resemble huge daguerreotypes. The show also includes *The Hart of London*, an oil with a series of pencil drawings down one side. Based, like so many of Chambers' paintings, on photographs, the work evokes the capture of a hart that strayed into London from the woods. Two women point, a man runs with a rope — simple actions, yet the painting is haunting, allegorical and faintly disturbing. Chambers, like many artists, has recently been experimenting with film, and has made a movie shot from a fixed position in his back yard, exposing a few feet every day to show the constantly changing environment. Curnoe wants to make a film about Chambers. "I'm going to shoot him in his studio from across the street," says Curnoe. "He will come across as a very shadowy figure. Sometimes I may shoot through the window when he isn't there at all."

Tony Urquhart, the third of the 30-year-olds, is a teacher at the University of Western Ontario, and for years made a comfortable living painting lyrical landscapes. His card index of sales has shrunk in recent years as he changed first to large, menacing canvases and then to what he calls "three-dimensional paintings." These last are black objects — black in every sense of the word. *Nostalgia Toy The Black Game*, is an acrylic boulder studded with nails and covered with tiny war images; *Two Hills 1966* has the same power to repel, being a black column, the back of which has a pebbly, post-nuclear texture.

The younger artists are an invigorating mixture of whimsy, eclecticism and talent. John Boyle, the only self-taught painter in the group, loads his cutout, free-standing figures with paint — raw, unprocessed Pop. Murray Favro, the quiet Londoner, is an inveterate tinkerer. For the past three years he has been building a half-size F-86 Sabrejet, a childhood passion that he has never lost. In the show he exhibits the electric guitars that he makes for the spasm band, as well as *Clunk* and *Sproing*, two paintings on shaped masonite that look like a

Pop-Art aerodynamics lesson. "They are funny to look at," says Favro, "but they are from a dream I had after studying physics." Bev Kelly, a Westerner who has since returned to the Prairies, constructs whimsical windows, complete with frames, blinds and, of course, the view. Ron Martin, the most eclectic of the group, now seems to be faintly Stella-struck. A talented colorist, he is working on triangular color-field experiments, which, for purely metaphysical reasons, he paints in pairs.

London's sculptors also come in pairs. David and Royden Rabinowitch are 25-year-old refugees from a Toronto suburb, attracted to the city by studios that cost as little as \$30 a month. David is represented by a single piece in the show, a large, anonymous metal tank with rounded edges — a completely ambiguous construction that teasingly reminded some of his fellow artists of a giant electrical appliance of some sort. Royden also uses metal, though he has it manufactured into elegant, tensile shapes. Like most of the London artists, the Rabinowitch brothers have a galvanic energy; after the opening of the show, the pair headed to the University of Waterloo where they had been commissioned to build a magnificently snowless pile of 2,500 snow linked snow fences topped by a metal Möbius strip. Walter Redinger and Ed Zelenak work as a pair, though they are moving in different directions. The two men and their wives help to

finance their monumental constructions by farming tobacco, and have built, their own back-to-back, 1,600 square-ft. studios with attached apartments in the middle of a West Lorne wood. Both work with a ferocious energy, Redinger on his overtly sexual epoxy and fibreglass forms, Zelenak on huge plywood primary structures. Slightly apart from the other Londoners, the two sculptors have an almost obsessive preoccupation with the passing of time and the need to constantly create and discard. "We have the feeling we are living on borrowed time," says Redinger, who like Zelenak, is 28.

Curnoe and many of the other echo that feeling. Most of the London artists say the same thing: that the day of the painter who can make a living simply by painting is almost over. Some survive by teaching, and all but one received Canada Council grants last year. Certainly there is little chance of London itself will ever be able to support the group financially — the city is reputed to have 200 millionaires, but few give the local artists so much as a glance. It is unfortunate, too, that *The Heart of London* will not be shown in any of Canada's major centers. For those who miss the exhibition, however, an excellent surrogate is the catalogue, made up to look like a comic book and succeeding to some extent in capturing the extraordinary exuberance and enthusiasm of 11 artists in an inhospitable environment.

Ron Martin. *Conclusion and Transfer Print*. 1968. Encre à tampon sur papier. Assemblage jumelé. Chaque élément: 31 1/2" x 26 1/2" (80 x 67,35 cm). Appartient à l'artiste.

