

A Glance at Art in Toronto

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A GLANCE AT ART IN TORONTO

By Roald NASGAARD

In six short articles discussing, at most, some twenty artists, this issue of *Vie des Arts* can hardly claim to give comprehensive coverage to art in Toronto. That would be too formidable a task. Even where individual writers have attempted to range relatively widely across their respective subjects, they have found it more advisable to select according to some preconceived theme rather than risk the danger of merely making inventories. There will consequently be artists and areas of work, not discussed within the following pages, whose contribution to Toronto's artistic life is at least as important, if not more important than many others who are. I think it more useful, therefore, to read the present issue, not so much for who is in and for who is left out, but as a series of reports on current artistic activity in Toronto which attempt to convey something of the city's variety and its vitality.

The apparent need to introduce the issue with a disclaimer points to the difficulty of coming to terms with just what is the art of the city which believes itself, and no doubt is, the most important artistic centre in Canada. From Ontario's contribution to *Mosaicart* during the Olympics, one might suppose art in Toronto to be essentially abstract, as well as lyrical expressionist in accordance with Barrie Hale's definition of the "Toronto look" of the 1960s. *Forum 76*, at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, shortly later, however, presented a much more complex picture. Though repeating a number of artists from *Mosaicart*, *Forum 76* also added work not only by as diverse Torontonians as Michael Berman, Ian Carr-Harris, Louis de Niverville, General Idea, Michael Snow, and Colette Whiten; but also by such dissimilar non-resident artists as Paterson Ewen, Murray Favro, John Boyle and Greg Curnø who are equally identified with Toronto insofar as they primarily exhibit there.

What it adds up to is a mixed bag indeed, the heterogeneous aesthetic content of which is only further complicated by a gamut of other divergent points of view affecting the work, ranging from extreme regionalist and nationalist isolationism to a yearning for international dialogue and recognition, sought by keeping second studios in New York, or better yet, moving there. The diversification is further manifested by surveying the respective wares of the commercial or parallel galleries in Toronto whether they be David Mirvish or Sable-Castelli, Carmen Lamanna or Isaacs, Aggregation, A Space, C.E.A.C., ACT, etc., etc. Heterogeneity does not, of course, imply universal acceptance by all parties. Quite the contrary, battle lines can be sharply drawn.

But to describe the untidiness of the situation in Toronto is perhaps no more than to reiterate the problem of every large metropolitan centre in the western world, where since the beginning of the seventies a state of critical confusion has prevailed because a plurality of options has replaced the greater security of a single dominant thrust. Even so, I think it could be argued that the difficulty of getting a clear focus on Toronto has some deeper causes which are of a specific local kind. On the one hand, it is difficult to isolate in the history of art in Toronto any strong and continuous tradition, and on the

other, Toronto art has always been produced and patronized in a relatively uninformed critical atmosphere.

Not so long ago John Russell in the *New York Times* commented on how the older generation of artists in New York were making such strong new showings as to quite overshadow the exhibitions of their younger colleagues. In Toronto the situation would seem somewhat the reverse. There are major figures, Michael Snow or Jack Bush for example, who are featured here in separate articles, whose new work is awaited with considerable anticipation; or such solid workers as Gershon Iskowitz who are dependably productive. But otherwise the promise of Toronto's older generations, the Painters Eleven and their immediate adherents, is less certainly fulfilled. They were Toronto's first abstract painters and as a group have been credited with providing Canada with its third landmark period of art (succeeding the group of Seven and Les Automatistes). And it would be to falsify history to belittle the heroic stature of their achievement. Nevertheless their momentum seems to have run down all too quickly, and it is difficult to deny disappointment at the limitations of their legacy. The reputation of both Bush and Snow rests on work produced subsequent to their immediate affiliations with Painters Eleven, and unquestionably the current excitement in Toronto art is generated by artists under thirty-five. As a younger painter recently quipped to me about being an artist in Toronto: "There's lots of room at the top."

Nor does one readily discover among younger artists in Toronto, even in those painters who can be seen as perpetuating the lyrical expressionist "Toronto look", any particular sense either of debt to, or rebellion against their immediate teachers in the older generation. The latter may have taught them how to behave like artists, but about art they claim to have learned elsewhere, across the spectrum of current international art, or from the longer twentieth century tradition.

In the long run, a greater sense of historical coherence with Toronto art may well be discernible. But it could never attain the clarity that it does in Montreal where, without oversimplification, it is possible to trace out an internal organic development over the last three decades against which more recent activity can be measured. In Toronto, on the contrary, if a local movement has established itself with some strength, its legacy has tended to be short-lived and winds of change, especially from the south, have tended to deflect it beyond recognition.

In so far as this is true, Toronto has remained persistently provincial. It has been continually difficult for any "style" to strike strong, self-sustaining local roots because it has usually been adopted from outside at a relatively fully developed stage. Toronto artists, without having the understanding derived from participating in the formative steps of the imported style, have been without the preconditions to develop it meaningfully in new directions, except to fuss it up. Whether we like it or not, and though we may acknowledge it as a false premise to depend too much in one's art on external models, it is nevertheless what Toronto artists have done and perhaps inevitably had to do. Is there any other way of explaining the range of eclecticism in Toronto art of the 50s and 60s and the curious emptiness at the core of their work despite amazing technical virtuosity?

There is surely some validity to such an analysis. Yet on the whole how much do we really know about the art of those preceding decades? And that points to the second problem in focusing on Toronto art: the avoidance

over the years of seriously coming to terms with it critically.

Is it not a little disgraceful that both Bush and Snow have received more informed attention outside Canada than within? And yet how symptomatic that is of Toronto's hesitancy to really look closely at what the art itself has to say. It is easier to deal with the peripheral data, especially biography. Even the best opportunities are missed. When the time came to establish the proper grounding for the study of Toronto painting in the exhibition *Toronto Painting 1953-1965*, the organizers of the exhibition opted, in the catalogue, for a narrative chronicle devoid of art critical or art historical analysis. The oversight was of no slight importance. Because no historical context was explored, no visual analysis performed, no standards set, licence was again given to all those little surveys and retrospectives which have followed and which persist in perpetuating a tradition of promoting the artist as friend, or the artist as personality (often with his own collaboration) when what we so badly need is dispassionate and informed consideration of the work, its historical context, its sources, its specific character and meaning.

My tone is becoming increasingly crotchety. But in the light of the amount of art which Toronto produces or which otherwise passes through its galleries, we really must do better. The newspapers must rise above mere reportage in which all things are equal, and take an informed stand, whether or not it is one we individually will agree with. The magazines, glossy or little, must become less indulgent and less self-indulgent, and intervene more provocatively into daily artistic discussion.

The arts in Toronto in the second half of the seventies are nevertheless thriving. The atmosphere is more relaxed than it was formerly. With no apparent dominant thrust shaping new directions, there is more time to explore what has preceded and what goes on around one. It is less significant to be first, or to be a star at 30. It is a mark of when an artist matured if he continues to harp on that edge of originality in his newest work. To the younger artist that component of tradition which dominates even the most important new innovative work also counts for something. It is the basis, after all, on which studiously to establish the grounded-work for what should be a long evolving and fertile career. There is no shortage of optimism in Toronto, but how productive will be the promises of the generation to which this issue is primarily devoted? We, and the artists, will know that only from the work they produce.

RECENT SCULPTURE IN TORONTO

By Walter KLEPAC

Sculpture — or, to speak more accurately, three dimensional art in general — currently enjoys a vigorous and productive existence in Toronto, particularly among those artists who have come onto the scene within the past five to ten years. Paradoxically enough, this recent upsurge in vitality, wide-ranging diversity and, in a few cases, even genuine originality on the part of certain Toronto artists in the area of sculpture occurs at a time when many artists in other major art centres, including that of New York, have experienced an enervating loss of