

La réalité du réalisme japonais What's Real About Japanese Realism?

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[See table of contents](#)

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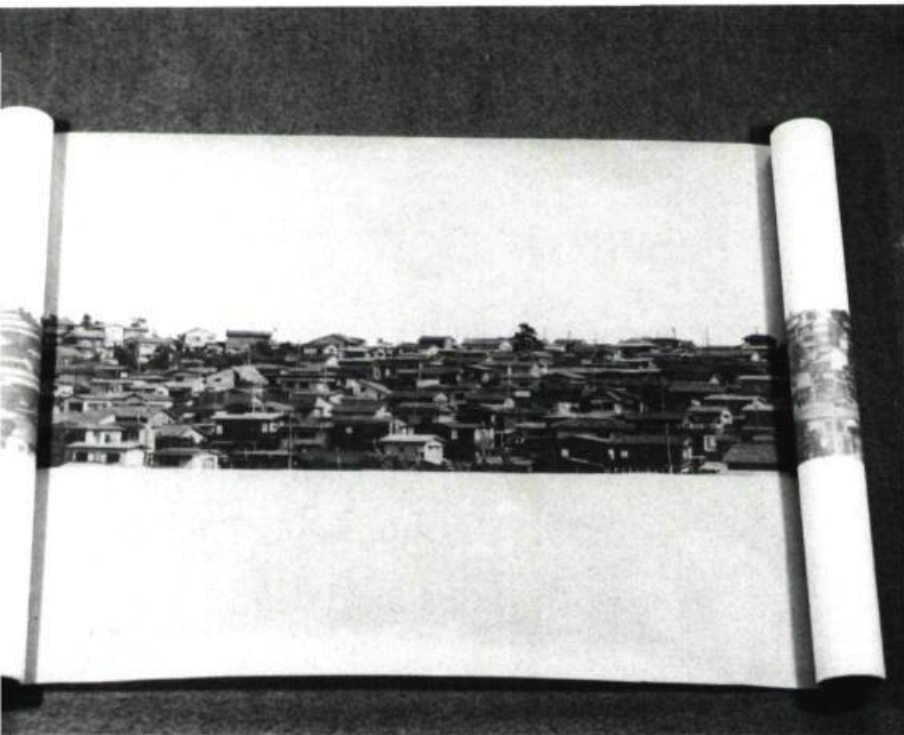
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LA RÉALITÉ DU RÉALISME JAPONAIS

Karl MacKeeman



1. Gô SHIGI
Japanese Housing, 1976.
Sérigraphie sur papier;
45 cm x 2 m.

L'art, tout comme le temps, ne connaît pas de frontière. Au Canada, un artiste né à Wolfville, en Nouvelle-Écosse, peint une série de grandes toiles. Leur sujet, les vagues. Des milliers de kilomètres plus loin, un autre artiste, son cadet de huit ans, exécute également de grands tableaux qui représentent le même sujet. Tokrijii Azechi n'a vraisemblablement jamais vu d'œuvre de James B. Spencer. Il faut admettre que les artistes qui se trouvent à l'avant-garde d'un mouvement quelconque produisent souvent des peintures qui se ressemblent. Pourtant, ils sont entièrement indépendants l'un de l'autre.

Si l'on veut étudier toute innovation particulière ou toute motivation en peinture, on ne devrait pas limiter son examen à ce qui se produit à l'intérieur des frontières d'un pays. La photographie a influen-

cé de manière importante le soi-disant hyperréalisme, mis en valeur dans notre pays par l'œuvre de Mary Pratt, de James B. Spencer, de Jack Chambers et de Ken Danby. Peut-être s'aveugle-t-on grandement en adoptant une attitude défensive et naturaliste au sujet de notre art. Ce faisant, nous le soustrayons à la critique ou empêchons sa reconnaissance par le monde en général. Une revue d'art internationale pourrait difficilement s'établir au Canada. Notre nationalisme devrait grandir naturellement et non pas de manière étrangement gênée comme c'est le cas depuis quelques années. A la suite d'une confrontation avec certains artistes montréalais au cours d'une rencontre annuelle de critiques d'art de différents pays, John Coplans, historien d'art bien connu, critique et écrivain, me faisait part des conséquences du nationalisme canadien sur la peinture. Il disait: «C'est à ceux qui occupent la scène canadienne de décider de la nature de son avenir, de son art, de la façon dont l'art jouera un rôle au Canada et de l'importance de ces idées pour le reste du monde.»

Il serait intéressant pour nous de comparer l'œuvre d'un artiste canadien avec celle de divers peintres de nationalités autres. Enfin, j'essaie peut-être en ce moment de justifier mon désir d'écrire sur le réalisme japonais et sur un certain artiste de ce pays. Je fais face à un problème semblable à celui d'un écrivain et critique d'art avec qui je parlais dernièrement à Charlottetown. Il s'exprimait ainsi: «Bon Dieu! que j'aimerais écrire un compte rendu sur quelques excellents jeunes poètes jamaïquains, mais qui, au Canada, le publierait?» En général, l'attitude, dans notre pays, est aussi provinciale que l'est la brillante arrogance de Toronto.

Si l'on regarde une peinture de Kaoru Ueda, un artiste de Tokyo, l'on se rend compte qu'en ce qui concerne la manipulation des surfaces réfléchies et semi-transparentes et le sujet, la composition se compare à l'œuvre de l'artiste de Terre-Neuve, Mary Pratt. Le sujet, un œuf cassé, se rapproche d'assez près de ses études de cuisine en acrylique.

Le *réalisme* est, par nature, vraiment étranger à l'art japonais pour lequel ce terme injustifié mais souvent utilisé possède une autre signification. Il exista, au 18^e siècle, une école de *miniaturistes* qui reproduisaient souvent des insectes de manière à faire illusion. Pourtant, à Londres et à Paris, au 19^e siècle, l'art japonais exerça une influence des plus fortes sur certains mouvements artistiques modernes. Il a conduit à la peinture non figurative. Depuis la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, le Japon a connu une foule d'influences artistiques qui provenaient surtout de la peinture abstraite et surréaliste européenne.

Né à Tokyo, Go Shigi, artiste de trente-quatre ans, appartient à un mouvement japonais qui tend vers le réalisme photographique. Cependant, son approche conserve certains éléments particuliers à sa culture. Contrairement aux œuvres de Konzo Mio ou Hideo Mori, dans lesquelles un élément fantaisiste s'ajoute au réalisme, les peintures de Shigi conservent une croyance dans la matérialité de la photographie. Il a déjà déclaré: «Peu d'entre nous se demandent si l'image photographiée est vraie ou non, et pourtant il existe une différence absolue dans la signification du contenu entre la photographie d'un véritable paysage et celle d'un paysage imaginaire mais dessiné de manière réaliste comme une photographie. J'ai tenté de critiquer ce caractère fictif de la photographie.»

Au Canada, on a découvert les peintures de Go Shigi pour la première fois, lors du 9e Festival d'Art Japonais, qui s'est tenu à Montréal et à Vancouver, et où il exposait avec plusieurs autres jeunes artistes de son pays. Le réalisme, au sens de prise de conscience de la réalité naturelle, fait partie du mode de vie japonais. Shigi parle de voir son sujet comme le fait un appareil photographique, «sans illusion». Comme un mirage et une caméra. Son œuvre exploite les différences rarement perçues de ce médium. Dans le réalisme photographique américain et canadien, il y a une tentative délibérée de déshumaniser l'action de peindre. Les artistes tentent chacun à leur façon de combler le désir exprimé par Andy Warhol lorsqu'il dit: «Je veux devenir une machine». Cependant, lorsqu'une image est projetée devant l'œil elle conserve toujours l'élément humain du choix. On a pu constater en partie ce phénomène avec la télévision où la manipulation n'est pas mise en question. Nous croyons ce que nous voyons et ne nous rendons pas totalement compte que la caméra est un instrument manipulé par un humain. Comme le fusil, elle ne choisit pas son sujet. Voilà l'aspect humain de la vision qui s'offre à nos yeux. J'ai déjà cru que la caméra pouvait enregistrer la réalité. Tout jeune, j'ai tenté sans succès de le faire. La *Chaise électrique* de Warhol est la reproduction mécanique d'une machine de mort construite par l'homme. Shigi ne s'intéresse pas à projeter une image qui va au-delà de ce que l'on voit. Il enregistre les éléments immobiles et invariables de notre environnement. Son sujet a le moins possible de contenu émotif. C'est là un environnement urbain familier. Il n'est ni critiqué ni loué, et son existence est uniquement enregistrée parce qu'il fait partie de notre habitation urbaine sur cette planète. Ce que cela révèle? Que ce n'est point le peintre qui est antihumain, ni sa création ni celle de quelque individu que ce soit. Le monde de l'environnement créé par l'homme se conforme aux éléments enseignés par la nature. Ainsi, l'œuvre de Go Shigi intitulée *Housing-D, 74-2* présente les cellules à l'intérieur d'une habitation humaine complexe et interdépendante comme étant modulaires, sinon aussi parfaites, au point de vue architectural, que les alvéoles d'un millier d'abeilles travailleuses. Les artistes ne voient pas la nécessité de la couleur dans la plupart de ces œuvres. En général, elles sont sans couleur à nos yeux. Nos villes nous apparaissent tout aussi grises et incolores. Je me souviens, quittant le métro de New-York, d'avoir émergé de la terre pour apercevoir pour la première fois la pierre grise de Wall Street. Non

seulement Tokyo est une ville plus grande que toute autre en Amérique du Nord et en Europe mais de plus l'espace vital y est beaucoup plus restreint. L'artiste est un être urbain; il enregistre ce qu'il y trouve et qui pourtant, demeure gris et invisible à nos yeux. Les citadins recherchent la beauté et une signification dans les arts. Ils la recherchent dans des vitrines de musée ou au théâtre. A Tokyo, dans une foule de millions d'individus qui avancent comme des fourmis vers le métro à l'heure d'affluence, chacun replié sur soi, une personne qui s'arrête pour regarder autour d'elle est renversée par la foule. A New-York, Londres, Montréal ou Tokyo, seul le touriste lève la tête. Seul l'étranger lève la tête pour regarder autour de lui. De la même façon, l'artiste fournit cette fonction. Une toute petite cuisine, voilà le sujet d'une peinture de Go Shigi intitulée *A Kitchen* et exécutée en 1975. Elle représente un centre d'activité humaine à l'intérieur d'un appartement multiplié cent fois, peut-être davantage, dans une seule structure extérieure. Pourtant, chacun reconnaît sa propre porte.

L'artiste fait partie de ce monde tout en se tenant à l'écart. Il peint des images qui ressemblent par certains côtés à des photographies, et puis ces peintures sont agrandies suivant la taille de la toile peinte. Côte à côte, les deux peuvent être comparées à l'image originale. La copie, dont la surface et la couleur varient peut-être sensiblement de la peinture sur la toile, existe comme une sorte de paradoxe. La photo provient de l'œuvre peinte et non du sujet réel.

(Traduction Marie-Sylvie Fortier-Rolland)

English Original Text, p. 90



2. *Die Japanischen Wohnungen*, 1976.
Sérigraphie sur papier;
25 cm 5 x 31,5.



its perfection, however great it may be, but from the change in the values whose symbol it was, through the meaning given to it by man in the different periods of his social life.

"Every survey is directed by values: it is not the result of enumeration, but of filtration", that is, of the perception we have to-day of a reality of which only a few shreds, sometimes debris, remain.

The *Trésors des fabriques du diocèse de Joliette* exhibition, as it was presented to the public from January 15 to March 15, 1978, could have created a false impression: from seeing the silver and the gold glow, the wood taking shape under the sculptor's skilful hand, the photographs lining up in impeccable order as in a family album, one might believe that all this heritage has been carefully preserved. It is true that in some places particular care is taken of it; such is unfortunately not the case in general. Dispersal, frittering away, hiding in corners as if to forget bad memories of the cumbersome dead make us realize that a similar exhibition held five years later would have been deprived of one or other of its photographs or of its most important pieces of goldsmith's work. During the two years it took to complete this inventory, two rare articles disappeared: one of the two ampulla by François Ranvozyé, indexed at Saint-Roch in January 1975, and a chalice by Paul Morand identified at Saint-Lin in February 1975 could not be found so that they might be shown at the exhibition. Also an enamelled holy-water basin disappeared from Saint-Paul.

Diocesan authorities and the government must certainly be urged to pay immediate attention to putting in a safe place what appears in the Regional Inventory, once it has been completed. The Cultural Property Commission pays only too little attention to inventories of movable objects and to their classification. It is necessary, as soon as possible, to draw up the inventory of all dioceses: at Three Rivers, for instance, almost nothing has been done in spite of the wealth and importance of the history of this region of Quebec. In the diocese of Joliette, it would be necessary to put safely away everything that appears in the Inventory which is not in current use. Besides, a periodical census ought to make possible the assurance that the objects are still preserved in the place where they were found. Incidentally, a descriptive catalogue containing an analysis, a photographic illustration and a graphic documentation for each of the articles in the inventory will be published soon.

This important body of work is urgent. The heritage of the productions of the mind is the essential condition of a people's survival. If we do not want to disappear as a society, we must examine tradition, identify our roots and take up in the face of to-day's events the path that alone can allow us to define the meaning of the length of an effort of civilization that is not limited only to the arts but which has succeeded in producing a synthesis of the values that give Quebec a unique identity.

1. Saint-Jacques-de-l'Achigan, burned down in 1914; Saint-Esprit: church demolished in 1901, burned down in 1931; Saint-Roch-de-l'Achigan, burned down in 1958.
2. The arm-rest of Saint-Paul is preserved at the Joliette Art Museum; Lavaltrie's is used as winter altar in the sacristy of the church.
3. In the diocese of Joliette, he supplied the plans for churches at Ile Dupas (1851-1855); Saint-Alexis (1852); Saint-Félix (1854); Saint-Ambroise (1855); Saint-Roch (steeple, about 1856); Saint-Jacques (façade and steeple, 1859-1860); Saint-Gabriel, Sainte-Julienne (1860); Lanoraie (1862-1864); Sainte-Élisabeth (façade, 1864); Lavaltrie (1866); Saint-Barthélemy (1866); Saint-Esprit (steeple, about 1869); Saint-Paul-de-Joliette (interior, about 1870).
4. See the study drawn up by Me Jean Héту and presented to the Historical Society of Joliette in December 1977.
5. Raymond Lefebvre, Lavaltrie.
6. See the *Patrimoine mobilier* chapters included in the four annual reports of the Cultural Property Commission of Quebec.
7. Alphonse Durand and his wife sculpted the altar-piece of the chapel at the Joliette seminary (1881-1882), preserved at the Joliette Art Museum.
8. These architects produced the plans for the reredo at the Joliette seminary (1881), the Joliette cathedral (1883), the second façade of Saint-Cuthbert (1884), the church at Saint-Lin (1886-1888) and the second church at Sainte-Élisabeth (1902).

(Translation by Mildred GRAND)

WHAT'S REAL ABOUT JAPANESE REALISM?

Karl MacKEEMAN

Art, like the weather, recognizes no national border. In Canada, a Wolfville, Nova Scotia-born artist does a series of large paintings of waves. Thousands of miles away an artist eight years his junior

also paints a large painting of a similar subject. Tokrijii Azechi has not likely seen the work of James B. Spencer. We should perceive that artists on the forefront of any particular movement often emerge with similar paintings entirely independent of each other.

If we are to look at any particular innovation or motivation in painting, we should not confine ourselves to the borders of one country. Photography has been a major influence to the so-called hyper-realism we've seen emphasized by the works of Mary Pratt, James B. Spencer, Jack Chambers and Ken Danby in this country. It is perhaps a very blind idea to become defensive and naturalistic about our art. By so doing, we are shielding it from criticism or recognition by the world at large. An international art publication would have some difficulty in establishing itself in Canada. Our nationalism is something that should develop naturally, not in the self-conscious awkward way it has been over the last few years. John Coplans, a well known art historian, critic and writer, spoke to me about Canadian nationalism as it affects painting shortly after a confrontation with some Montreal artists at an annual meeting of international art critics. He said, "... It's up to the Canadian scene to decide what the nature of its future is. What the nature of its art is, how that art is going to play a rôle in Canada, and how significant those ideas are to the rest of the world."

It should be of interest to us to compare the work of an artist in this country to the other various nationalities in other parts of the world. My argument here is perhaps a justification for the fact that I want to write about Japanese realism and a particular artist of that nationality. My problem is very similar to that of a writer and literary critic I spoke to the other day in Charlottetown. He expressed himself this way, "Goddamit, I'd like to write a review of some really excellent upcoming Jamaican poets, but who's going to publish it in Canada?" Our attitude in this country as a whole is as provincial as Toronto's glittering arrogance.

When we look at a painting by a Tokyo artist, Kaoru Ueda, it is realized that in terms of its handling of reflective and semi-transparent surfaces as well as subject matter it is comparable to the work of Newfoundland artist, Mary Pratt. The subject, a broken egg, is not far from her kitchen studies in acrylic.

'Realism' does not come all that naturally to Japanese art, where the concept of that misapplied but often used word has a different meaning. In the eighteenth century there was a school of 'miniature' painters that often turned to illusionistic renderings of insects. However, Japanese art was one of the major influences in some of the modern art movements in 19th century London and Paris. It led to non-representational painting. Since World War II Japan has seen a frenzy of art influences centering around European abstract and surrealist painting.

Go Shigi, a thirty-four year old Tokyo-born artist is part of a movement towards photo-realism in Japan. His approach, however, maintains elements unique to his culture. Unlike the paintings of Konzo Mio or Hideo Mori, in which realism is used with an element of fantasy, Shigi's paintings maintain a belief in the materialism of photography. He has stated on occasion, "Most of us do not question whether the photographed image is true or not, but there is an absolute difference in the contained significance between the photo taken of a real landscape and the photo taken of a landscape which does not exist and is drawn realistically like a photo. I tried to criticize this fictitiousness of photography".

Go Shigi's paintings first came to light in Canada at the 9th Japan Art Festival in Montreal and Vancouver, where he showed with several other young Japanese artists. Realism in the sense of being aware of natural reality is part of the Japanese way of life. Shigi speaks of seeing his subject much as a camera would, "without illusion". Just as it is with a mirage and a camera. His work exploits the seldom seen differences of that medium. In American and Canadian photo-realism we see that there is a deliberate attempt to dehumanize the act of painting. Artists try, each in his own way, to fulfil the expressed wish of Andy Warhol when he said, "I want to become a machine". However, when a particular image is projected to the human eye it still maintains the human element of choice. We have seen this in part through television, where manipulation is unquestioned. We believe what we see and do not fully realize that the camera is a humanly manipulated machine. Like a gun it does not choose its subject. This is the human side of the vision before us. I once thought that the camera could record reality. When I was a small child I set out to achieve this without success. Warhol's painting of 'the electric chair' is the mechanically reproduced image of a man-made death machine. Shigi's interest is not in projecting any image beyond what is seen. He records those still and unchanging elements of our environment. His subject has as little emotional content as is possible. This is a familiar urban environment.

It is neither criticized or praised, its existence is only recorded as part of our urban habitation upon this planet. What is revealed is this, it is not the painter who is anti-human, it is not his creation nor that of any individual. The world of man's created environment conforms to the elements of nature's teaching. Go Shigi's painting *Housing-D, 74-2*, for example, shows the cells within a complex interdependent human habitation as modular, if not as architecturally perfect, as the honeycombs of a thousand worker bees. The artists see no need of colour in most of these works, they are generally colourless to our eyes. We see our cities as grey and colourless. I remember stepping from a New York subway coming up out of the earth and seeing the grey stone of Wall Street for the first time. Tokyo is not only a larger city than any in North America or Europe, but it is also far more condensed in its living space. The artist is an urban person and records what is there and yet remains unseen and grey in our minds. People in cities seek beauty and meaning in the arts. They seek it in glass cases in a museum or at the theatre. In a crowd of millions moving like ants for the Tokyo underground at rush hour, each wrapped in his or her own individuality, one person stops to look up and is knocked over. In New York, London, Montreal or Tokyo only the tourist looks up. Only the stranger looks up and sees the surroundings. The artist in the same way provides this function. A small and compact kitchen is the subject of Go Shigi's painting *A Kitchen* painted in 1975. It represents a centre of human activity within the apartment multiplied a hundred times, perhaps more, within a single exterior structure. Yet everyone knows his own door.

The artist is part of this world while standing apart from it. He paints images that resemble in some ways photographs and then these paintings are enlarged as large as the painted canvas. Side by side both can be compared with the original. The copy, its surface and colour perhaps somewhat different from the painting on canvas, exists as a kind of paradox. The photo is derived from the painting and not from the actual subject.

NOSTALGIA FOR ROMANTICISM

by Eric CAMERON

Virgil Hammock's exhibition of sixteen drawings at Dalhousie Art Gallery includes seven based on photographs of the composer Mahler. Most of the rest are self-portraits or portraits of his family. It is the relationship between these two groups of works that sets the theme of it all and finally gives the key to the meaning of the drawing process for him.

Several of the Mahler drawings are quite straightforward portraits, a seated half-length or just a simple profile of a head, that are prosaically rendered from plates in books. In one Mahler is on a boat going to New York; in that case alone there is a scanty indication of setting. Another, *Mahler at Toblach 1907*, shows the composer and his daughter together with a rather shadowy figure of a woman in the background. At that point we might notice the parallel with the subject of Hammock, his daughter and former wife together in Edmonton, but generally the connection is not forced. We are left to form our own conclusions as to the nature of the juxtaposition, to play with the composer's name and its suggestion of a visual artist, and to wonder if there really are similarities between the cast of Mahler's features and those of Hammock himself.

In the brief catalogue notes he does tell us his drawing is a private activity, but one has to look between the lines for its personal significance. As drawings they are very reticent. There is no great passionate outpouring of emotion of the kind we find, for instance, in Mahler's symphonies. Perhaps that in itself is their main point. What Hammock shows us is the actual Mahler, who was in fact a rather small man. If Mahler had his share of misfortunes (the loss of a daughter), that in itself is no more than many people endure without attracting the attention of history. What was different with Mahler was that the music of late romanticism allowed him to externalise his personal feelings on a heroic scale, to sublimate his grief in expanding it to the dimensions of a great tragedy.

Since Mahler, that sort of sublimation has become more difficult. The twentieth century and its art have become disillusioned with heroic stances. Looking back over his own active art life since the fifties it may seem to Hammock now that he has "watched the form of the visual arts disintegrate to the point where writing on art is more interesting than art itself," but the process he describes is partly an

internal one, his own shift of emphasis from art making to art writing, and as he looks back to the generation of Mahler he still remembers that disenchantment with the hero image was his own starting point in art.

That was in 1960 when he went to art school at the age of twenty-two. For three years before that he had been a photographer with the U.S. army in Korea. The war was over, but people continued to get killed — in automobile accidents, plane crashes and suicides. It was his job to take the photographs. Between times he recorded the parades and medal presentations. It left an abiding sense of futility and absurdity.

At the San Francisco Art Institute he first studied photography, but soon turned to painting. His subjects were cowboys, airline pilots, politicians, and writers like Scott Fitzgerald and Herman Hesse. They were the heroes of society, but in the photographs from where he worked they were only paper heroes. Sometimes the subjects were very pointed, the boy presented with a blue rosette for some juvenile achievement, the maimed war veteran receiving his medal in the hospital. In the context of California figurative painters like Richard Diebenkorn his flattened images fitted well enough, but there was something negative, a denial of humanity in his own move towards abstraction.

When his painting becomes completely abstract around 1966 there is something very harsh about the colours. I have to admit to finding them very difficult to deal with. However, before the end of the decade the formal patterns began to resolve themselves as landscapes — impenetrable mountain ranges beyond great expanses of water that provide no place to stand. As time goes on the mountains break, a path winds its way into the distance, the sun appears above the horizon, but it is all still very flat. From '72 come the first of the drawings, generally from photographs. He copies an old photograph of himself in army uniform. It seems important to know he is working from the flat surface. When he turns away from his photographs he finds in his studio window a subject that is just as flat; the wall, the double layers of glass and the fence beyond that. When he draws his own image in the mirror, it comes out just as flat again, squashed between the drawing board and some unidentifiable form in the background. The lines are varied, a lot of different grades of pencil and different modes of shading, but almost always a rather hard indecisive line somewhere seems to dominate as if he were trying to penetrate the barrier of the paper itself.

Occasionally as in the drawing of his daughter *Paive on the P.E.I. Ferry* there may be a hint of the "magic" realism of Maritime artists like Alex Colville, a reminder that the years since San Francisco have brought him via Indiana, Alberta, and Manitoba to New Brunswick. Such occasional overtones are never more than slight. In the end they only point up that his is a world deprived of illusion.

THE SCULPTURED PLANES OF GERHARDT KNODEL

By Virginia WEST

Historically, the use of the fabric plane within interior architectural space is not new, dating back to medieval times when banners and tapestries were hung in high vaulted areas of churches and castles. Such textiles called attention to the new dimensions of space that were made possible after the pointed arch raised ceilings to new heights and allowed light to penetrate interior recesses.

Gerhardt Knodel has bridged the tradition of Renaissance tapestry with his handwoven sculpture, super-scale works using the fabric plane as three-dimensional dynamism within vast architectural interiors. One recent commission came from John Portman, architect for Detroit's \$337 million Renaissance Center; a second from the University of Houston for their new library; and the most recent a grant from the General Services Administration for the entrance to the Federal building in Oklahoma City. All are stunning, — astonishing in their ability to blend the most radical engineering feats with weaving, the oldest of man's arts. It is perhaps to be expected that the architects of our twentieth century buildings would resort to the warmth of fiber to humanize their antiseptic steel, glass, and terrazzo surfaces; since the fourteenth century tapestries have visually blotted dank castle walls from memory. However, Knodel's work extends the spatial relationship of architecture and sculpture, communicating an emotional experience that places the whole mass of the building into an identifiable perspective.