Cite this review
SACKVILLE, NEW BRUNSWICK

FULL SPACE:
MODERN ART FROM THE FIRESTONE COLLECTION OF CANADIAN ART

28th October - 17th December 2005
The Owens Art Gallery
61 York Street
Mount Allison University
Tel. 506-364-2574
www.mta.ca/owens

This exhibition features a selection of works from the Ottawa Art Gallery's Firestone Collection of Canadian Art and was put together by Emily Falvey, the Ottawa gallery's present curator who is a former Mount Allison University art history student. Falvey also edited the excellent catalogue for the exhibition that features two fine essays, one by Esther Trépanier, Director of the Ottawa Art Gallery, and the other by Gentry Kelly, Director of the Owens Art Gallery. Kelly's essay, A Definite Image: The Representation of the Social in Canadian Art of the 1930's and 1940's speaks to the essence of the exhibition which is the transition of Canadian art from its emphasis on the landscape to a focus on urban imagery. There are also essays in the exhibition that invoke the beginnings of Modernism in Canadian art, mainly through the paintings of the Automatistes, but that Quebec-based movement occurred in the 1950s and outside the scope of Kelly's essay.

Canada, in spite of its vast wilderness, is an urban nation, however, the landscape paintings of the Group of Seven were central to how we saw ourselves as a nation in the first three decades of the 20th century. Increased urbanization and the Depression were to change that vision. In this carefully curated exhibition these changes are reflected through art. The large Firestone Collection is the cornerstone of the Ottawa Art Gallery's collection and, in fact, has a very large number of Group Seven works. Falvey looked at the less popular, but important works in the collection for the exhibition, such as the urban landscapes of underrated Montreal artist Philip Surrey. Many of these Surrey works are Montreal street scenes of working class neighborhoods. Social Realists, and Surrey is a prime example, are often overlooked in our art history. It is easy to see why as many of their works appear drab when compared with the easy going landscapes of the Group of Seven. A little ink and watercolour such as Surrey's Factory, which is in the exhibition, is not the kind of thing many collectors of the time would have liked to put on their walls when they could have lovely landscapes. Social Realism also later lost out when it was identified with Marxism, Communism, and Socialism, but there was a period prior to the Second World War when many of our artists clearly identified with these values. The Red scares of the 1950s and the post war boom changed all of that, and our artists had to look elsewhere— that where was Modernism.

This exhibition has three very fine small paintings by Jean Paul Riopelle, Paul-Emile Borduas and Marcelle Ferron, all done between 1955 and 1958. In fact, all the works in Full Space are modest in scale which, to my mind, is not such a bad thing, as it proves that artworks do not have to be large to be important or good. The three works by these Automatistes clearly demonstrate a new direction for Canadian art in the 1950's. It is pure abstraction and not to say that these artists were not interested in social issues. Their art was very much a part of the Quiet Revolution that was to follow in French speaking Quebec, but that is a whole other topic and there is no room here to get into details. Borduas and his followers are a very important part of the history of Canadian painting. Borduas could achieve results in a small painting, such as his Formes oublées, 1958, in this exhibition, that many other Modernist painters could not in wall sized works.

There are other pictures in the exhibition by artists who were well known in early second half of the last century such as B.C. artists Jack Shadbolt, who is represented by two fine paintings Night Harbour Image, 1959, and Italian Tomb, 1961. These paintings are more abstractions than the non-objective works of the Automatistes, but they are Modernist paintings none the less and strong ones at that. Along the same lines are a pair of early paintings by Fredericton, New Brunswick artist Molly Lamah Bobak, who is one of the few artist in Full Space, if not the only one who is still alive and active. The artists in this exhibition were the familiar names in the Canadian art world when I moved to Canada in 1956 to teach art at the University of Alberta. Now they seem to have faded from sight and become footnotes in the art history books. They are better than that and this exhibition was a good way to look at them again and understand how modern art came to the fore in Canada. Contemporary Canadian artists owe a debt to these pioneers who deserve a hard second look.

Virgil Hammock

QUÉBEC CITY

LUDMILA ARMATA:
LETTERS FROM THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

Engramme
501, rue de Saint-Vallier Est

At the heart of matter there is matter. At the core of the earth—there is some unseen force, an energy that abounds. We can only imagine what the sources there are or could be. We cannot define, have never seen the centre of the earth. Nevertheless the seismic shifts and tectonic plate movements affect our lives. However brief in intensity, these phenomena can generate tsunamis, earthquakes... Ludmila Armata's Letters from the Centre of the Earth series (2005), her etching Poem from the Centre of the Earth (2005), the Shadow & Shape series (2005) created in boxes with pins and fragile tiny cut outs a la Henri Matisse in white paper on black and vice versa, or black on black and white on white are like ennomologial and exemplary exercises in aesthetics. Also on view are the large scale Tectonica (2005) series of etchings that can be assembled in a variety of ways on a wall. Armata's Tectonica series emphasizes the surface of things, and the traces that are felt or even left behind after the life has ended. They also interpret all powerful earth forces, as registrations, tiny lines and exaggerated striations. The surface may be that of an artwork for the artist, but the carries allusions to more universal physical forces. Whether in biology or geology, or astrophysics these forms are transitional as they are universal.

Working on steel plates, or delicately assembling miniature works in boxes after cutting them out. Ludmila Armata integrates a sense of time, of the density and shape of time, and of the perpetual changes that seismic movements enact, as much sound as matter. The seismic shifts on the surface of earth become a digital dance, with scatological notations, scratchy effects... vertical vortices open up and then close. There is a repetition of line in many variations. The lines are like voices that speak to us from some distant and inhuman, less than conscious source. The ongoing change is an effect of motion, or affect of energy. All this passes through the earth and is paraphrased in Armata's art. Energy moves towards a surface and speaks to us, Armata's art seems to suggest. The energy, eventually moves onward, and dissipates, dissolves altogether. Her art has this aspect of sensitivity for the dissolution of things, even of histories, and this is the personal and autobiographical part of her art, all abstract even so. What a metaphor for life itself! With this art, we can fully understand how time can be a metaphor for life, (particularly as it affects the physics of the world we are in).
Ludmila Armata has created a body of work that not only references the unseen, the invisible by drawing sometimes fluid, other times nervous, very physical motions in a push and pull tug of war battle with the surfaces and density of the matter she makes her art out of. Her art achieves this resolution of the elemental and primordial, and elucidates on nature's essential force with a visual eloquence that is based on observation of very real things—the geological layers, the chasms of a gorge, the layers of things, even the growth form of a mushroom or tree root. We sense that life does not ultimately imitate art, but that art can imitate life in Armata's Tectonica works. We see here a visual language that often resembles what we discover around us in landforms, or growth forms, or body details, and cannot put to words, or in images. There is also a conceptual edge to Ludmila Armata's play on and with variations of surface effect, energy and design. The cartoon-like character that emerges as a description of effect is an aesthetic that seeks to build bridges between the mind-body split. Armata achieves this with a tactile and visual interweave.

*Letter from the Centre of the Earth* is a show that proposes a communication between elements of nature, including ourselves. These forms are ultimately not abstract at all, but as hidden poetic epigrams from some concealed space, even an existential place of origin, Armata's artworks are symbols of intuited experience. As mediatworks, these works on paper challenge the stereotypical belief that technology is the only source for contemporary artistic process. The physical and natural world is a very real source for art as *Letters from the Centre of the Earth* makes clear.

John K. Grande

---

**MONTREAL**

**URBAN TERRITORIES**

Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal
October 7, 2005—January 8, 2006
185, rue Sainte-Catherine Ouest
www.macm.org
Tel. 514-847-6226

---

Curator Réal Lussier's approach emphasizes the historically close relationship the city and its environs have had with the medium of photography: the flat, documentarian approach of photography has always melded well with the rapidly shifting constructed environment most of us inhabit.

Isabelle Hayeur, Pavel Pavlov, Miriam Yates, Christian Barré, Emmanuelle Léonard and Martin Désilets are all represented with their various takes on the city and its discontents, as well as it's startling, harsh beauty and disorienting vision. With largely new contributions, three of the six have contributed works in medium that is now almost a contemporary museum cliche: video installation in an hermetically sealed environment.

Pavel Pavlov has the most intriguing offering, melding medium and subject in a video installation entitled *Drive-In* (2005) from the point of view of Angmagssalik Shopping Center's parking lot. Four numbered light poles fix the center of each projection, surrounding the viewer. As the landscape dissolves and changes slowly, a new perspective emerges from the same parking lot, but in a different position with suddenly differently numbered poles that retain the same position on the screens.

The effect of traipsing through various states of urban space—both temporal and mental space—is again represented in all the works present. Isabelle Hayeur's large digital prints of cityscapes and construction sites are endowed with an eternal Wagnerian gloom effected by digital intervention. In *Nuit Américaine* (2004), a scrappy condo building site is given a twilight-of-the-dodge-tool effect, a deliberate romantic's touch on a mercilessly shifting environment.

All the artists represented address urban space in what seems to be a largely romantic way that belies the harsh technological medium utilized. *Urban Territories* leads the viewer's nose through the nooks and crannies of the contemporary western cityscape, offering up surprisingly new odors.

Cameron Skene
For the International Exposition of Pornography (1967), a female torso against a pink background has a key shaped exclamation point. On her belly is a Napoleonic hat and a circular eye alluding to some male gaze. Funny, and to the point, the poster gets you even though it has been through the so-called politically correct meat grinder. The aftertaste still lingers, and it is a good one.

Isak “Bean” Augustine

Gabor Szilasi is one of our best-known photographers. Remembered mostly for his panoramic photographs of Monet's gardens commissioned by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, he is at his strongest when focusing on the human condition. Whether documenting rural Quebec, or exploring portraiture, his sensitivity to what lies behind the image transforms his black-and-white photographs from narrative to homage.

This intuitive sensibility underlies Szilasi's latest exhibition at Galerie Les Impatients. Organized in collaboration with la Fondation pour l'art brut et l'art thérapeu­tique du Québec which houses the exhibition space, the show presents a series of photographs of the patients that seek art and music therapy at the centre. A project that took close to a year saw the photographer participate in the daily sessions, discreetly taking his cellu­loid notes. The result is a moving pantheon of figures, unique human beings mak­ing the I am series, faces that will re­main with the viewer for a long time.
the heady palette of her own garden, spilling the bouquets harvested by her eye onto the canvas in great gushes of flora. Her latest series of works, on display at Galerie de Bellefeuille, offer a visual feast, where what we see trickles into our psyche like sweet honey.

Flowers, and nothing but flowers; in all their glory, spilling out of vases, strewn petals in abandon, jostling for attention in a flutter of multi-coloured floral orgy. Painted from flowers growing around her house, "things that appeared miraculously", these acrylic on canvas works look like fragments pared off from Renaissance paintings or those of the Dutch Masters. "It is about the dialogue between nature, its mysterious ways, how the beauty of it feeds the soul, and how there can sometimes be divine intervention," the artist says of the series. "These paintings try to capture the spontaneity of nature's ways and the glory of 'giving birth' to something so beautiful." Most of her compositions focus on lush tops of lilies, irises, peonies and so many others, their various shapes and colours offering endless visual entertainment. Textured, fluid, painted with sweeping brushstrokes, the flowers in Burger's works speak unabashedly of beauty. These paintings are slivers of an endless mosaic, interchangeable yet unique. Together they form a dense tapestry, delicately textured and infused with light. Burgers is a marvelous colourist and an accomplished technician. Her canvases are boldly executed, the composition solid, leaving spontaneity and play to their floral subject matter.

Dorota Kozinska

OTTAWA

CHRISTOPHER PRATT

National Gallery of Canada
www.nationalgallery.ca
1-800-319-ARTS

Renowned for having designed the Newfoundland flag, Chris Pratt and his wife Mary are painters of the super-realist mode par excellence. His compositions have been emblazoned into the Canadian psyche, and yet for this remarkable show at the National gallery, curators have established a regionalist, colonial paradigm for his art that it does not deserve. His paintings are superbly crafted, accessible to everyman and woman, and act as windows onto and into our psyche. For all their so-called realism, they are edited, pared down like an apple so that our psyche begins to ask questions about what is really real. In this sense Pratt's paintings develop their scenes—whether a boat in dry dock, a clapboard siding of a house, or an empty bedroom—in a theatrical way.

Forlorn and empty, these scenes enthrall light and perspective. These paintings are beatific, yet as exciting as watching paint dry, and yet, they propose questions about familiarity, the everyday, and how it touches upon us. The familiar becomes a touchstone, a cue card, for broader eternal questions. Pratt mentions is the catalogue that geometry is used to confirm his intuitions, and this engineered characteristic betrays his early training as a pre-engineer at Memorial University. Group of Seven painter Lawren Harris—the most esoteric and quasi-spiritual of that gang of of 7—likewise taught Chris Pratt at Mount Allison. Both paint coldness very coldly. Pratt is even more rigid and structural than his teacher Harris. Indeed, all that inflexible composition seemed to engender a movement on the east coast, with Alex Colville, and other advocates... The rigidity and frozen formula of this realist—not so real at all—brand of painting—almost feels colonial, pre-confederation—for its clasping the straws of a realism and familiarity—even for a nostalgia of place that is not so real as one might imagine. Isn't folk art and surrealism far closer to the vernacular of popular culture and the unconscious than painstaking whimsy and duller than dull chronicling of material culture with a paintbrush. One should not compare apples and oranges, but give me a Nova Scotian folk artist Maud Lewis painting any day over this! If there is a heaven and a hell, these paintings are idealizations of a hell I would never want to visit. It leaves no room for atmosphere, for oxygen, for accident. It may engender violence but we would never see it in these screened scenes.

Chuck Close and Richard Estes investigated the American vista as photorealist painters in the late 1960s, and like Chris and Mary Pratt their works have a photo-like look. Banal subject matter becomes a window or door to self-questioning of perception, of interpretation of what is called real. Even Fitz Hugh Lane and the Luminist movement in early America achieved the same effect with a magic sense, as does Alex Colville.

A contemporary problem with Super-realist art arises when billboards, and virtual reality infuse our physical and psychic environment daily with photo and video imagery and visual and photo illustration to an extent where the philosophical is no longer the main issue. McLuhan wrote about this as early as the 1950s. Though no one seemed to listen then, they sure know what he was commenting on now! New questions arise about economies of scale in visual media, and the role of the artist and even of imagery in today's world. Escaping into an ideal world, an edited down reality—is mere nostalgia for an everyday world that has greatly changed—if it ever was the way these paintings claim. Devoid of people for the most...
part-aside from the highly hieroglyphic female portraits Chris Pratt’s paintings reflect an order that could disguise an incredible inner disorder and confusion about the state of the world. If this work reflects some vision of a regional culture, it is ultimately interpreted in an ascetic, denaturized, isolated, and unfulfilling way for art. Give me a Henri Matisse instead of this any- day, even if all our lives lived are ultimately regional.

John K. Grande

TORONTO

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL
ART FAIR AND
ALTERNATIVE ART FAIR

Toronto International Art Fair (TIAF) and the Toronto Alternative Art Fair (TAAFI) again raised the profile of contemporary and modern art. Presented in the Metro Toronto Convention Centre but moved further into the back of the immense structure. As usual the event attracted a broad range of art dealers from across Canada as well as international dealers from Europe, North America China and South America. Among the Montreal dealers were Galerie Trois Points, Sandra Goldie, Pierre-François Ouellette, Lilian Rodriguez, René Blouin, Galerie Orange, Galerie d’Avignon, and the largest exhibit in the entire fair was Galerie de Bellefleur. This huge event attracted a wide range of media ranging from kinetic sculpture, to painting, mixed media, printmaking, video and photography. It helped draw public audiences to familiarize themselves with the most recent trends in art. There were also more traditional modernist works... a Stanley Spencer preparatory marble drawing, a very rare Edward Munch lithograph, the inevitable Picasso and Matisse, and others. Flowers East Gallery from London featured some remarkable painters and Toronto’s own Ed Burtynsky whose China Photographs have been attracting worldwide attention. Goodhuis Contemporary gallery from London/New York & Beijing featured the remarkable photos of now abandoned and disintegrating Communist public spaces such as meeting halls, theaters, a cinema by the Beijing based husband and wife team of Shao Yinong and Mu Chen.

Gallery going in such a conceived manner tend to overwhelm the viewer, but it all depends on what one expects and this always raises that eternal question “What is Art.”

There were brief glimpses of the best Canadian art can offer—a large Jean-Paul Riopelle painting that sold for $1,000,000., Canadian portrait painter and former editor of the early 20th century The Rebel magazine in Toronto–Barker Fairley for reasonable prices. Other gallery from Winnipeg stood out as one of the most affordable and up-to-date venues for Canadian art with prices for original artworks in the hundreds of dollars. Curated by Clara Hargitay, the video lounge viewers were witness to recent projects by Paul Wong, Tom Sherman, Norman Cohn/Zacharias Kunuk and Vera Frenkel among others.

The Toronto Alternative Art Fair (TAAFI) was held at 2 hotels–The Gladstone and The Drake–on Queen St. West. This was more fun, adventurous, and there were notable surprises, affordable art, and interventions just to shock. Among the best was an entire faux-finish installation featuring Silverback Sasquatch and his mate made entirely of fun fur, wire, wood, styrofoam and standing on a homemade latch hook rag. This was definitely the place where kitsch meets kitsch with wondrous and imaginative results by Alyson Mitchell (Paul Petro Contemporary Art). A video by Christina Zeidler featured video imagery of a tiny red deer set amidst the real nature surrounded of mountains, flowing streams—all this to conjure up feeling of what real nature and the Romantic ethos—great background music! Nicolas di Genova’s landscape photos have an edgy admixture of flowy streams—aU this to conjure up reminders of nature's once wondrous and imaginative results. There were also some truly fun and quirky art installations by Canadian artists like Adam Brandejs’s Genpets Series (if you are into cloning or mass breeding and need user friendly pet people in your home) and a Francesca Vivenza Lost in Transit bag, affordable, while the Canadian Photographic Portfolio Society (www.cppsonline.com) from Vancouver had portfolios for sale by Liz Major and others. Fast iwrmers self-installed art was cheeky as ever. All in all the TIAF and TAAFI widened the scope on what art is or can be, and is developing a new public for Canadian art—very contemporary!

John K. Grande

PLATTSBURGH,
NEW YORK

CHANNEllING GHOSTS:
MARION WAGSCHAL
PAINTS THE FIGURE

October 1st–November 13th
Plattsburgh State Art Museum
101 Broad Street
clube.plattsburgh.edu/museum

While the subject of Marion Wagchal’s painting of people are often set in bedrooms or living rooms, her art is something of a sleeper in the art world. Not yet fully recognized and a mature artist, it is quite amazing her art has not been stepped up by a Canadian or American museum for a major catalogue retrospective. What is more Wagchal has stayed true to her own vision. This remarkable show of her portrait works includes some very significant group portrait works.

These function not simply as likenesses recorded but alternatively as real life reckonings of the history and experience of the peoples being brought to life in paint. We sense that these paintings are neither easy nor clever realist captions. (Instead these works are psychological renderings, and resemble Leon Golub’s for their atmospheres of sometimes tragic other times densely charged social anomie. They also can be compared to the paintings of Lucien Freud for their febrile, wavering lines that become synonymous for a certain psychological incertitude. But despite the smell of impending death and the absence of fresh air, even the sense that these old peoples worlds are shrinking and moving inwards, have little to do with any reality these are ultimately hopeful visual experiences. The bodies and environments literally grow outwards confirming a state or states of being.

If Jean-Paul Sartre were to see them he would understand for they express the wartime experience and the desolate nature of relations after incredible destruction. It is not the experience itself now, more the inherited memory of all that. These paintings have an edgy admixture of fate and destiny. After all, what is identity after so much has been removed. And what is a relationship even if the people are there when the potential for memory and place are displaced, removed, relocated. It is a hard scene to work with, particularly as an artist no longer in Europe, whose family survived the European Diaspora. The scene is set with Marion and her mother king on the same bed together. In front of them is a set of spoons, the only object from the past brought to North America after emigrating and we can also see a tippied glass and stain, and a document with Star of David. The mother is quite resigned, arms crossed and half asleep, while the artist daughter looks at us the artist viewer. A lot of these people look exhausted like Raincoat Portrait (1999) with a man seated barefoot in his armchair or the incredible Woman (1997) a small sharp por- tray, or the nude man with towel in the austere surrounds of The Footbath (1998).
We are forced to deal with this awkward state of emotion. It is one that persistently resurfaces throughout Wagschal’s production. Indeed, what is awkward is likewise what gives these works something human—the faces and bodies are in a listless state of suspension. These people literally hang in a non-space of the artist’s creation. In one of the most intense and lasting images of a couple I have seen in quite some time, Attachment (1998) the folds of sheets and bedding literally form an interior landscape. The pose is formal, even classical, but one has the sense of time moving along and of the quiet anxiety of daily life. The man looks downwards into space his legs stretched out. The woman in her nighty has her arms around his neck. The distended space in this and other paintings becomes a metaphor for the way these aging people identify and build reason in an ultimately irrational universe. Space moves inwards. Their bodies extend outwards. Hence these are likenesses, but that have their own atmosphere, often grey, pallid, solemn, covered in sadness or the pallor of repetitive events, survival being the ultimate miracle of it all. These people’s lives are not fulfilled, just lived, endured, and the successes seem small despite the effort but remain great for what they are. The monumental painted subject of a fallen man astride a fallen horse in Ur (2005) one of the most recent works in Channelling Ghosts: Marion Wagschal Paints the Figure has a sense of play even when the painterly risks are great, as do the two fighting boys next to father who is asleep in Spill (2000). There is even a tinge of symbolism to one or two of these paintings As in Woman with Still Life (1998) where an elderly seated woman poses adjacent to a human skull that sits in a pile of drapery.

There are likewise a series of small to middle sized portraits that include several egg temperas on boards paintings, one of fellow artist Judy Garvin, another of Sandra, and yet another of a lawyer. Cyclopa, an older painting from 1972 could be a nightmarish self portrait of the artist as monster. We see a woman painting entirely nude, with only one eye visible in her slippers. All in all, Marion Wagschal remains one of Montreal’s best kept secrets and one who deserves much more exposure than she currently has received.

This is one of the best recent exhibitions of her work—well worth seeing. We look forward to a major retrospective from one of Montreal’s main public museums...

John K. Grande