

Jim Dine: Concealed in View

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JIM DINE

CONCEALED IN VIEW

By Dorota Kozinska

IN NOTHING LESS THAN A SCOOP, MONTREAL
ART GALLERY, GALERIE DE BELLEFEUILLE,
HAS MOUNTED A SOLO EXHIBITION OF JIM DINE,
ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS OF CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN ARTISTS. IT COMPRISED OVER 30 PIECES,
INCLUDING SOME OF HIS SEMINAL WORKS, AS WELL
AS A SERIES OF PAINTINGS DONE SPECIFICALLY
FOR THE SHOW.

Jim Dine is 74 and an icon on the international art scene. Instantly recognizable by the repeated use of symbolic elements in his work, he continues to confound the critics, a pop artist in the robe of an abstract expressionist.

The reference to 'the robe' is oddly apt, as it is one of Dine's favourite subjects, duplicated in variation upon variation. It is as much a symbolic connection between the two genres, as a stand-in for the artist himself.

Endlessly versatile, Dine made his name in the 1960s, during the Pop Art movement in New York. He has experimented with numerous styles, setting himself apart from the cold plasticity of Pop Art by the use of personalized objects, thus injecting an element of intimacy into his work. He keeps reinventing the many familiar elements – tools, bathrobe, heart, Venus de Milo – each new image adding another page in an ongoing visual diary.

The theatrical quality of his art is present to this day, but it has lost some of its initial effect. Ergo the reference to Dine's age, which may give a clue to a sense of weariness that permeates some of the otherwise vibrant works, and the pictorial overcompensating that marks others.

If one considers that in his long career, Dine has produced more than three thousand paintings, sculptures, prints and drawings, not

to mention performance works, stage and book designs, as well as poetry, the facility with which he creates new works is understandable, if at times disappointing.

In the Montreal exhibition, the opening of which was graced by the artist himself, Dine shows both sides of his talent, the great and the facile. The latter relates to the series of hearts painted for the show, and inescapably repetitive. Perhaps the problem lay in the overabundance of the colourful dappled compositions, with prosaic titles like *Yellow and Blue*, or *The Gold Blues*.

This is not to criticize the works as such. They are good. They cannot be otherwise, done as they are by an artist of Dine's calibre. But what is missing is a sense of passion, and an element of uncertainty that often gives art its human touch. Dine does hearts really well. Painted hearts and sculpted hearts, like the one in front of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Its smaller version, mounted on a jagged rock, is part of the exhibition, vying for attention with a roughly moulded, marching Pinocchio.

Another of Dine's favourite subjects, this small acrylic on patinated cast bronze figure is a model for the Borås monument, a nine meter high bronze statue, named *Walking to Borås* and inaugurated last year in the Swedish city by that name.

A large lithograph of the iconic wooden puppet, *The Red Feather*, and a wonderful woodcut with hand colouring, *Jim's Hand Painted One*, showed Dine's true mantle and versatility. Each image was defined by the medium, their composition, the figure's stance, remaining identical. The woodcut's rich surface texture and deep palette were in contrast to the more loosely drawn and coloured lithograph done several years earlier.

Dine's signature bathrobes took a major part of the exhibition, partly due to their large format. Ostensibly a stand-in for the artist, this everyday garment becomes a metaphor for life as experienced by the painter. With a tip of the hat to the host, *Oh Robe, Oh Canada* introduced the series. Other works, both prints and paintings, such as *Woodcut in Paris and Tokyo*, *Bill Clinton*, and *July on the Palouse* offered more variations on the bathrobe theme; a vestment at once transparent



The Red Feather, 2006
Lithograph with hand colouring
53.5" x 38.5 in
Photo courtesy of P. Wildenstein
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and mysterious, a simile of a self-portrait wrapped in a social commentary.

This eclectic collection of Dine's imagery, which also included prints and sculptures of Venus de Milo, was almost overwhelming had it not been for a couple of earlier works of stunning craftsmanship and quiet plasticity.

Off the main gallery space, in a small corridor, Dine's *Great Horned Owl*, a dark print, (photoengraving, etching, drypoint with hand colouring), from 2000, spoke a very different visual vocabulary, its symbolism not immediately decipherable.

An even earlier print, a hand coloured etching from 1996, focused on a rather unusual image for Dine – a double portrait of a skull, one in black-and-white, the other brightly coloured. It combined his print-making and painting virtuosity in a concise and subtle manner that, at least to this critic, spoke louder than the rest. □

EXHIBITION

JIM DINE

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