

# C h e a p

Reid Shier



May 26 to June 24, 1995



Or Gallery



# Reid Shier

## Cheap

May 27 to June 24, 1995 Opening: Friday May 26, 8pm • Artist talk: Saturday June 17, 3pm



Oil paint on canvas, Reid Shier, 1995

The OR Gallery is pleased to present a solo show of new work by Vancouver artist Reid Shier entitled *Cheap*. The exhibition consists of paintings and photographs depicting foliage in the immediate area to the gallery as well as various locations throughout Vancouver. The paintings as objects also relate physically to the architectural space of the gallery.

*Cheap* advances and clarifies Reid Shier's ongoing explorations of the contradictions surrounding the depiction of landscape, not by suppressing such contradictions but by drawing upon their transformative energies. By making *Cheap* contingent upon the 'mutilation' of his paintings (or at least of their privileged status) Shier satisfies the alternative gallery's demands for criticality and conceptual rigor while decisively reformulating his own relationship with landscape painting's ambiguous legacy. The resulting works, neither wall paintings nor sculptures, occupy a contested zone of refusal and repudiation. Their rigid angularity turns their lush representations in on themselves, creating a circulatory mirroring which destabilises both their subject matter and the viewer's expectations. *Cheap* inhabits a place where reference becomes inference, where beauty and symmetry are externalized impositions, where history is the least of our problems.

There is a publication to accompany this exhibition with an essay by Peter Culley. The artist will be present at the Opening and will also give an Artist Talk on Saturday June 17 at 3pm. Gallery Hours are noon to 5pm, Tues. to Sat.

For an artist engaged in the practice of landscape painting, it is not a question of whether or not one responds to the overwhelming force and variety of its traditions, but how. For example, the halting depictions of the west coast that fill the galleries of our malls and souvenir shops fail to compel us not because their relationship to their predecessors is unclear, but because that relationship is so unreflectively smug and secure. The legions of Sunday daubers—their watery neo-impressionism filtered through “folk art” and surrealism, with perhaps a dash of Carr, are as much as anyone the confident inheritors of an established and sustaining mode of representation. Given this indiscriminate and profligate legacy—one that comfortably includes Constable, Toni Onley, Monet and half the population of West Vancouver—it is perhaps not surprising that there are those who see it as something of a mixed blessing.

One way in which the career of Reid Shier can be read as an ongoing response to the ambiguities of this inheritance. His oscillations—between photography and painting, the personal and the political, the studio and the open air—seem ultimately predicated on a two-fold dilemma: to paint landscape or not, and if so, which landscape? The tensions of the resulting work, have, however, sometimes been blunted by what appear to have been preemptive concessions to prevail-

ing modes of alternative gallery practice. Though certain accommodations might have been necessary survival strategies in a gallery system dominated by a “critical” ethos, Shier’s attempt to contain within conceptually over-determined structures his inchoate and deeply personal struggle with history spoke also of his own hesitancy and doubt.

Cheap advances and clarifies Shier’s project, not by suppressing contradiction, but by decisively inhabiting it, by drawing upon its transformative energies. The “broken” frames that constitute its most obvious formal strategy, for example, act variously as agents of encl-

sure, release, accommodation and repudiation. By making Cheap contingent upon the “mutilation” of his paintings (or at least of their privileged status) Shier satisfies the gallery system’s procedural demands while enacting a strategic misdirection of his own performative anxieties. The resulting objects, neither wall paintings nor sculptures, refuse to inhabit even an uncontested middle ground, occupying instead a zone of repudiation. Hinged like icons but resolutely un-iconic, their rigid angularity turns the objects in on themselves creating a circulatory mirroring in which the viewer’s expectations are materially destabilized.

The works inhabit a place where reference becomes inference, where beauty and symmetry are externalized and random impositions.

The paradox that inhabits Cheap’s centre, however, the fulcrum around which its resonant ironies gather, is that the pre-lapsarian, “unbroken” canvases from which it is derived are the most sublimely confident of Shier’s career. A case could be made, in fact, that Cheap’s apparently unyielding strategic focus is merely a precept by which the artist has insinuated into criticality’s stainless white cube a set of lushly romantic and sensual depictions of Vancouver flora. As tempting as such an argument might be, the specificity of these images—and of the particular pleasure that such specificity engenders—argues for a more careful reading.

All but one of the canvases depict Victory Square, the first world war memorial park adjacent to the Or gallery. As much monuments to the British imperium as they are to the war dead, parks of roughly similar dimension and design are to be found throughout the former Empire. The kind of historical continuity such parks represent, with their fussy, miniaturized enactments of the British landscape tradition, is so physically manifest in our daily surroundings as to be almost invisible. By including in his apprehension of the landscape tradition a carefully rendered depiction of its continual working through in the unconscious details of daily life, Shier effectively historicizes



first world war memorial park adjacent to the Or gallery. As much monuments to the British imperium as they are to the war dead, parks of roughly similar dimension and design are to be found throughout the former Empire. The kind of historical continuity such parks represent, with their fussy, miniaturized enactments of the British landscape tradition, is so physically manifest in our daily surroundings as to be almost invisible. By including in his apprehension of the landscape tradition a carefully rendered depiction of its continual working through in the unconscious details of daily life, Shier effectively historicizes

experience. The result is that the paintings are not so much objects of contemplation as they are moments of sharp recognition, what Wordsworth called "spots of time".

Because Shier's paintings are derived from photographic studies, it might be inferred that their arrested stillness is likewise derived from a primarily photographic tradition. However, the force and clarity of the artist's historicizing method reminds the viewer of the extent to which photography can be said to have emerged from the romantic landscape project's desire for an unmediated apprehension of the sublime. The affectless quality of the paintings, conceived in a middle distance reminiscent of Friedrich, their foreground subjects unambiguously centred and celebrated, the melancholic touches of Hopper in the treatment of the background buildings, indicate a restraint that is in the best sense profoundly romantic. Even their refusal of a fixed status within the space of the gallery speaks to the forbearance in the presence of the tumultuous forces of nature and history that define the romantic project.

If Cheap remains, to an extent, a work defined by its cautious and transitional quality, its hard-won revelations are all the more impressive for the tightness of their compass. To begin to attempt the reclamation of landscape painting as a tool of historical enquiry, and to enlist in this project the facile gamesmanship of the gallery, are large and ambitious undertakings even at their outset.

Peter Culley



  
Or Gallery

112 West Hastings St.  
MAIL: Box 1329 Bentall Postal Unit  
Vancouver, B.C., V6C 2T2  
Canada  
604 683 7395

Gallery Hours: Tuesday to Saturday, 12 to 5 pm

We acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council, the Provincial Government through the Ministry of Small Business, Tourism and Culture and the City of Vancouver.