

Kelly Clark, *Self-Portrait #2*, 1986, mixed media and graphite on paper, 65.5 x 50.2. Photographs courtesy: New Delta Artists Foundation.

Clark seemed to have needed to get high. Explaining the drugs in the art and the drugs in his life would require a full-fledged biography or maybe one or two more retrospectives. Johnson has initiated an important debate—let's see where it goes.

This is my contribution: it is odd to condemn an artist for drinking instead of, say, jogging. Talent and dissolute living are mixed up both in the popular culture of contemporary art (which has shaped many an artist's self-image since at least the Bohemia of the 1830s) and also, witness Clark, in many contemporary lives. Clark's story reminded me instantly of Gulley Jimson's, the threadbare alcoholic hero of Joyce Carey's novel *The Horse's Mouth*. Jimson was an invention of Carey's, but also a composite of many mid-century English art characters. Indeed Johnson's catalogue essay begins with a quotation from Carey's novel and the testimony of George Swinton, Clark's friend and teacher, who relates that he himself often compares Clark to Jimson.

Both seem right in implying that Clark was a product of a mid-century English version of bohemia and its aesthetic myths. That scene was essentially conservative (even for 1944 when Carey wrote his book), big-R Romantic and floating

in booze. Within the larger art world, English art at mid-century was mostly eccentric and backward-looking. The fictional Jimson and the living Clark were plainly not updated versions of a hero like Van Gogh, who was a bohemian but also an aesthetic radical. They made no revolutionary or innovative art but instead lived their version of an aesthetic life, realizing the bohemian archetype of artist. One of the unwritten goals of artistic bohemia is to maintain status as a bohemian while making conventional art of the highest possible quality. The goal: to aestheticize a transgressive life through art.

The young, late-1950s Kelly Clark was a talented magpie. He made Braque and Dubuffet-like works, and even Pollock-inspired ink drawings (one called *Man Blowing His Brains Out*); he diligently painted his way through Soutine, Bacon and CoBrA, and he absorbed painterly traditions with great technical proficiency. But as he matured Clark ignored, as so many English and English-trained artists did at the time, all the new 1960s American and European-based art movements—even Pop Art, which had post-war English origins. Minimalism, Op Art, Arte Povera and Conceptual Art had no influence on him. My guess is that it was either Clark's immersion in the isolated milieu of mainstream post-war English art which lead him towards the nostalgia and artistic conservatism of his mature work, or his conservative and bohemian predilections in art lead him to England.

As a mid-century expressionist—a Jimsonian, the kind of artist who associated savage marks with emotional turmoil and languid lines with peacefulness—Clark was ever verging on the edges of abstraction without crossing the line.

Sincerity is important to an expressionist painter. A viewer is expected to read the work in a straightforward way, without irony and without some complicated postmodern spin. (Expressionists would find it difficult, for example, to match a beautiful painting of Nova Scotia's Peggy's Cove with the Swiss Air disaster—a tortured psyche requires a tortured surface. Allegory is rare in expressionist art.)

Clark characterized his life in a set of Matrushka dolls (shown at Gallery III) made in 1993 for a *Border Crossings's* fund

raiser called *Five Steps in the History of the Artist*. The five dolls represent "Ink," "Faces," "Top Hat," "Delta" and "Trees." There is no progression in the themes, no logical order—nor should there be. Clark absorbed the rules of expressionism early and made pit stops amongst other styles after a brilliant apprenticeship for commercial or fanciful purposes; his artistic phases were not linear.

Clark began his artistic life with talent, developed considerable skills, made uneven work and died tragically. The low point is the Magritte-inspired "Top Hat" series: tedious exercises in the illustrative conventions of 1970s graphic design and popular illustration. The "Delta" watercolours, executed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, mark the high point of Clark's art. In his maturity and in his best work Clark came into his own as a conservative landscape artist of the English Romantic tradition. The pastels and mixed media "Delta" works may be overworked, but the bloom of sky in a "Delta" watercolour is beautiful enough to justify an artistic life. ♦

Kelly Clark June 4 to October 11 1998, Winnipeg Art Gallery and Gallery III at the University of Manitoba.

Cliff Eyland is a Winnipeg artist and frequent contributor to Border Crossings.

VISUAL ART

Geometrics of Conjecture

by Robin Laurence

If charm were a process of the unconscious mind—which it patently is not—it might generate Francis Alÿs's art. Charm in Alÿs's practice, which spans the disciplines of performance, painting, drawing, sculpture, installation and video, is allied with a modest surrealism and an extremely modest scale. His tiny and somewhat fanciful images seem to accord with the dream state conjured up by the title of his ongoing series of paintings, "*Le temps du sommeil*," but that same unassuming surrealism is manifest in all his mediums of expression. There's a playful disruption

of the everyday in his art: images and actions are mysterious or puzzling but not disturbing, rarely even disquieting. Rather, they are wittily attentive to a notional normalcy that is slightly skewed into the realm of pseudo-physics or metaphysics. Modernist art, architecture, subjectivity, sexuality, authorial voice, the cultural construction of nature (all familiar themes of postmodernism) are touched upon but in a manner that is both original and unpretentious. Each subject receives a disorienting little tweak in the course of the artist's engagement with it.

Alÿs, an expatriate Belgian based in Mexico City, is known internationally for his urban-inflected conceptual and performance projects. Many of these are predicated upon the metaphor and activity of urban walking—he has walked through great cities on three continents, carrying sandwich boards, wearing magnetic shoes, pulling a magnetized wooden “dog” (both shoes and dog picked up a thick pelt of metallic debris, material evidence of the places walked through), pushing pillows into broken windows of abandoned buildings, or carrying a paint tin leaking a thin, Jackson Pollockesque line of colour along his route.

Originally trained as an architect, Alÿs says he learned to paint while walking through Mexico City and studying its many hand-painted commercial signs. He subsequently undertook an important conceptual project with a group of Mexican sign-painters (*rótolistas*), to which the flat simplicity of his representational painting style seemed to relate. Images similar to those enacted in his walks float through his paintings, drawings, sculptures and videos. All, it seems, cohere within an enduring conceptual project.

In Vancouver, Alÿs produced a mixed-media installation at the Or Gallery, and mounted a series of 84 tiny paintings, two tiny sculptures, a couple of ephemeral paper dust drawings on glass and a video projection at the Contemporary Art Gallery three blocks away. Three *harrowing* blocks away. The Or, an artist-run centre, is located in the 100-block of West Hastings, one of the most desperate stretches of Vancouver's impoverished, derelict, drug-and-crime-infested Downtown Eastside. On the subject of urban walks: when I walked out the Or's front

door on a sunny Saturday afternoon, notebook in hand, bound for the CAG, I was confronted with the sight of a woman sitting on the sidewalk with a syringe stuck into her arm and blood spurting out of it. Did this horrifying vision infect my reading of Alÿs's two exhibitions? You bet it did. But it also seemed wholly incongruous with Alÿs's sweet take on flâneurship. Although a mildly purgatorial mood sometimes attends his paintings, horror, degradation and despair are absent from his agenda.

The Or installation, titled *Dog Rose*, consisted of a wall-mounted collage of canine images and memorabilia, an improvised sculpture and a videotape. The collage, informally stuck to the walls of the gallery as if to a bulletin-board in the artist's studio, comprised hundreds of photos, drawings, newspaper clippings, posters, xeroxed notices, handwritten notes, scrawled words and a few appended toys, all related to the iconic image of the dog. The sculpture was two cardboard boxes, upside down on the floor, one with a molded clay nose stuck to its front end and the other with a molded clay anus stuck to its back end. That was it: two boxes, nose to arse, succinct and hilarious. The videotape was a short documentary loop of an anxious dachshund, seemingly lost, running up and down a sandy beach and stopping occasionally to look out over the vast body of water, as if seeking an answer to its unhappy condition. (Were his owners boating or swimming out there?) Amusing but slight, this installation did provoke some meditations on the nature of our relationship to the dog, our oldest and most devoted companion. But Alÿs's fascination with dogs seemed more relevant to his version as a collector of canine memorabilia than to his vision as an artist of the urban landscape.

The exhibition at the Or, “*Le temps du sommeil*,” was filled with creative wonders and metaphysical moments, beginning in the front window with two scarcely visible drawings in dots of white paper dust, one of a finger raised to a pair of lips, the other of a loosely folded hand with extended index finger. Beyond these enigmatic signs were a couple of miniature sculptures, each making reference to art history and to the kinds of science experiments undertaken in elementary school. The

tiny sculptures then led to a small video projection, a short, animated line-drawing of a woman pouring water from one glass to another (more rudimentary science). The audio component of the videotape consisted of a little music box, constructed out of found materials, sitting on the floor beside the projector. When wound by the viewer, it played the tune of “The Impossible Dream” from *Man of La Mancha*, inserting a note of valedictory humour into this most modest enactment of the laws of physics.

Most compelling, however, was Alÿs's series of 84 paintings, installed in two horizontal rows in a corner of the gallery. Each painting consisted of a tiny, rough wood panel, primed a brownish red oxide (the colour of dried blood), sketchily drawn or written upon in white, and dominated by a curious, tondo-like scene executed in oil in the unassuming, vernacular style of the Mexican sign-painter. Most of the panels had been stamped with the date of their creation and the name of the series, “*Le temps du sommeil*,”

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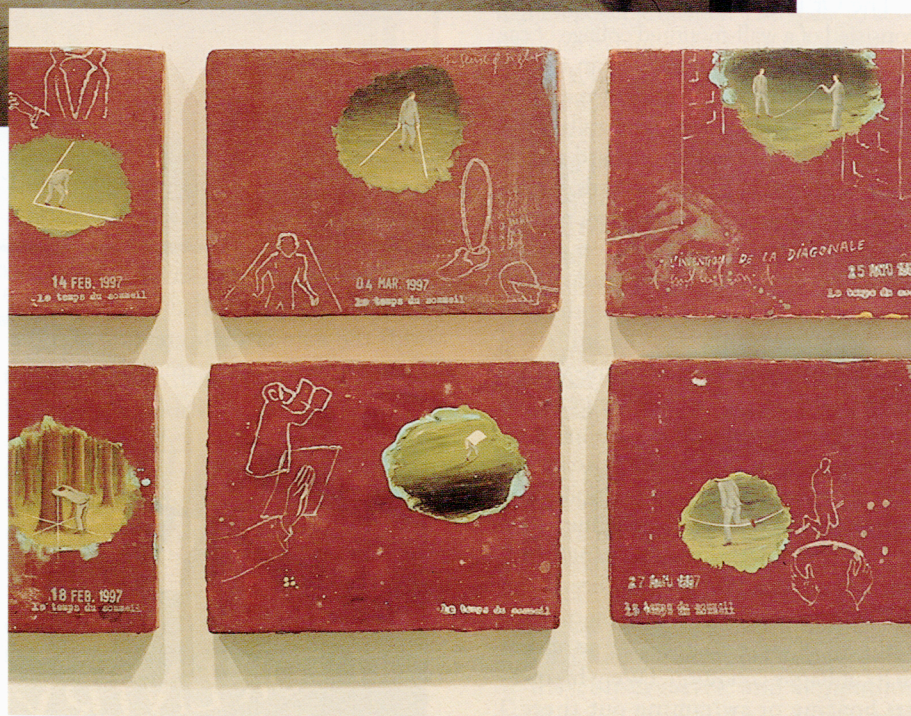
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Francis Alÿs, "Le Temps du sommeil," 1998, installation and detail, mixed media. Photographs courtesy: Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver.

and were arranged chronologically, indicating the serial-conceptual nature of Alÿs's project.

Many of the tondo scenes—khaki-coloured landscapes viewed through holes "punched" in the dried-blood ground—feature a grey-suited man in a neutral or forest setting, engaged in some enigmatic activity with a thin white line. Although it didn't seem to vary in width, the line did vary in length, shape and function. Sometimes seeming to be a string, sometimes a baton, sometimes a post, or skipping rope, or tightrope, or hula hoop. Sometimes it was an L-shaped beam, sometimes a square enclosure, sometimes a curved projectile. Animated by the

grey-suited man (who may be joined by one or many more identical grey-suited men, or by a dog, or by a woman in a sexy dress) and wrapped around various human and landscape elements in circular, triangular or rectangular configurations, the white line is an essential element in Alÿs's peculiar geometry of conjecture. It's a geometry that seems to encompass states of both ideality and actuality, a geometry involving the un-geometric condition of the natural world and the human body.

The show's curator, Kitty Scott, has observed that the figures appear to be engaging in physics experiments, and that their "rational and irrational, plausible yet highly unlikely" situations bear a direct

relationship to Alÿs's past and future performances, although many of them would be difficult, if not impossible to enact. A handful of Alÿs's drawings are exhibited on the wall beside the paintings, and they give some indication of the evolution of his ideas, from markings in his notebooks to tentative sketches on torn and crumpled pieces of tracing paper, to paintings, sculptures or performances. The little drawings, which are stuck together with tiny pieces of masking tape, have the look of reclamation, as though they had been scribbled down, torn up and crumpled, and then patched together again. It's as if Alÿs were catching and reassembling fragments of a mysterious system or process, known only to the unconscious mind. It's a system or process in which quirky charm plays an essential role.

Francis Alÿs: "Le temps du sommeil," organized by the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, was at the CAG July 4 to August 8, 1998. It will be at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, August 27 to October 4, 1998. Francis Alÿs: Dog Rose was at the Or Gallery, Vancouver, July 4 to August 1, 1998. ♦

Robin Laurence is a Contributing Editor for Border Crossings in Vancouver.

VISUAL ART

The Indescribable Rightness of Being Abstract

by Nancy Tousley

Abstract painting, born from passionate belief and attended by cerebral theory, has long meant serious business in Quebec. But perhaps never before has a genre once known for separating the sheep from the goats been so permissively defined as it was this past summer in Montréal's "Peinture Peinture." Its organizer, the Association des galeries d'art contemporain de Montréal billed the mega-event as "a major manifestation of abstract painting." It was both more than