

Peter Legris
Or Gallery
Vancouver
January 2 to 14

If the founders of Surrealism had known that the tenets of their philosophy would prove more readily adaptable by artists than the doctrines of Dada by virtue of their inherent rigidity, they would doubtlessly have been shocked. Surrealism rigid? Well, yes, actually. Whereas Tristan Tzara and company were willing to subvert anything (including themselves), the early surrealists did regard one thing as sacred: dream logic. For them the Freudian unconscious was a sort of Holy Ghost.

Because the dream (defined by its non-linear coherence) is always with us, we can do with it what we will. Metaphysically speaking, it is as solid as canvas or marble and can be refashioned in as many different ways.

Dream logic played an important role in the painted photo collages which Halifax artist Peter Legris re-

cently exhibited at Vancouver's Or Gallery, even though these fair sized tableaux failed to demonstrate a pronounced preoccupation with buried meaning, blocked desire or unspoken dread. For Legris, dreams provide a convenient pretext for formal organization. His dreamscapes are really subconscious landscapes painted with a waking hand and a sleeping eye.

Tower and Tree is almost certainly the cornerstone in this suite of eight brightly coloured objects. A photograph of a 1920s style skyscraper (almost certainly Montreal's classic Bell Telephone building) is superimposed on a plane of plywood. The flat setting consists of a cloudless blue sky attached to a featureless purple foreground. To the left of the skyscraper, a branchless, barkless tree casts a jet black shadow on the ground. This lonesome oasis is crowned with a hazy corona of green, "out-of-focus" leaves. The skyscraper rises from a painted pedestal of murky grey acrylic.

A somewhat more emotional treatment of the same formal elements is provided in *Untitled*, a composition of two photographs on paper painted over with oil pastels and acrylics. Again we see the same period skyscraper, only this time it is smaller and standing on its head. Rubbing up against it is a West Coast tree stump of equivalent size. The picayune tower standing next to the chopped down tree which, in the full bloom of its youth, must have been many times taller than the skyscraper itself, eerily links, in a non-explicit way, commerce and castration.

This theme is carried still further in *Laterally Stretched Tower*. Here we see the signifying skyscraper once more, its depth expanded to create an office longhouse or grain elevator. Over this

odd looking structure, a violent, scum-green sky angrily whirrs. In a sense, Legris has created an amalgam of the modern prairies. Even the ground on which this agribusiness edifice squats looks orange and tainted, unhealthy and grim.

If the skyscraper represents construction and repression in these paintings, freedom is indicated by the tree and emotion by the sky. This formula is most perfectly expressed in a untitled piece that places three identical arboreal photographs in the midst of a vibrant landscape. The trunk of the left hand tree is painted over with oils, as are the trunks of the other two; the outline of the central tree is also lined with green paint while the photograph in the right hand corner of the canvas is literally smothered with brushstrokes. The shadows cast by these three objects are, respectively, bulb, heart and spade shaped. Over this geometrically set grove, a sky skips in green spirals, its oceanic energy concealing a glint of Northern Lights.

No photographs, skyscrapers or trees are present in *Small Landscape*; nevertheless, this acrylic painting exists in the same aesthetic universe as the others. A sombre, wintry sky glowers over a rippling prairie field. Legris uses the grain of his plywood surface to create the illusion of wind-tousled wheat.

The other works in this show are formal variations on the aforesaid themes. Even the triangular grid in *Untitled Photo Landscape* (consisting of a two storey office block, a free standing cathedral wall and a hewn cedar tree trunk) is emotionally and thematically true to the other objects on display. Distance and involvement in virtually all these oil and acrylic studies can be determined by the visibility of brushstrokes. Where they are most present, feeling is most powerful; where they are most absent, it is virtually non-existent.

Peter Legris is an intensely controlled, tightly disciplined dreamer. His nocturnal images are singularly devoid of wildness and chaos. Idea rises over intuition; fantasy is transformed by a clear-eyed intelligence.

Mark Harris

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