

Arni Runar Haraldsson

"Third Hand"

Or Gallery

Vancouver

April 4-15

As painting reclaims its position in the forefront of artistic practice of the 80's, gallery owners, art administrators and dealers no doubt breathe easier. Now galleries can get back to the business of art. They can function as they once did, before the piles of earth and mounds of felt, the glow of neon and the aural invasions of the art of the 60s and 70s disturbed and dirtied their sacred, silent space. Through an array of audio and visual technologies and methods of mechanical reproduction, art of the 60s and 70s extended itself well beyond the traditional modes of production and limited subjects of art. But more recently, in a political climate of increasing conservatism, in the face of an all-encompassing electronic media culture, and under pressure from a revitalized art market, art recoils from the wide, wide world, and as if in fear of losing its own boundaries, retreats to stretched canvas and the tip of the painter's brush.

Arni Haraldsson installs six paintings in the Or gallery for his show, "Third Hand:" three on the left-hand wall and three on the right. A seventh painting hangs before the curtained store-front window of the gallery, illuminated by a bare lightbulb which hangs above it. He has painted the frames of all of the paintings red and bathed the back wall of the gallery in a solid coat of vibrant lemon yellow.

All of these paintings are the work of amateurs or hobbyists. They are the kind of paintings laboured over in spare bedrooms and rumpus rooms and are brought to fruition by making time after work and on the weekends. All are relatively small in size and "unlearned" in technique. Some of the paintings are executed on board, some on canvas and one on black velvet. The subject matter, though on its own terms appropriated from the tradition of oil painting from the Renaissance, up through the Salons of the 1800s, to the public and commercial galleries and gift shops of today, lies more readily within the realm of paint-by-numbers' portraits, still-lifes and scenics than anything else. As you enter the gallery and move to the left the subjects are: two collie dogs, a bouquet of roses and a cottage in the country; and from the back wall to the right towards the entrance: a portrait of a woman, a small house or cottage, and a black velvet portrait of country-Pop singer

space of the gallery, on the other side of the drawn curtains, hangs a portrait of a young boy.

Arni Haraldsson's *Third Hand* comes out of Conceptual and Installation work of the recent past more than painting per se. Haraldsson uses paintings he has purchased from local second-hand stores in order to construct his installation. As the title *Third Hand* suggests, he is not originator of authentic imagery, but rather retriever of original works. His strategy of purchase and exhibit introduce the current issues of appropriation and re-contextualization.

Haraldsson sets up a situation in which we consider these sincere but unexceptional paintings, by virtue of their re-contextualization, with the attention and scrutiny deserving of serious works. This exercise can hardly be conducted without a nod of acknowledgement to Marcel Duchamp's appropriation of everyday objects such as the bicycle wheel and the urinal. Haraldsson's found objects are, however, "art objects"—specifically, paintings from so-called Low culture.

Is it appropriate to suggest, as Haraldsson does, that the wooden expressions of these portraits, the forced and laboured brushwork and muddy palettes of these hobby paintings are comparable to painting today? A testy area, one worth thinking about, and as I consider Haraldsson's subtle proposition, I wonder how we, the audience, can be so faithless and sceptical. And we are a sceptical audience. He has, to some degree, fulfilled our scepticism by continuing the argument which declares the impotence of the artist to create anything authentic/meaningful/critical in this era of Late Capitalism. In a brief summary of intentions he states:

The role of the artist as authentic producer has been transformed into that of curator or connoisseur. . . From a conventional viewpoint such a strategy could be summed up as one of failure due to lack of authenticity; this would by no means be an entirely false perception. By deliberately positioning myself for failure, a subtle comment is intended as to the resurgence of out-moded art practises in much of today's art.

Haraldsson has employed strategies of appropriation and re-contextualization to challenge the viewer's assumptions about painting.

By choosing these kinds of paintings, Haraldsson highlights the interface of High and Low culture: a concern of the Pop art-

ists of the 50s which, having outlived the dictates of Greenbergian Modernism, now re-establishes itself as a viable subject for artists and academics of the 80s.

Popular culture has traditionally been less dynamic than High culture. The paintings in this installation could have been painted last week, or ten or fifteen years ago. They are virtually interchangeable

with representative hobby paintings of the not too distant past. The same cannot be said of High Art. The Minimal, Process, Conceptual, Performance work of a decade ago has changed. It has re-materialized as the current wave of Neo-Expressionist painting.

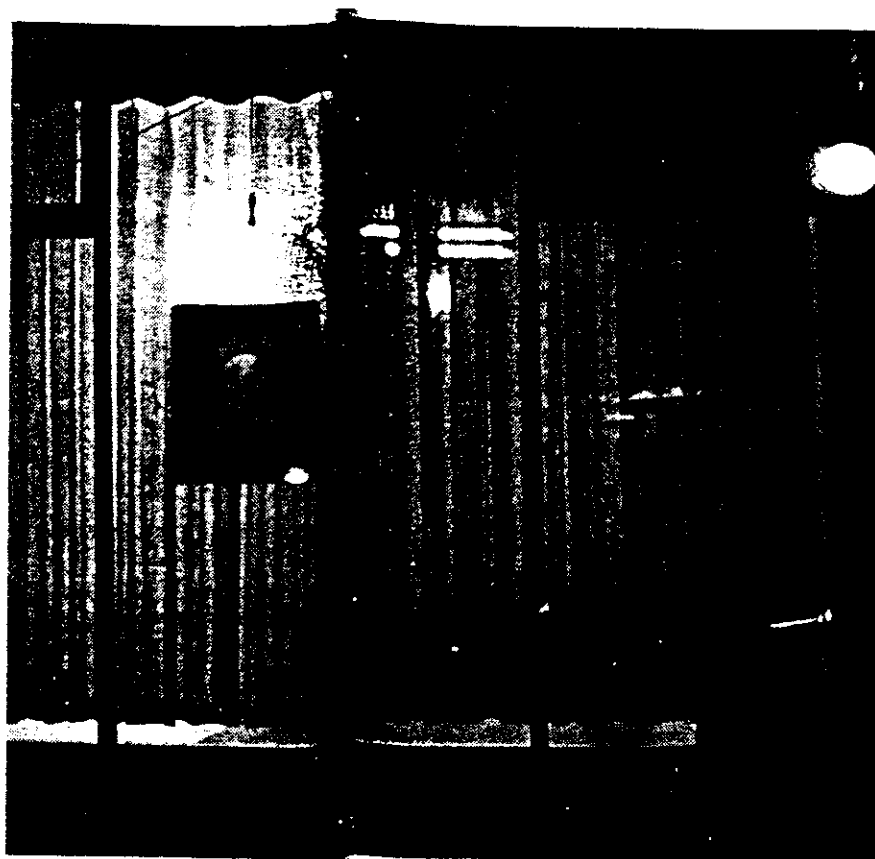
Haraldsson's work aligns itself with the work of some of his predecessors: artists such as Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren and Dan Graham, who have questioned and challenged the authority of the gallery to validate art, but he undermines the worth

of those objects framed, hung and housed within it. These hobby paintings are charged with meaning when placed within the gallery. Small and tentative, they hang self-consciously in the privileged space. As representatives of Low culture, their technical ineptitude and sentimentality symbolically challenge the framing apparatus of High art.

The artist's intentions were never to mock these paintings, but to consider them thoughtfully for what they are, and to consider their relationship to contemporary painting. Haraldsson does not dismiss the vulgarity of technique, but surreptitiously compares it to the consciously-cultivated, unlearned look of much of today's works. Nor does he dismiss the banal subject matter, but plays with it to construct his own extra meaning.

The back gallery wall is, in his mind, "treated" with the colour yellow. The yellow radiates an "aura" which serves to interfere with and envelope the work hung inside the gallery, thereby confirming the gallery's importance in framing these "out of context" works. This aura also echoes the "aura of inner spirit" depicted in the portrait of the young boy which hangs in the window.

Haraldsson also considers "Third Hand" a metaphor for patriarchy. He states:



Arni Runar Haraldsson; *Third Hand*, exterior installation view. Photo: courtesy the artist.

Included in the exhibition and made thematic by the red frames, are a symbolic family: father/mother, the mantel piece (flowers), cottage, house and pets, and finally there is the son looking out the window beyond to the future, enveloped in the light, warmth and protection of the family

The metaphorical family he presents is an aberrant representation of the Ideal. It is perhaps a testament to the state of jeopardy we have known the Family to be in for quite some time now. The symbolic mother is, in fact, the portrait of a 50s style glamour girl, complete with blonde hair, fashion model nose, and heavily lashed almond-shaped eyes. She wears a high, choking collar and gazes forward with a cool, blank expression. The symbolic father is a representation of Kenny Rogers on black velvet encased in an ornamental balsa wood frame. The son is the young boy depicted in the portrait in the window whose head is haloed with a

spiritual glow which makes him appear iconic, or at the very least folklorish. The viewer would not easily come to this interpretation on his/her own and consequently the metaphor remains for the most part Haraldsson's own extraneous and obscure view.

More interesting is the comparison of the "look" of these paintings to current works. Much of today's paintings deliberately look crude and unlearned in technique. The formal conventions of Modernism, once imbued with radical political conviction, are now exhausted and fall to the wayside. Experimentation in subjectivity and figuration reigns unchecked in an atmosphere of unbridled Pluralism.

Haraldsson's installation invites us to consider the evolution of painting, and more specifically the evolution of painting as a significant form of cultural comment and challenge. Have the innovations of new cultural forms and imagery, once attributed to the avantgarde, been usurped in spirit and technique by the makers and distributors of popular media culture? Has the force of our media culture superstructure brought the traditional dynamic of High and Low culture full circle? As the artworld we have inherited appears to do a dance of readjustment rather than reassessment, painting confirms itself as a traditional, not a radical form of expression. The entrenchment of painting as the dominant mode of artistic practice does not sit well with all artists. *Third Hand* testifies to Haraldsson's discontent.

He has chosen an academic yet witty path to deal with his personal, and possibly our collective, creative problems. By doing so he quite consciously denies his personal expressiveness, but more significantly, he risks losing his own voice among the cautiously constructed strategies and calculations of contemporary art discourse. Like many of us who have been through the system of institutionalized art-making, Haraldsson has learned to ask the right questions without having fully formed his own answers. As such, *Third Hand* is more of a proposal than a statement, more of an exercise than a completed piece. *Third Hand* does, however, ask us to remember the conceptual and critical framework of our recent art past, and causes us to rethink our wholesale acceptance of painting's position in the forefront of artistic practice of the 80s.

Merike Talve



Arni Runar Haraldsson; *Third Hand*; 1984; found paintings. Photo: courtesy the artist.