

# Celebrating Shadbolt's Legacy

The way Vancouver honours its artistic icons is a testament to its cultural growth

BY TREVOR BODDY

**D**espite the fondest wishes of our merchants and developers, Vancouver's greatness cannot be measured by such simple indicators as retail sales, square feet of buildings constructed, or population totals. More subjective qualities of character, consciousness, and visual identity must be invoked to separate truly great cities from mere conurbations, boomtowns, and gormless metropolises.

Few events so clearly display this city's incipient greatness as its tributes to its most influential artists. News of upcoming celebrations of the work of the late Jack Shadbolt reminds me of the deeply moving memorial service to Bill Reid that was held at the UBC Museum of Anthropology last March.

The 800 people assembled in architect Arthur Erickson's masterpiece—which looked as if it had been designed expressly for the event—represented all the tribes that constitute this city and its lush hinterland. In a roster that defined the length and breadth of much of the best of this awakening city, they spoke one after another of Reid and his impact on their lives in a eulogy that lasted nearly six hours. Master of ceremonies Myles Richardson, hereditary chief of the Tanu Haida, told the crowd, "We're all on Indian time now," and after the speeches the feasting and partying went long into the night.

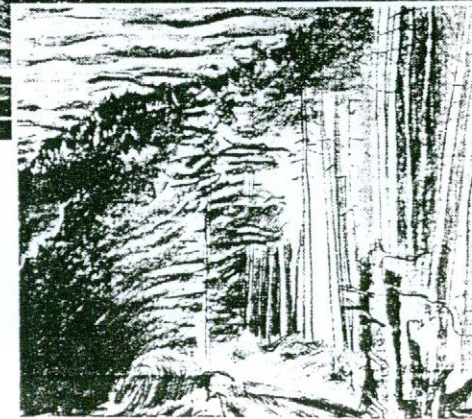
The museum—a synthesis of the best of western technology and optimism with building ideas abstracted from the traditional ones of Pacific Northwest First Nations—acted as an echo chamber for these sentiments, and a



The late Jack Shadbolt, creator of such works as *Elegy for an Island* (above) and *The Hornby Suite* (right), will be eulogized by friends and colleagues on Friday (January 19).

about being here." According to real-estate consultant Herb Auerbach, who lived in New York, Paris, and Montreal before moving to Vancouver, the event exceeded his best hopes—and those of other tribute organizers. "I have never seen a civic event like this in any city I have lived," he said. Going

to the memorial service, headed by Mayor Alvin Balkind, painter Peter Voornboom, and National Gallery curator of Canadian art Charlie Hill. The presentation will feature music, text readings, and slide projections of Shadbolt's best work, and will end with a screening of Stephen Arthur's short video "Transformations", a clever animation of Shadbolt's paintings.



...amber for these sentiments, and a backdrop for the procession to and the great hall by drummers and singers. The artist's ashes were carried in *Loo'tas*, the 60-foot canoe Reid carved as a prototype for the longer one he paddled on the Seine at Claude Lévi-Strauss's invitation. The personal tributes were serious but, often, equally humorous, with Reid's own artwork nearby seeming to reply with the same mix of emotions. Some speakers were even critical: Reid's foibles as a man and the incompleteness of his work were often mentioned alongside the praise for his genius and example.

Art historian Charlotte Townshend-Gault speaks of this honouring of an artist by a city as a rite of passage: "It was one of the most powerful events I have ever attended in Vancouver....It made me more excited

this in any city I have lived," he said. Going on to speak about his friend, he added, "Not only did Bill Reid instill a sense of pride for his own people, but he did it for all of us."

On Friday (January 29), Vancouver will have a civic rite for another of its best-loved and most influential artists, Jack Shadbolt, who died last November 22.

An evening hosted by Vancouver Art Gallery director Alf Bogusky will begin in the Robson Square Conference Centre's Judge McGill Theatre, with a series of short talks by friends and colleagues of Shadbolt's from the world of Canadian art. On hand will be curator Scott Watson of UBC's Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, artist Alan Wood, architectural historian Abraham Rogatnick (who sponsored an evocative memorial ceremony/party of his own in December for his late life partner, crit-

"Transformations", a clever animation of Shadbolt's paintings.

The crowd will then move upstairs to the rotunda and foyer of the Vancouver Art Gallery for a reception, and late arrivals are welcome there. Both events are free and open to everyone, but arrive early if you want to hear the talks, as the theatre's capacity is only 350. (Organizers will provide an audio feed for overflow attendees in the Robson Square Conference Centre lobby.) According to the memorial's organizer, curator Karen Henry, the purpose of the event is "to celebrate Jack's life and mourn his passing. We hope the community comes out to help us to help celebrate Shadbolt, who put this city on the map as an art centre."

Anyone who knew Jack Shadbolt will remember the reams of tales and opinion and speculation that used to wind out of him. But his ultimate legacy is his drawing and painting, and some of the finest Shadbolt works in the Vancouver

community, for years we've been complaining about there being no venues. Everyone was saying that, to have a theatre, you have to come up with \$1 million and have expensive lights. We're saying, 'Why do we have to be limited that way?'"

**REVVED-UP READINGS** The *Western Front* is launching a new monthly poetry series, but don't expect dry recitations or poetry slams. The first event, which takes place Friday night (January 29), features readings by Sheri-D Wilson from her new book, *The Sweet Taste of Lightning*, interspersed with live jazz and appearances by drag performers. "I wanted to break it up a bit," Full Frontal organizer Billeh Nickerson told the *Straight*. "It's also to open readings up to different communities: people who go to see a drag queen perform might not necessarily go to see a poet."

**PUBLIC ART REPORT CARD** Urbanarium has organized a forum for Wednesday (February 3) to examine the status of Vancouver's public-art program, especially when compared to efforts by other cities. Starting at 6 p.m., a panel of experts, including artists Ken Lum and Hank Bull and public-art consultant Carolyn Lair, will discuss this question. Public debate follows, and organizer Jeannie Bates said artists are encouraged to attend. Creative types will be pulled in two directions that night: at the Vancouver Museum at 7:30 p.m., they'll be discussing the fate of Artropolis.

**REMEMBERING SHADBOLT** On Friday (January 29) at 6 p.m., Rogers Cable will present a live, one-hour broadcast of the tribute to Jack Shadbolt, who died last November 22. Held at Robson Square Conference Centre, the memorial will feature a series of talks, poetry, and letter-readings by Shadbolt's artistic colleagues. • JANET SMITH



exhibited on the gallery's third floor until the end of February. These range from early studies and realist work through all phases of his nature-based abstraction, and include the important cycle of drawings called "The Hornby Suite". Hung in the rotunda, the four large paintings on view—most of them also created on Hornby Island—are particularly powerful in daytime, with the natural light revealing subtleties of colour and texture not evident under artificial light. Shadbolt's long-time gallery, Bau-Xi, will soon open a show of the overpainted collages he was working on at the time of his death.

There is some historic precedent for these high-profile public tributes to artists in Vancouver.

When poet Pauline Johnson died here on March 13, 1913, the whole city was thrown

SEE NEXT PAGE

**WHAT:**  
Tribute to  
Jack Shadbolt

**WHERE:**  
Robson Square  
Conference Centre (6 pm)  
and the Vancouver  
Art Gallery (7:15 pm)

**WHEN:** Friday (January 29)

**INFO:** 662-4719

## First they'll take Manhattan...

Ballet B.C. was taking the Big Apple by storm this week—even before it hit the prestigious Joyce Theater stage on Tuesday (January 26) for a six-day run. John Alleyne's troupe scored a full-page feature in the Sunday *New York Times*. The story, carrying the laudatory headline "Imagination That Transcends Expectations", focused on the company's history and innovative choreography.

Of the Joyce performances, Tricia Baldwin, executive director of Ballet B.C., told the *Straight*: "This is, without a doubt, the biggest engagement of the company's history. A number of presenters from the U.S. and Europe and the international media will be there." Ballet B.C. performed at New York's Brooklyn College to positive reviews in 1994.

## Arts Notes

Baldwin said Ballet B.C. is in a stronger position to pull off the New York tour than the National Ballet of Canada, which lost \$250,000 on a \$1-million trip to New York last fall. Instead of taking on the financial burden of the tour itself, Ballet B.C. is being presented by the Joyce Theater, which is paying the troupe a fee.

**THEATRE ON THE BLOCK** Reports that Livent is planning to auction off this city's Ford Centre for the Performing Arts do not have Vancouver Civic Theatres preparing to make a bid. With a mortgage of \$20 million, property taxes of \$500,000 per year, and about \$8 to \$15 million in new stage, sound, and lighting equipment needed to handle touring shows, it's not exactly a bargain. "If you took all those encumbrances away, maybe we could make it work," Civic Theatres' Rae Ackerman told the *Straight*. But he doesn't see how a commercial company could keep the theatre running, after Livent's attempt failed. "The only way I could see it maintained and useful to the community is as a civic theatre." Of the auction, expected to be announced later this week, he said, "The city wouldn't touch that."

**MAKESHIFT STAGE** A Canadian Actors' Equity co-op is turning the empty storefront at 1146 Commercial into a stage for its show *Devil Box Cabaret* February 3 to 11. It's the latest innovation by troupes needing small theatres; Pink Ink Theatre recently transformed the Russian Community Centre for a show. Said *Devil Box* director Camyar Chai: "As a

## Jack Shadbolt

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

into mourning. Vancouverites flocked to public memorials for the Ontario-born, half-Mohawk writer, whose romantic verses not only helped define this city's sense of itself when it was only 30 years old, but also helped form a distinctive Vancouver aesthetic that balanced all-powerful nature with the memory of First Nations forms and modernist hopes for the future. Although Shadbolt and Reid were much better artists than Johnson was a poet, there is no doubt that she was partly responsible for paving the way for their popular acceptance.

One way to gain a better appreciation of the aesthetic Johnson pioneered—and to pay tribute to Vancouver's finest modern artist—may be to complement the VAG event with a trip to the brilliant outreach exhibition the Belkin Gallery's Watson is showing in the Or Gallery space at 112 West Hastings Street until February 27. The title of the show—Heart of Darkness: Emily Carr and Jack Shadbolt—speaks to its location, one of the most toughly contested blocks in the Downtown Eastside's foul supermarket for crack and heroin. The unity of the art with the decaying setting makes for one of the most emotional, pointed, and timely exhibition experiences I have had here in years.

Watson has provided deftly eloquent, didactic wall texts to increase access to and appreciation for these visually overpowering works. On the first of these, he states the essence of the show: "This is the first two-person exhibition of British Columbia's finest artists." Once that remarkable fact sinks in—within sight of deals going down outside the Or's front door—Watson's strategy for hanging the works comes into view, with Carr's *Wasteland*, which depicts a clearcut landscape, next to Shadbolt's 1942 *Image in a Cedar Slash*. Thoughts turn naturally

from the devastation of forests to that of cities, and the appalling fact that what was once Vancouver's most vital retail block has become a no-go zone.

On the wall opposite are four placid drawings taken from Shadbolt's series "The Occupation of Point Grey" and depicting Vancouver's most leafy and self-righteous neighbourhood with dismembered bodies, dead domestic animals, and other detritus of conflict left to litter quiet streets.

Drawn out of Shadbolt's reaction to the increasingly grim news of the Second World War, these works take on special resonance with the mayhem going on in the Or's vicinity—which will soon drive the gallery, one of our city's most important artist-run spaces, out of the neighbourhood and into new quarters at Smithe and Richards. The handful of other arts organizations still left in an area that was once so hospitable to them will not be far behind.

Shadbolt and Carr were sometimes artists with angry voices, using pencil and paint to rage against the waste of that which is whole and beautiful. Only blocks from where Shadbolt shaped a generation of artists at the Vancouver School of Art, not far from Bill Reid's former jewellery workshop on Pender Street, Heart of Darkness speaks to this neighbourhood and this city just as boldly, sending out a *cri de coeur* for action before the damage is complete. Let's hope UBC and the Belkin Gallery can build on the memorial precedent of Burnaby's Shadbolt Centre by acquiring the soon-to-be-vacant Or Gallery site for further Downtown Eastside outreach courses, workshops, exhibitions, and community programs. While Bill Reid's monumental public sculpture is his best permanent memorial, I can think of no better way for Vancouver to mark the generosity and genius of Jack Shadbolt than this. ■