

Speaking softly on moral ambivalence

Beneath the layers you'll still find sexual, political implications in Lukacs' works

By ANN ROSENBERG

Don't let the images of fresh-faced boys lead you to believe that Attila Richard Lukacs has gone soft or is losing his bite. His new, imposing paintings are as full of sexual and political implications as any he has done before. Only this time they speak softly as they wield strong, morally ambivalent sticks. Lukacs' new exhibition opening today at the Diane Farris Gallery might seem different from the artist's earlier work. Instead of portraits of jackbooted, Mohawk-crested punks who stood like princes against Gainsborough-inspired landscape backdrops, instead of the homoerotic murals that were inspired by art history, you'll find paintings of choir boys, cadets with flags and youths kicking balls around a field.

VISUAL ARTS

Layered references, moral equivocation and eroticism are qualities that endow great works of art with a long shelf life. Lukacs, who is still under 30, is a master of such layering, with images that have the power to invade the viewer's psyche and remain there jostling for space with Michelangelo's David and Edouard Manet's Fifer.

The painting reproduced on the invitation to the exhibition is an image that begs comparison to these masterworks.

No, the young man in Lukacs' portrait is not naked like Michelangelo's David, but the muscles in the arm that supports the flag are as lovingly rendered a proof of physical prowess as is that Renaissance sculpture overall.

And the uniform that Lukacs' cadet wears, and the flag he carries, are as potent an emblem for what is right or wrong about war as is the sling David dangles over his left shoulder.

Lukacs' youth is also apple-cheeked like the fifer who stands in front of a similarly brushed, grey background in Manet's life-sized portrait of a militia boy. His boots cast strong, sharp shadows like the lad's shoes do in Manet's work.

Further, this contemporary painting, which is derived from a news media photograph, also evokes the famous photograph of



REMARKS MADE TO THE PRESIDENT AT THE WHITE HOUSE, oil painting by Attila Richard Lukacs, contains veiled meanings that invade the viewer's psyche

the young men who raise the flag at Iwo Jima, and with the many American flags painted by Jasper Johns.

Lukacs' portrait is of a youth who presumably is fit — or even anxious — for a fight to the death. He is willing, perhaps, to be cut down, at the height of his potential, for the sake of a patriotic cause.

The fact that the portrait is called Remarks Made to the President at the White House gives it a political dimension that points the way to other meanings: Bush's America, any president's America. America before and after Vietnam, pre- and post-detente. America during glasnost.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the exhibition is titled To Interested Young Men. These

words, like the images of the youth, convey many implications. The most literal and innocent reading is that this phrase, like the paintings of young men in action (singing, holding flags, playing sports) is simply a reference to the young men's interests.

At another level, this title suggests the show is a blandishment for gay observers, a hint I feel is an honest expression of the show's intent from Lukacs' personal, homoerotic point of view. Seduction and warning are present in equal measure. And the punks he previously painted are here replaced by officers with lovingly painted, almost clean-shaven heads.

This exhibition, which proves Lukacs is a *tour de force* image-



Portrait of cadet in the White House has haunting echoes of Michelangelo's David and Manet's The Fifer

maker and masterful painter, will be on view at the Diane Farris Gallery (1565 West Seventh) until Sept. 26. The public is welcome to attend today's opening between 2 and 5 p.m. and meet the artist.

Lukacs' other show, at Simon Fraser University's Teck Gallery at Harbour Centre, runs until Sept. 20. In it a series of canvases produced in 1984-85 attest to one phase in Lukacs' already complex development. Mischievous monkeys, some of whom are sexually aroused, gambol in vines set against impervious, graffiti-marked walls.

These creatures, which are skilfully and three-dimensionally rendered, are at odds with the flat, man-made environments in the backgrounds. As in real life,

the animals flaunt themselves and gaze at the spectator with uncanny intelligence, as if our behavior is as shocking to them as theirs is to us.

These works by Lukacs, however, are not as affronting as the images of skinheads and other controversial paintings executed in the years since his 1985 participation in the Vancouver Art Gallery's Young Romantics exhibition — a show that first brought him to public attention. Many these have been shown at the Farris Gallery in the last five years. Lukacs is a regular exhibitor even though he lives in Berlin.

Ken Lum's show is a retrospective of another young Vancouver artist who, like Lukacs, has a

Comical but socially aware pieces from Ken Lum cleverly incorporate language into art

national and international profile. This exhibition, which will be on display until Oct. 8 at the Vancouver Art Gallery (750 Hornby), offers a survey of Lum's last five years of production.

Visitors first see a red, doughnut-shaped sculpture composed of sectional, cushy chairs that sits in the rotunda under the gallery's Neoclassic dome. This visually inviting, but closed-to-the-public ring of seats is the best of several chesterfield pieces included in this exhibition that is installed principally in the second floor of the VAG.

The sofa installations are soft, found-object sculptures, and are one of Lum's best-known devices. For me, however, the up-ended sofas and bad-taste settees piled high with no-taste cushions (despite the obvious critique they make on current corporate systems, the worlds of foreign and domestic manufacturing, and the current obsession with upscale or downscale consumerism) are not very gripping. And as far as social commentary goes, other works in this witty, bright-as-a-jelly-bean show do a better job. For example, the Woodcutter

and His Wife, who are photographed standing on either side of a Douglas fir — he with a chainsaw in hand, she, with a cigarette — are a delightful pastiche of Hansel and Gretel, Grant Wood's American Gothic, ads for equipment and cigarettes, and the grimness of work-shirting it in the workforce.

Lum, like Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall, who have been subjects of similar VAG retrospectives, is big on high-tech photography and conceptual ideas. Like Wall, Lum employs staged photography as a principal basis for his art.

Like Wallace, Lum likes color fields and the formality of simple geometric shapes. While all three artists are concerned with art-historical, political and social messages, Lum is the one who most frequently and most fully incorporates language into his art.

Lum is clearly someone for whom words matter. There are poems in Chinese and Arabic written in candy-colored acrylic script on plastic banners. There

are slogans and truisms inscribed on the bright plastic components of the photographic diptyches like the Woodcutter and His Wife. Ad verbiage real and imagined signwriter-inspired version of alphabet soup, polyglot, new or no glot are subjects for large-scale, vibrant works.

It was a pleasure to see so many families, and especially young children, enjoying the comical but socially aware pieces in this sparkling exhibition. ♦

Color prints with a hard-edged reality

Roy Arden, who has a site-specific installation at the Or Gallery, is, like Ken Lum, an artist who combines photographs and minimalist color fields. He, too, is a younger Vancouver artist with a growing reputation.

In one of his earlier exhibitions, a series of archival photographs of cars confiscated from the Japanese during the Second World War (carefully selected and reformatted for presentation) were set under a row of sky-blue rectangles of a similar dimension. The blue color fields seemed to emblemize freedom as surely as the impounded cars symbolized the lack of it.

His current show Frontenac, which ends today, is based

more on first-hand experience than much of his earlier work. However, the look and intent of these color prints is archival, and the inclusion of hard edge elements make firm connections with the non-representational motifs Arden has incorporated into past works.

In the current exhibition, a suite of large photographs documents the pipes, boxes, buckets and meters that are part of the Frontenac Apartments' basement. The discarded tools, the inoperative gauges, are evidence of turn-of-the-century technology and suggest the presence of workmen in overalls who toiled (and toil yet) in this fusty boiler room.

The colors are earthy.

Blacks, greys, brick-browns and rusty reds harmonize with the metallic rectangle Arden has rolled on to the wall (below waist level) like a dado, and with the black rectangle he painted near the entrance of the room in which his exhibition takes place. The photographs are hung low to suggest the real-life location of the pipes and ducts represented.

Logically laid out and artfully conscious of art history within Arden's oeuvre, Frontenac presents a rather stiff and sanitized version of a subterranean place filled with the smell of rust and, likely, the sound of drips of water falling on cement. I felt this work took a too controlled, too tepid reading of a warm and claustrophobic place.

Attila Richard Lukacs

September 8 - 26

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