End Painting on the Edge The Young Romantics

Philippe Raphanel Exhibition
Or Gallery Assistance
Writing about artist

Roy Arden

The Vancouver Art Gallery has not had a group exhibition of new Vancouver painting since Affinities *in 1979. Scott Watson's* Young Romantics *exhibition (June 8 to August 15), featuring work by Graham Gillmore, Angela Grossmann, Attila Richard Lukacs, Vicky Marshall, Philippe Raphanel, Charles Rea, Derek Root and Mina Totino, represents the VAG's most ambitious statement about local painting in some years. (All works mentioned in this article, unless otherwise noted, were made in the spring of 1985.) Vancouver artist Roy Arden balances the strengths and weaknesses of the exhibit.*

Installation view of the *Young Romantics* courtesy: The Vancouver Art Gallery, photo: Jim Jardine

Having revitalized the international art market and incited a critical fury, painting as avant-garde praxis has, in the course of its resurgence, finally returned to Vancouver. The *Young Romantics* presented eight of Vancouver's most ambitious young painterly painters. Curator Scott Watson's choice of the 'Romantics' label is intended to position these works in a historical perspective — this exhibition commemorates "The Return of Romantic this exhibition is a *fin-de-siecle* requiem for European cultural history. If one were to accuse contemporary German and Italian painters of revisionism and derivativeness, it would be appropriate to double the charges against the *Young Romantics*. Twice removed from their sources, they steal from Turner and Munch via LeBrun and Baselitz.

Watson, in his catalogue essay, uses quotes from Antonin Artaud and "Anti-Oedipus" by ed a coherent, bona fide, art historical "movement". Watson insists on "the affirmative nature of (these artists') protest",[2] which he envisions as a rebellion of the body and imagination, in the name of the present, against the oppressive futures of Marxism and Capitalism with their linear conception of time and mechanization of the body. A youthful exhuberance and a readiness to paint have been misconstrued as a protest against political ide-

Charles Rea, *Tissue of the Soul* (1985), acrylic on books mounted on plywood, 143 x 110 cm, courtesy: Diane Farris Gallery, photo: Jim Jardine/VAG

face of Ronald McDonald and the politburo. This defence of contemporary painting is understandable in light of the ironically reactionary criticism it has had to endure. In reinventing "degenerate art", Baselitz consequently rediscovered our own latter day intolerants. The storm has subsided considerably since then. The critical head is settled down once again on the shoulders of the art monster, convinced for now that the flames within pose little threat. While the futures of Marxism and Capitalism are nothing to look forward to, it seems that the real weight on the shoulders of the *Young Romantics'* fiery bodies is the oppressive past of their own bourgeoise cultural roots. This past threatens to stifle their imaginations sooner than they can exorcise such heavy history.

In their rush to be identified with the latest trend, the *Young Romantics* have appropriated idioms that are loaded with plenty of baggage. Ignoring the possibility for a clean New World break with European tradition, these artists employ vernaculars from which they are severely detached. Searching for a mode of expression that was direct and visceral, they didn't foresee the various contents that their newly found styles evoke. They needed a vehicle, a rowboat would have sufficed — instead, they booked passage on the Titanic.

The paintings of the *Young Romantics* are exciting if only because they are novel within the context of local art history. If they make

enjoyed the spoils of American technology and imperialism, artists responded to the successive trends of abstract expressionism, op, pop, minimal, and conceptual art. Now that the party is over and America is held in disfavour (forcing her to resort to pathetic attempts at rekindling nationalistic fervour), Canadian artists are looking to the Europeans for their cues.

This exhibition is marked by the neglect of *place*, a neglect which points to the habit of Vancouver art of behaving as though it were a mere shadow of the ideal art worlds of New York or Berlin. In spite of the fact that the quantity and quality of its art and discourse can only be equaled by cities twice the size and hundreds of years older, Vancouver continues to practice art and criticism by osmosis. Although some of the *Young Romantics'* paintings are deserving of much attention, the overall impression one gets is that the artists have consumed the latest exotic diet and regurgitated the stuff in a partially digested form.

One presumes that the *Young Romantics*, as an exhibition, is the Vancouver Art Gallery's way of demonstrating its intent to nurture local art before it withers from neglect or escapes to the more fertile grounds of Queen Street or New York. The packaging of this show on the other hand, does not promote a clear analysis of the issues that this work raises; museum bureaucracies the world over have adopted a marketing strategy that mimics the media with which they are forced to compete. It is not necessary to swallow this package whole, it is imperative though, to see it for what it is — the energetic experimentation of gifted young artists who will undoubtedly find themselves making very different art in years to come. So far at least, they have managed to avoid the commercial puerility of the East Village variety.

On the same floor and running concurrently with the *Young Romantics* is an exhibition of the type of European art that has been so influential to these Vancouver painters. *Europe in Vancouver* is a fortunately timed counterpoint to the *Young Romantics* and offers the opportunity for a digression on the differences between actual conditions of art production in the two places. Comprised of works by contemporary painters, *Europe in Vancouver* is a collection on permanent loan to the VAG, courtesy of an anonymous patron. Although

this collection sorely lacks works by heavyweights such as Anselm Kiefer and Sigmar Polke, it is an important addition — one which signals a shift from the collection's earlier emphasis on American art.

Compared to the *Young Romantics*, the European works seem slick and facile — partly because the Europeans are more experienced, and perhaps because they are cynically comfortable with their role as producers of commodities. Elvira Bach is the most unconvincing, her pallid, derivative "expressionism" is a kind of Kirchner wallpaper. Even Middendorf looks flat. Mario Merz, once a figure in the forefront of *arte povera*, now allows himself the luxury of oil paint but refuses to relinquish his trademark neon tubes, guarantors of his historic credibility. A collection of minor prints and large, easily dispatched paintings, *Europe in Vancouver* serves as a general reminder of how foreign "professional" art making is to Vancouver. Only older, established artists such as Toni Onley, whose innocuous landscapes are comfortable in waiting rooms of dentists and large corporations, ever receive the financial support needed to facilitate such production. In contrast, the average young Vancouver artist has plenty of time to worry his/her paintings. Far from the centres of the art market, there are no nagging queues of impatient collectors. This is both fortunate and unfortunate: it saves us the drudgery of having to look at works which should have been rejects. On the other hand, Vancouver artists sometimes tend to destroy excellent pieces by overworking them.

Yet, the overworked surfaces have other possible significances: they evoke the dark, tubercular west cost rain forest (one thinks of Emily Carr's dank palette), they are metaphors for an elegiac sense of the history of painting, as archaeological strata — as though all the canvases ever painted were glued on top of each other and painted over once again, they are hieroglyphics of the asphalt heart of a post-modernist sensibility whose heaven has been displaced by the lonely void in which the late-capitalist adman displays his products.

Few of the *Young Romantics* appear to use gesso or any other white base. Some use roofing tar and sawdust for texture. The effect is that the works are light absorbing masses rather than reflective surfaces: they don't give off light, they eat it. All of the artists, except Vicky Marshall, fasten objects to their paintings or mix foreign matter into their paint. Charles Rea actually uses books instead of canvas; an intelligently conceived project, Rea's works are engaging. On the other hand, Graham Gillmore's *You Do Not Belong To You*, features the carcasses of two brass instruments — the only function of which seems to be to draw one's attention away from an attempt to make the biggest painting in the exhibition. It is instead the biggest failure.

Angela Grossmann's *The Wedding* is an orgy of colour, it's central motif is an embracing couple rendered in a bright blood red. At once spectres and flayed carcasses, they are vulnerable beings-without-skin, standing in a golden door frame that is the threshold of their world. This world is the *world in the head* of the artist; a discordant nightmare of dismembered limbs and ruins, it is Bosch's inferno redone in a hysterical fiesta of oils. The title of Grossmann's *Reclamation No. 4, The head is bloodied but*

Philip Raphanel, *Grainery* (1984), acrylic and sawdust on canvas, 229 x 168 cm, courtesy: Diane Farris Gallery, photo: Jim Gorman/VAG

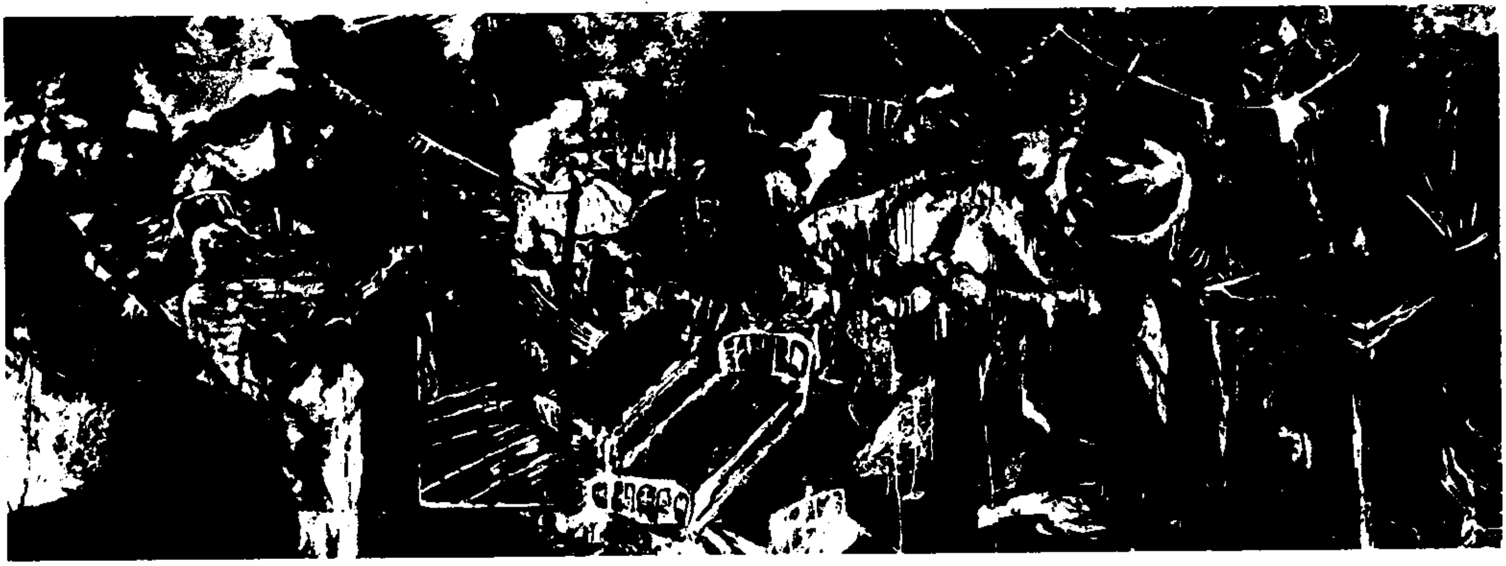
these works are infused with "the energy of celebration",[4] but we experience only the celebration of the solipsistic survivor whose dream of immortality is the unconscious desire to reign alone from atop the pile of post-apocalyptic rubble.

If Grossmann's works are technicolour "reclamations" of her dreams, they tell us nothing of her reality. These claustrophobic visions betray an indebtedness to the poignant narratives of Max Beckman, but Beckman was a creature of his time and place, a world-gone-mad that bears little resemblance to our own cozy boredom. Although these paintings are aggressive testaments to an ambitious talent, they could alienate the viewer who is concerned with more than their decorative aspect. A re-run of Weimar *angst* is of little worth in a world with different problems.

Vicky Marshall is probably the best known of the *Young Romantics*. Marshall finds inspiration in the happenings of her urban environment, perhaps because of this her work is less pretentious than some of the others. A skilled and accomplished painter she has, however, a tendency towards illustration, as though anything could go through her ringer and come out homogenized by the Marshall style. *Chimney* (1984), is formally perfect, or perfectly formal. The vertical red structure threatens to take us back to that old, reductivist surface. In

displaying an engorged red member. Although this painting offers the most risque image in the exhibition, it may as well be a non-figurative abstraction. Style, "good taste" and technique have brought this work to a dead end that is anything but the intuitive and visceral works that the catalogue promises. *Disturbed Sleep* although less restrained still seems flat, especially in comparison to the gobs of paint used by the other artists. Marshall's painting suffers from the comparisons that this exhibition presents.

Philippe Raphanel was born and schooled in Paris. This may account for his use of such literally local subject matter, the other *Young Romantics* largely tend to shun the local — one assumes it is insufficiently exotic. Using acrylics mixed with sawdust, Raphanel depicts logs, grain elevators, and other "Canadian" subjects. *Worker at Rest* (1984), displays a contented, sleeping worker beneath a machine that looks like it was designed by Henry Moore — all biomorphic curves. The idea must have been to make the machine look menacing — ready to eat the unsuspecting prole. Raphanel, however, shares Marshall's tendency toward illustration. Not scary enough, this painting might be seen as a sentimental utopian dream of man and machine co-existing in perfect harmony. We might blame this on the artist's Parisian training, this wor



Angela Grossman, *Reclamation II* (detail) (1985), enamel, oil and tar on canvas, 213.4 x 183 cm, courtesy: Diane Farris Gallery, photo: Jim Gorman/VAG

ange sky, the phallic log becomes a dynamo threatening to explode from its centre.

In 1934 Vancouver photographer John Vanderpant wrote about the grain elevators that dot the shores of Burrard Inlet, he saw them as "unpretentious temples of trade". In their "rigid strength and sublime simplicity"[5] he found a new world equivalent to the monumental structures of antiquity. Raphanel's *Grainery* (1984), is another story; in institutional pastel blues and yellows the *Grainery* is alive with schizophrenic, lunatic energy — it is preparing to jitter out of the canvas and crush the viewer. In pieces with this kind of energy, the artist's taste and training become less oppressive.

While perhaps the youngest artist, Mina Totino is the oldest person contributing to this exhibition. The advantage of her years has enabled her to avoid some of the problems with which the younger ones are struggling. Her largest painting, *Luna Fortuna*, is well conceived and executed, but one wonders if the tin cans and inner tubes that are glued to its surface are a superfluous concession to fashion.

A scene of a scrap yard at night with three phases of the moon hanging simultaneously in a dark blue sky, *Luna Fortuna* is both melancholic and good humoured. Totino's brushwork refers to De Kooning but is firmly under her control. Her subject we are told, is "human frailty"[6]. In her allegorical three-painting suite, *The Three Graces*, we are introduced to three salt-of-the-earth, lumpen proletariat types: *The Mopper*, *The Sweeper*, and *The Shoveler*. As with the couple in *American Gothic*, each figure holds the tool of his/her trade in hand, symbolic of an intimate connection with the earth. Totino's subjects come from daily life. Although her style is familiar, reminiscent of American figurative abstraction of the 50s, her work displays a mature, humanistic attitude that is a relief from this show's other extreme of *traumkitsch*. Her painting is just strong enough to save the *Graces* from sentimental provincialism.

Derek Root is a landscape painter. His *Sea of Forking Paths* is an awkward composition which actually depicts a wave breaking against a stone seawall. The horizontal seam which demarcates the two panel painting at first seems either a gratuitous affectation or the result of little foresight. If we look harder though, it becomes apparent that Root builds his paintings by accretion. This painting did not commence as an attempt to produce a seamless pictorial reality. Rather, it is a collage — assembled piecemeal and alternately de-collaged until the desired effect is achieved. The anxious composition tells us that nothing is well here. Rocks, bricks, and water are at odds with each other. How are we to know if this anxiousness is due to poor painting or is, instead, the evocation of the interior of a torn being? My guess is that Root is

uncomfortable with his subject matter. His breaking wave is simply white paint, an effort to imitate nature with literal drips more reminiscent of Richard Hambleton than Turner's atmospheric visions of Nature. In Root's latest piece, *Explosion in a Landscape*, he jumps across the English Channel and lands in the background of a Baselitz — a tangle of burnt stumps and broken branches. Root is in search of a subject through which to present his interior landscape. Geography and representation, however, do not seem to be appropriate vehicles; Root's strength shows in fleeting passages where gesture and atmospheric nuance unite successfully.

Charles Rea paints interiors of cathedrals and museums on surfaces constructed of hardcover books. Like Joseph Cornell, Rea hasn't been to Europe to visit the places which he finds so fascinating. Instead his travels are through the pages of books and the clutter of second-hand shops. The books reinforce the architectonic nature of his project and add the symbolic element of books as "the lust of reading" wrapped in "prudent antiquity".[7] Cultural, if not sacred energy cells, they lend the works a fetishistic power. The interiors are, of course, meant as human interiors, as *The Tissue of the Soul*, informs us. In earlier pieces such as *Tissue*, *Love God*, and *Painting With My Eyes Closed*, Rea depicts Gothic, Baroque, and Renaissance structures in a manner remarkably similar to the obscure Italian painter and poet Filippo De Pisis. De Pisis is known for bridging Impressionism and *Pittura Metafisica*, one might also add, anticipating Taschism. Rea's painting can also be seen as occupying a territory at the juncture of these three modes. While Rea's new pieces retain a lingering fraction of the murkiness predominant in his 1984 exhibition at the Western Front Gallery (*Vanguard*, May 84, p. 31) they also introduce an understanding of light that betrays a recent study of the old Italian masters. In the two latest works, *1961*, and *L'America*, the artist has ventured into twentieth century architecture. *1961*, an image of the interior of an opera house, is daubed onto books that are arranged in a rhythmic, checkerboard pattern. The monochromatic palette ranges from cuticle pink to flat red, transforming the rotunda into a large brain. Comparatively under-painted, this work relies heavily on optical illusion (a strobe effect) that the pattern provides. *L'America* is based on the architecture of the Guggenheim Museum. Rea has peeled it like an orange so that the floor and ceiling are both parallel to the paintings surface. Although the idea is clever, the drawn design is sloppy and the colours (oxblood to peppermint) make it the ugliest and least successful piece in Rea's exhibition history. The graphic nature of this piece is at odds with Rea's forte as a painterly painter. His metaphysical oeuvre is innovative and intelligent, his emotional range — from a brooding, mud-puddle pessimism to epiphanic moments of *claritas* make Rea an outsider to this exhibition.

Graham Gillmore's biological worlds of pleasure are gardens in which decay is never decrepitude, but simply the inevitable cycle of a benign Nature. The recurrent gramophone motif in his paintings doubles as an *art nouveau* flower. Its pistil and corolla make it a symbol of androgyny as well as a reminder of a lost Eden. Images of birth and rebirth speak of

Vicky Marshall, *Voyeur* (1983), oil on canvas, 193 x 155 cm., courtesy: Diane Farris Gallery, photo: Jim Gorman/VAG

and female bodies aligned at the genitals. A white umbilical cord growing from their genitalia widens into a ghost of the trademark gramophone. A large, antiquated hand saw and a pair of scissors complete this work. While the symbolism of these paintings is heavy-handed and cliched, they are redeemed by Gillmore's drawing. His open, erotic line is the backbone of his art — its quivering, inquisitive personality brings it to few dead ends. When Gillmore dispenses with it altogether, as in *You do Not Belong to You*, we discover that his painting is weak. Francesco Clemente has said that a good painting is one you wish you were living in. With his unfortunately titled *The Return of Aqua-Vulva*, (1985),Gillmore, a fan of Clemente's has created such a place. Gillmore's project is melancholic, if not nostalgic. He must stay awake in order to prevent his work from degenerating into gratuitous "hippy" symbolism or atrophying into the decadent facade of Klimt's Vienna.

Attila Richard Lukacs paints a poetic, transgressive eroticism. *Il y a quinze ans que je n'ai pas fait ca*, is an enormous metal cage. On the left side sits a minotaur, its intestines spilling outward as piss-yellow putti hover around its bull head. This is decor, an homage to Moreau and half of European art history. The true subject occupies the centre of the cage, the most engaging and haunting image in the exhibition, *it is a face that looks at you*. This is a real face, not an art historical one. A shaved head and a tattooed arm mark this pensive young man as an archetypal juvenile delinquent. Lukacs, the *enfant terrible* of the show has dangles a bunch of grapes from his fingers. We are left to imagine the scene of his theft from Caravaggio's effeminate *Bacchus*. The tattoos, coloured with the same inky blue as the grapes, float off the arm and rest on the surface of the painting. An art-form associated with the primitive, the tattoo is at odds with the rest of the piece — a mock academic machine, this canvas is poised and well-nigh neo-classical. The gallery goer is duped into a confrontation with the naked prisoner, his face is a text, a statement of his contempt for the politics and "morality" of a society which denies him his body.

Son, is a portrait of the same boy. Hung close to the floor, it displays only the boy's head, resting in the prostrate position as though he were a giant sleeping on the gallery floor. His closed eyes, and slightly oriental, broad nose and full lips, illuminated from above by a benevolent light, suggest contentment and grace — a young Buddha. This sleeping muse of Lukacs's is at once the smallest and largest painting in the exhibition. Having escaped the delinquent's accusing eyes, at least physically, we are now the parents of the beast "that only a mother could love", gently tucking him into bed. Lukacs would no doubt be bored by analysis of the political significance of his art. He simply wants to tell us how it feels. It is this autobiographic intensity, along with Lukacs's technical skill, that makes this work so powerful. Lukacs has found himself in the present, as well as in history.

Inspite of the distractions and affectations that fill this exhibition one nevertheless experiences moments in which something genu-

Derek Root, *Chasm* (1985), enamel, oil and tar on canvas, 243.9 x 167.7 cm., courtesy: Diane Farris Gallery, photo: Jim Gorman/VAG

Young Romantics is the attempt to rediscover painting at a time when it is as archaic as iambic pentameter. Such heroism deserves to be received with generosity but "heroes eat soup like anyone else"[8] and in this case the kitchen is far from the table. There is no shortage of models closer at hand: Lawren Harris, Emily Carr, Maxwell Bates, Jack Shadbolt, bill bissett, Rauschenberg, Al Neil, Michael Morris, Mark Tobey. Why approach De Kooning through Baselitz or landscape through nineteenth century models? Turner, whose art is paradigmatic for at least one of the paintings in the show, believed in God, the sublime, and Nature. In order to experience the elemental vortex he desired to recreate, he had himself tied to the mast of a ship in the middle of a North Sea storm. This conviction is nowhere evident in the agnostic art of the *Young Romantics*. Instead, God, Nature, and the sublime have been replaced by — Turner. "It is deadly hard to worship god, star, /and totem. Deadly easy /to use them like worn-out condoms"[9]

The lack of apparent recognition by these artists of just who, what, when, why, and where, they are, is another sad chapter in the story of the Terminal City[10] artist who wishes to be somewhere else. For all of Watson's insistence that these artists are champions of the present, we discover that this "present" is second-hand. Having discovered that "kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain off death",[11] the *Young Romantics* have fallen into another type of kitsch — that which curtains off *life*. Their disdain for the "reality" of rationalism has led them to miss out on the

is to be more than a luxury of a wealthy people, a self-reflexive game of art for art's sake, or a necrophilic dance with a weary collective subjectivity, it must recognize itself as "necessary to the composition or knowledge of the real"[12] It requires patience and humility to hear the voices whispering through the cracks in the facade with which we in our weakness obscure the present. ☐

NOTES

1. Scott Watson, "Surface, Ruin, Flesh", in *Young Romantics* exhibition. catalogue, (Vancouver, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1985), p. 8.
2. *ibid*, p. 8.
3. Scott Watson, "Terminal City — Place, Culture, and the Regional Inflection", in *Vancouver Art and Artists — 1931-1983* exhibition catalogue, (Vancouver, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983), p. p. 226.
4. *op cit*, Watson, "Surface, Ruin, Flesh", p. 10.
5. John Vanderpant, in *John Vanderpant, Photographs*, Charles C. Hill, (Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1976), p. 26.
6. *op cit*, Watson, "Surface, Ruin, Flesh", p. 13.
7. Loredana Parmesani, "Filippo De Pisis", *Flash Art*, '10, Jan. 1983, p. 34.
8. Jack Spicer, excerpt from "Language" in *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser, (Los Angeles, Black Sparrow Press, 1975) p. 220.
9. *ibid*, pp. 226.
10. Vancouver, at the end of the railway line that crosses Canada has long been referred to as *The Terminal City* by its inhabitants.
11. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, (New York, Harper and Row, 1985) p. 253.
12. Robin Blaser, "The Practice of Outside", in *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, *op cit*, p.271.