

Robert Enright / COMPOSITION BY FEELED THE VISUAL ART OF bill bissett

In a radiant explosive nature poem called "in the forest" bill bissett writes rapturously about the connections between the world of nature and the whirled of the flesh. After inviting us as readers to join in the rutting game — "an touch an suck an kiss bodee yr/cock yr running bliss cum th/dawn of yr heart" — he begins a mantric invocation that is as much persuasion as desire. "th skin is opn opn/to th touch nd th mouth running endless/dreems" the poem tells us and goes on to open up the field to a world of limitless expansion. "th skin is opening/with our touch n th treez moov thru us/ th earth moov thru us watr sky cum thru our/limbs our flesh nd th skin is nd th skin is opn to our/touch thru our belly th spine uv th universe all is/opn skin is opn thru our soul." This is a wonderful conceit: the body realized as a space whose dimensions run a range from the corporeal to the cosmic. It's in poems like this that bissett's charter membership in the Whitman College of Ecstatic Poetics becomes clear; the field he moves in makes adjustments of scale and kind with the ease of a caress. The world is a place that must not only be imagined into existence but also must be tangibly imagined. It's a kind of figuration by feeled, to do violence to a phrase of Charles Olson, in which bissett's head and hand stroke the body into a unity that is indissoluble.

As goes his poetry, so goes his painting. bissett has been making visual images for as long as he's been making literary ones and they share with their literary twins a Dionysian fervour. Let me pick an early example of his commingled imagery: in "th first light," [Plate 1] an acrylic on board done in 1976-77, bissett conjures up one of his characteristic self-portraits, a figure either on fire or of the angelic party. Either way, he's a character of immense attraction, alive with an irresistible vitality. A good deal of this energy comes from the simple way that bissett makes marks — layered strokes of colour that are often outlined in such a way that they radiate the surface. This image is a

riot of colour and undulating lines whose solitary figure is a man with many faces. bissett renders the figure as a series of surrogate animals, so that the intermixing of the human and the natural world is complete. The sex of the man looks like a disgruntled bull, its nostrils flared open and its horns the points of definition for the human waist. What seems to be driving it wild is the conjunction of a pair of metonymic cunts that hang between the man's legs — spikey and large they are a match for this bull in a vagina shop. Even the figure's chest is realized as a benign bear with a nocturnal and spacey feel about it, the nipples wide and round in the realization that the world is a transforming place in which all god's creatures share an angelic and a sexy disposition. Genesis is not the originating book of the edenic world that bissett creates in this marvellous painting, but parthenogenesis is. It is a painted world that is capable of auto-eroticizing its component parts in an infinitely ecstatic sexual dance.

It's important to realize that bissett is part of a tribe of painters (to appropriate and change a notion from Margaret Laurence) that begins with Indian art and comes through Blake and the aboriginal tradition invented by Norval Morrisseau. There are quotations from other painters along the way as well. The female sexes that tempt the frenzied bull in "th first light" are familiars yanked out of the rapacious sexual terrain of Miro while the vaguely hieroglyphic quality of the shapes that decorate the figure's body comes from the same language source as a diversion of painters running from Adolf Gottlieb to Niki de Saint Phalle. Throughout bissett's career it's possible to see the painters and sculptors who have been on his mind, if not in his mind's eye; there are boxes that look like junk-yard Joseph Cornell and assemblages that scramble about in the refuse-romancing of Arman; there are collages that Richard Hamilton would have made had he been into the homoerotics of pop culture [Plate 2]; there are collages that have the uninflected intelligence of Kurt Schwitters [Plate 3]. And many of bissett's curious shapes — they seem like highly stylized pieces from a jigsaw puzzle you'll never figure out — anticipate the strange pictorial language of Keith Haring. But even when bissett appears to have been more a borrower than a lender (he certainly seems to have suggested a palette to an artist like Laurence Paul Yuxweluptun), the paintings still seem entirely his own. He has

created one of the most uncompromisingly authentic bodies of work in Canada and he seems incapable of a dishonest visual gesture. This doesn't mean that the paintings always work but that they always have a reason for being what they are. One of the most pleasing aspects of bissett's work is to discover the degree of figurative resolution in the paintings; a figure will be clearly defined, with broad, discrete brushstrokes (as we see in "walking" [Plate 4]); the figure will barely be discernible in a shower of tonally proximate colours (as "molecular dissolv" [Plate 5] makes clear). Wonderful paintings emerge from this technique — like "wizard" [Plate 6] in which the subject of the painting emerges in an all-over composition of indecent colour. What is intriguing about this work (and others like it) is that it duplicates the disintegration of the subject found in synthetic cubism; the subject loses identity in the process of finding its place in the composition. But Picasso and Braque were after an insistence on pictorial invention — a revolution in seeing. What bissett desires is a revolution in the way we think about our relationship to the universe. Except as a by-product, his concerns are not painterly, although they most assuredly end up being perceptual. Then in work like "summr" [Plate 7] he will make marks that look like they belong to Salomé, the German painter of dazzling swimmers and pretty boys. Always with bissett there is the sense that these individual figures have conceived of themselves as participants in a world of insatiate, polymorphous sexuality. At the same time (and this is a paradox that seems to sit at the heart of spiritual devotion), there is something of the quality and reach of religious art in these works to the extent that they trace the figure's movement towards a radiant invisibility, a condition of tonal oneness with the charged space around them. It's a kind of trippy transcendentalism, equal parts Renaissance and Tantric art mixed in with a brew-ha-ha of hallucinogens. Certainly no other Canadian artist has been as thorough in his investigation — both technically and experientially - of the condition of cosmic yearning; bissett is a space-age Browning, his reach obliterating his grasp in an almost unbearable super-nova of cascading colour. "th dreems ar endless" he tells us from the vantage point of his forest hideaway, and so it seems is his visual embodiment of that limitless reverie.