

R. Fish / INTERVIEW

*Robert Field (R. Fish) was interviewed by Lois Redman, August 16, 1979, on one of his visits from Malcolm Island, B.C. The Capilano Review wished to publish information about Fish's recent show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, June 9 - July 16, 1978.*

**LR** Alvin Balkind uses the word "romantic" in connection with you.<sup>1</sup> How do you feel about that?

**RF** Oh, Alvin was waiting for that one. I took him out to the Harrison River one bitterly cold day. I don't think he's ever spent much time in the country, but I got him out there. He arrived in his old navy toque and, with all his extra clothes on, looked about forty pounds heavier than he normally does. I stuffed him inside a pair of chest-waders and we walked down the middle of the river channel while I towed my canoe, which held all my plaster and stuff, behind me. Salmon were bumping up against his legs and he felt the feeling of buoyancy — it was a completely new experience for him. Then we got down to the river mouth and I was making my moulds. I forget the question he asked, but I said something about my being just a pure romantic.



*LR* You enjoy taking people who are used to being governed by the structures of their cities and their lives — taking them out into something that has another structure.

*RF* Yes. It's a very dynamic structure, too — the whole life and death struggle laid out before me. Most of the things that happen in the city tend to be greyer. There isn't that intensity: you aren't that close to primeval forces. The excitement for me is being up at Malcolm Island where I can see things like seals hunting every day or watch whales moving.

*LR* So you prefer that natural structure to man's social structure?

*RF* I feel it more deeply, although I don't feel that culture is a disease. Culture is definitely a part of me — my need to create and to see what other people create.

*LR* For someone who now lives away from the city and whose art comes from that natural source, you've had a very social background. What happened to make you go out there?

*RF* I've been going out there all my life. I've got a father who enjoyed the same sort of thing. Also, I'm very fortunate in that I was gifted with good eyesight. Combined with that gift was my interest in looking into things which was created by people I'd grown up with.

*LR* What about sight? I get the feeling that your sight means an identification and understanding — a sympathetic vision.

*RF* That tends to be true. I enjoy seeing things closely. I've often been accused of being morbid because a lot of the things that I work with are dead. Unfortunately, quite often you can't touch things and get to know them by looking at them closely unless they are dead. If I were driving down the highway and saw an animal at the side of the road, or, when walking through town, if I saw a sparrow lying in the gutter, I would pick it up and take it home because of the need to look at something and to understand it — to view it very, very closely.



*LR* In the pieces of your journal that are printed in the catalogue, you use the words “visual feast” and “symphony.” It seems to be an appreciation of life and yet that this appreciation should be focused at the point of death in order to understand it seems a curious focus.

*RF* For me it’s not such a curious focus because it’s a beautiful culmination. The salmon, which are what I describe as being the visual feast, have gone through all of their cycle. When they get into the river they do the final maturing, the procreation, and then it’s the winter, the dying of things. I don’t think of it as being morbid and death as being a bad thing: in my mind it’s a beautiful ending. However, I’m sure people would be able to find all sorts of incidents in nature where animals kill each other — even the fish do a lot of fighting amongst themselves.

*LR* But you don’t portray any of this. It’s kind of a memorial . . .

*RF* You think I idealize it? I don’t know. Alvin was saying there’s something classical and very clean about the pieces as well as romantic.



*LR* Are you interested in doing other aspects of the natural cycle?

*RF* Sure. Whatever is a part of my life. Now that I'm in the city I'm getting into people things more: humans and human bodies. Also, when I'm down here, I tend to be influenced by some of the art. I've always had an appreciation for somewhat savage human art, such as some of the things from New York. Maybe not "savage," but really strong images — the human element when it leaves its grey areas.

*LR* These "grey areas" are situations that economics has forced people into, or situations in which you feel people are being led away from being human?

*RF* My "grey areas" in the city are just times when people allow other people to make decisions for them. You're so reliant in the city on what other people can do for you rather than what you can do for yourself. I've become so independent in the last few years, for example, in being able to build a place from scratch . . .

*LR* What about people who don't have your experience of nature? You're taking these natural forms away from their context and putting them in an art gallery on the wall or floor. How do you expect or hope that viewers will relate to what you're presenting to them?

*RF* Well, on the west coast I think that they will realize that this experience isn't far removed from them: this is something that they could experience if they wanted to or if they had the initiative. West coast people tend to react more favourably, as they understand these things. Farther east, if the Toronto show was any sort of an example, the reaction was 50-50. There was no middle ground: it was either pure hate or pure love. The funniest thing was that I had a big fish carcass encased in glass, and it did smell a bit but I never thought about it. At one point, one of the guys who contributed a lot of money to the AGO walked through and said, "This show stinks!" I felt like walking over and levelling him. Then I realized, to tell you the truth, the show *did* stink!

*LR* I'm not familiar with the process of making plaster moulds and putting the latex in.

*RF* You make sure the fish or animal isn't going to get locked in — most animals are flexible enough. When I make the plaster mould I can usually just lift it up — you're lifting a lot of weight in fairly wet plaster — and then just shake and the carcass will gradually fall out. It's plaster moulds, rubber casts: the cast is your final product.

*LR* What is it about the rubber that you like?

*RF* Oh, it's tactile and it colours beautifully. The rubber tends to deteriorate, though. With the salmon it's beautiful because the fish have a life-cycle of four years and my rubber has a life-cycle, under normal use, of about four or five years. These objects double the life of one salmon — the cast of a particular salmon would last four years beyond the salmon's normal life and then that image of the salmon would die too.

*LR* How did you come to make moulds of salmon?

*RF* When I finished university, I went to the Vancouver School of Art for one year. It was around December of that year that there was a strike by the janitors and so there was no heat in the school. I decided that since the school was so cold I would take some plaster and go out onto a river. That's when I started making them. The year before that I had gone out on a river with a friend. The river had obviously been about four feet higher only days before — before it had frozen. I remember seeing a flat — what had been a big back-eddy — and, since the salmon run was finished, there were dead salmon, which had been covered with a fine layer of silt, lying in this area. Then it started to snow and all this was covered.

*LR* Did you see that as a sculpture?

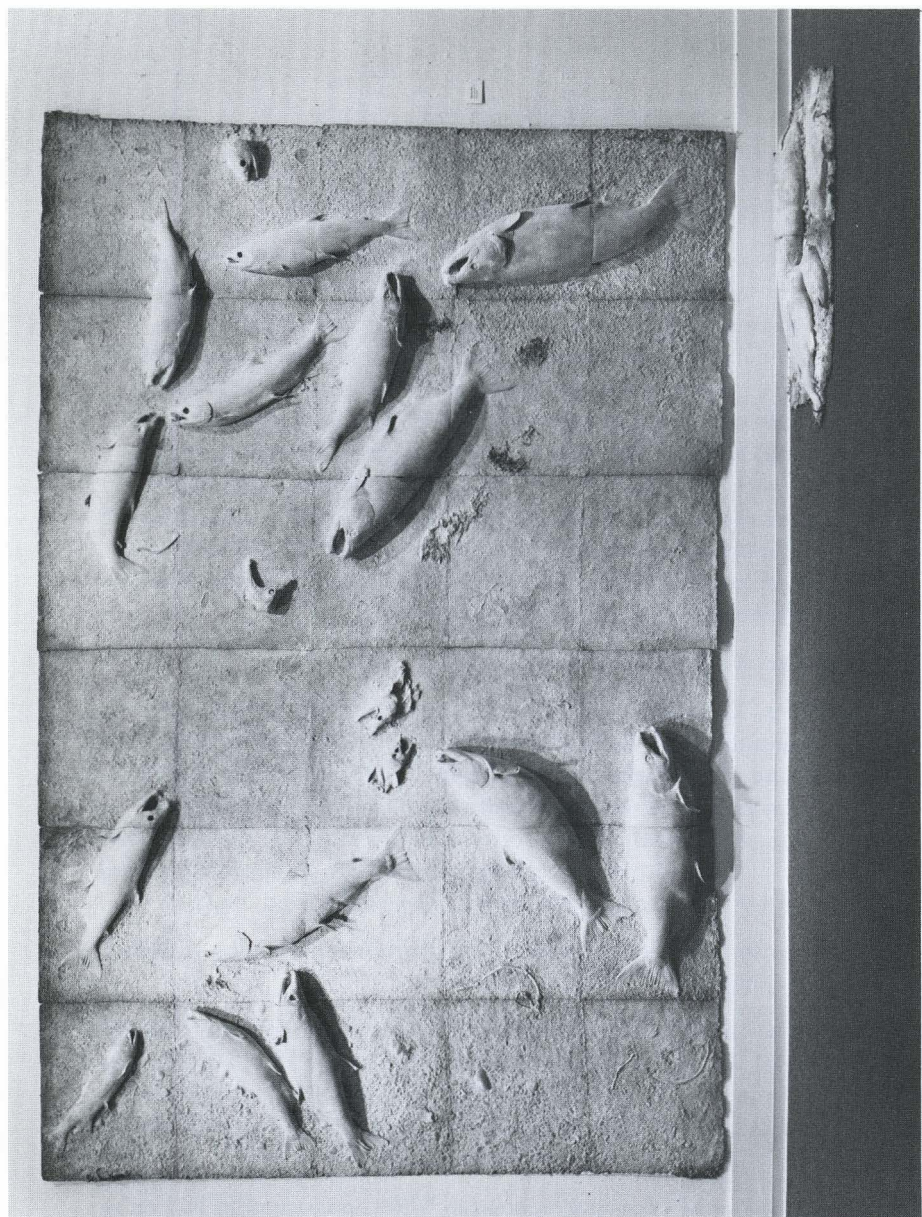
*RF* Yes. The salmon mat, which came out of that scene, was a monster to do. Each of those moulds when they were fresh must have weighed close to 150 pounds. I had taken 2,000 pounds of plaster and set up camp beside the Harrison River. I spent three-and-a-half days in torrential rains and then the water rose until it wiped out my working area. All my plaster moulds were under water, so I had to retreat. Eventually I did it again.

*LR* Do your shows always have your journal entries along with the fish pieces?

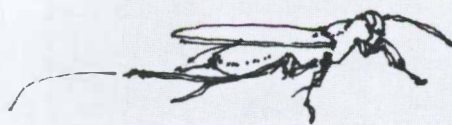
*RF* They have in the past. The show then operates on more than one level. I'm not trying to show just these animals but also the way I interact with them. Rather than just showing a sculpture or something, it's important that there are also words to reveal a little bit about how I experience things.

*LR* It's your life that enters into the gallery, not just objects. You're bringing the whole idea of going out there and . . .

*RF* confronting. I've been fortunate in being able to experience these things first-hand. Part of what I'm trying to do is also to show these beautiful things to people.



1 ANTENNAE  
BURNT ORANGE WINGS.



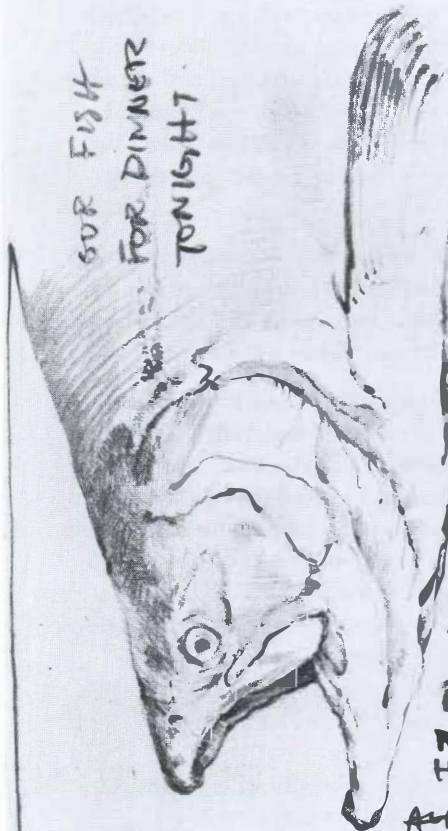
1 SAW ONE WITH  
PURPLE-BLACK WINGS  
TODAY.



LONG BLACK OVIPOSITOR.

WOOD  
BIG WASP WITH YELLOW ANTENNAE. - YELLOW BYES + BLACK + YELLOW  
STRIPED LEGS - BLACK PELVIC BODY.

OUR FISH  
FOR DINNER  
TONIGHT



MEL WENT OUT  
WITH MR LION  
TODAY + YESTER-  
DAY - THEY  
CAUGHT THIS  
BIG PINK PLUS  
17 OTHERS. TODAY  
I CANNED HIM OUT  
TO THE BOAT.

IT'S A BIT WINDY  
TODAY. I'M FEELIN  
FINE PEELIN LOGS.  
HE'S BIG + BRIGHT.

ALMOST A SHAME THAT  
HE NEVER GOT TO REACH HIS RIVER. THERE'S  
A PATCH OF TURQUOISE BLUE ON HIS CHEEK  
WHAT A BEAUTIFUL COLOR - LIKE WATER.

LR What difference would it make if you showed in an aquarium?

RF It wouldn't make any difference at all. Actually, the Vancouver Aquarium asked me if I would fill their display case for the summer, but I was too busy with what I was doing. The elitist — or the whole idea of art being anything special — doesn't interest me. It's just the idea of making these things and showing them to people in almost any context that really excites me. I used to send them through the mail — that's not an art context, but it's lots of fun. I wasn't saying anything, I was just doing these things.

LR (reads) *In the late Sixties, inspired by the Vancouver version of the neo-dada school of correspondence art, he began to use the postal system as a medium for his creative acts, and has followed the example of some of its avatars in adopting a pseudonym.*<sup>2</sup>

RF That was in my fourth year of university, during the summer. A friend of mine had just written me a letter and addressed it to "R. Fish". I walked in to see Michael Morris at UBC and I knew he was into things — well, Mr. Peanut hadn't quite started at that time, but I think Michael was Marcel Dot then. I walked up to him and said, "Hi, I'm R. Fish." That was it. I also used to do a lot of corresponding through the mail and I found that if I signed my letters "R. Fish" — especially since they tended to have a lot of fish images inside — I got replies. It was also a good way of keeping my artistic life separate from my other life.

LR Why would you do that?

RF Well, partly because a lot of my art, especially when I was in high school, was really weird stuff and I tended to have a conservative side. So, I separated these two aspects of myself — the artistic aspect that was completely free and willing to do anything, and the other aspect of my life with which I tried to maintain an even keel. I take neither of them too seriously.

*LR* What does that say about identity, though, if you want your shows to say something about you? Just who is it . . .

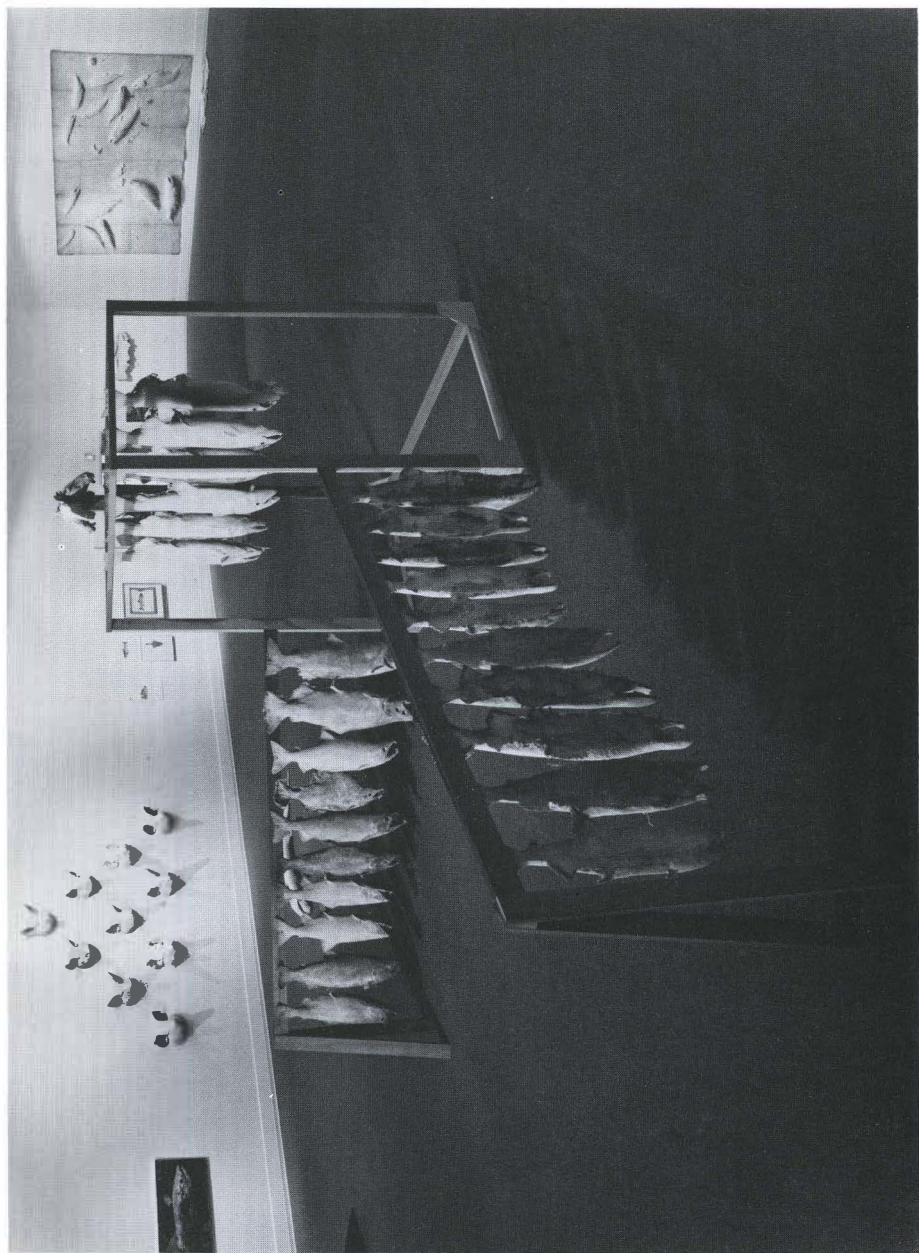
*RF* Well, the Toronto show was titled “R. Fish” because, three or four years ago, that was really my identity. We came to name it and I said, well, if we stick to “R. Fish”, it means “rubber fish” and it means lots of different things, so just leave it at “R. Fish” and if people think it’s me, that’s fine, and if people think it’s supposed to describe the rubber fish, then that’s fine, too.

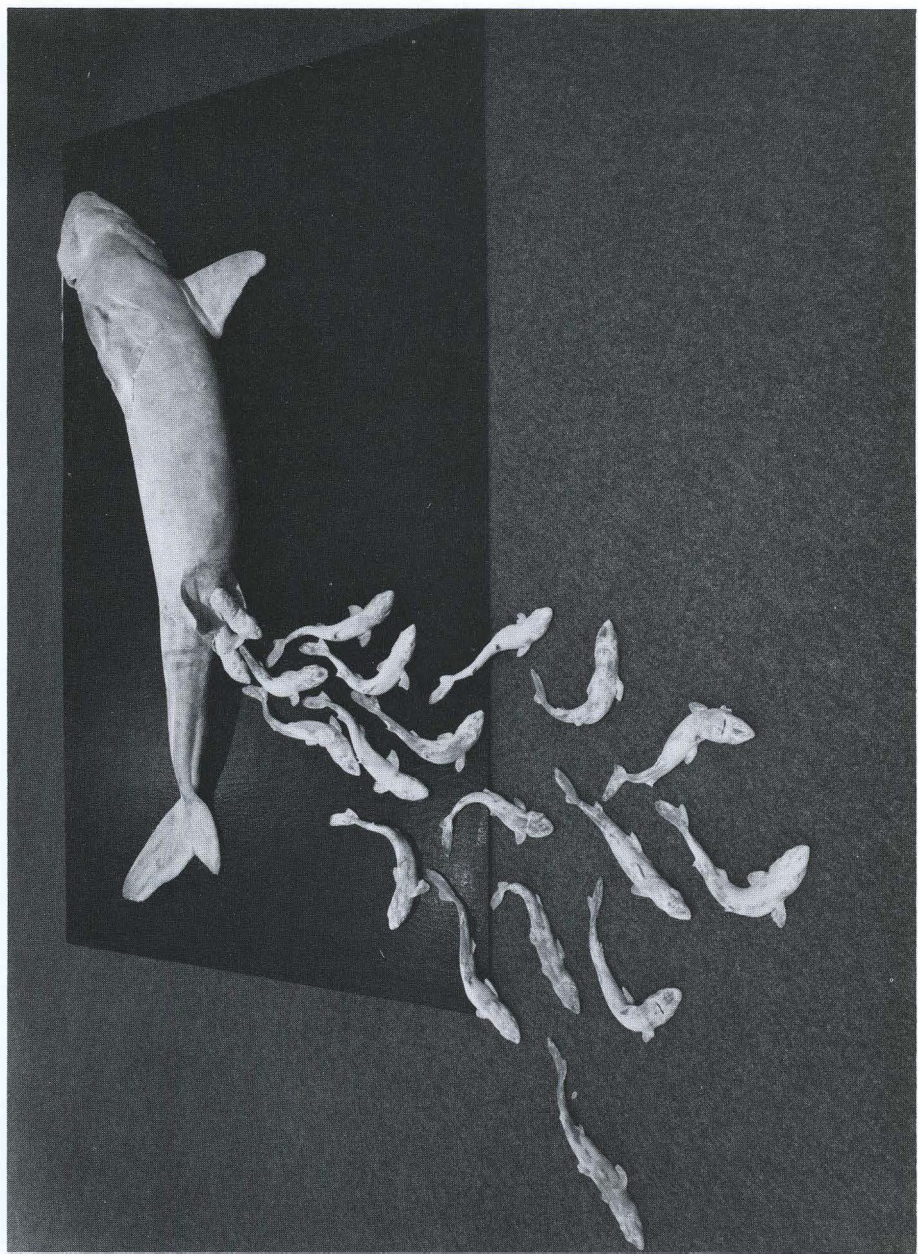
*LR* You seem to be very easy-going about how people respond to your work.

*RF* Most of the things are perfectly obvious. If you’ve got a shark sitting on the floor, you don’t really need a tag telling you it’s a shark.

*LR* The information they’re getting is that this is a cast of a shark and here it is on the floor . . . and you’re saying that your art is all about your environment and your interaction with that. You’ve been out there in those rivers and streams and you know what it’s like, so these things may act as visual clues to you. . . . There’s that difference between the gallery and — well, you can take people up to your island.

*RF* It’s interesting — I’m realizing I’m creating a grey area. I’m saying that people don’t experience all these things; they get things given to them by somebody else. I’m giving somebody something else that isn’t quite vivid, it isn’t quite real, it’s sifted through. In this case it’s sifted through me.





*LR* What is it that you've been learning about yourself throughout the process of your art — especially with the fish. Are there differences between your first pieces and where you're at now? Would you say they've changed?

*RF* Things are changing. They tend to be more complex, yet I'm also becoming more relaxed; I'm looking at the ordinary things a lot more around me and finding that they're really quite exciting.

*LR* What do you mean by ordinary?

*RF* Things like getting a big dog-fish in the boat and having her give birth in the bottom of the boat. It's so commonplace that it didn't strike me as being a vivid image until I produced the piece on the floor of the gallery. Creating these things is causing me to look at everything much more closely than I ever did before. I suppose the really important thing that's happened isn't so much the creating of the pieces in themselves, but the knowledge that I've gained. That's probably why the thoughts recorded in the journal pieces can be so important.

*LR* This recording . . . your sculpture is an act of recording as well. Do you get out with an eye to fixing these things, making them permanent in some way?

*RF* Yeah, to a certain extent. Sometimes it's an instant — to record an incident such as the dog-fish piece. That piece had to go along with the description up on the wall of what happened the day my brother and I were out in a boat and came upon a school of herring being chewed apart by mud sharks. We looked down into the water and there were literally hundreds and hundreds of sharks all moving around very slowly and methodically as though they were in a sleep — as long as they kept their mouths open, sooner or later the fish would be caught. I wanted some bigger dog-fish to take home and make moulds from, so, as one passed under the boat, I reached down and grabbed it by the tail and flipped it into the boat. My brother thought that was great, so he got out his movie camera and asked me to do it again. I waited for a few more minutes until one came by just the right way and I was able to reach down and grab him by his tail and up he came into the boat too.



*LR* You use fish as materials, too, apart from appreciating them as beautiful things. How do you justify your taking of them?

*RF* I can't justify it very well. Usually I get my fish when they're dead anyway: either they're spawned-out, or maybe they've come up in a seine net and are dead. Given the opportunity, I'll release anything I can into the water.

*LR* Why are you not a conservationist — or, overtly so?

*RF* Okay, I'm not a member of Greenpeace, for instance. I feel I'm doing it in my own way. As a part of an organization I would have to do things that the organization would want me to do, whereas this way I can do whatever I want to do. I think I am a conservationist in that I'm making people aware of these things and, so, less willing to see them disappear.



*LR* You were saying that you objected to belonging to an organization which might limit your freedom. Do you regard yourself as a free person? as a free artist?

*RF* Yeah, up until now I have. I must admit in the project I'm doing right now I'm not very free. The federal government commissioned Roderick Haig-Brown, who was an author and a magistrate in Campbell River, to write a book on the sport fisheries of Canada. I've been reading his books ever since I was a little kid and so came to know his writings really well. Later on I corresponded with him, and, before he died, he mentioned that he was writing a book and that he would like me to do the illustrations for it. He died three years ago, about a week or two after the book was written. Then the whole project was held in limbo. Eventually they said that I could do the illustrations for it. They asked me how long and I said I'd like maybe a year and a half and they gave me eight months.

*LR* They're all pen and ink drawings?

*RF* About half of them are watercolours. They tend to be silhouettes or portraits of fish, such as Rainbow trout, Chinook salmon, Brook trout and some of the lesser species. The more important species are done in watercolours and the lesser species I've done in pen and ink — these are more fish in movement.

*LR* How do you do that?

*RF* Well, it hasn't been easy because one of the deals was that I was to be supplied with all my specimens. If anybody can find specimens, it should surely be Environment Canada and the Federal Fisheries — but they couldn't. They also let the contract in the beginning of winter, which is a great time to try and get specimens of fish in Canada if you want to do a lot of ice fishing. What they did was ask me to go to UBC and check around their pickled fish. I've been really disappointed because I would've liked to have done a tremendous job on the book. I intend to do a book of my own which will be the way I want it to be.

*LR* What would be the content of your book?

*RF* Well, obviously it's going to be fish, but even this is changing. It might not be just Canadian fish and possibly not just fish. Some aspects of the journals may be included, in which case, I could do fish and include them as a part of the whole natural world.

*LR* There are journal pieces in which you've related events and gone into descriptions of the island — it sounds as though it's very beautiful up there.

*RF* Oh, it is. It's difficult to make it seem otherwise, really.

*LR* What if nature were not so beautiful? You've felt the force of nature, the unpleasant side — does this ever come into your work?



**RF** No, it hasn't found a place yet, but I must say that I've never fully appreciated solitude such as I find in *The Old Man and the Sea* until we were running down from Rivers Inlet once, about one o'clock in the morning. There's a distance of open ocean from the inlet to the northern end of Vancouver Island and it was blowing up pretty good that night. We came upon a gill-netter way out there and saw its one light in all the solitude. I was in a 45-foot seine boat so the bad weather didn't make any difference to me, but this guy was in a gillnetter, and we could just barely make out his light. I thought, 'That is real solitude — that guy has got no recourse; if he gets into trouble, he's out there by himself'. That's when I started to appreciate the solitude that I think Hemingway was talking about when he wrote that book. It's something so difficult to get into writing — difficult to get into any art.

**LR** What's discovered in solitude?

**RF** I think you discover the limits of yourself really quickly. I guess living up on Malcolm Island is solitude, although I don't really think of it as such. Is that solitude when you've got all those living creatures around you? I think a lot of people from the city would think so because you can't relate, you can't talk to them, you can't socialize with them. I think I socialize in my own indirect way with them.

**LR** Your social is nature . . .

**RF** Well, I realize that we're all living things and that therefore I have something in common with them. So, there is a communion, I guess, with these creatures. I don't feel the solitude as long as there are creatures around. The only time I feel it is when it's absolutely pitch-black and really stormy. That's solitude: the absence of everything except yourself.

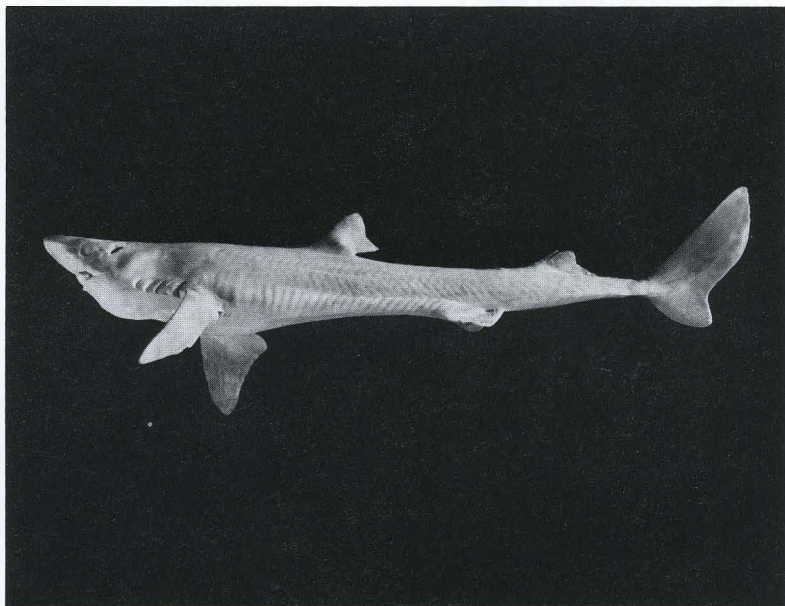
**LR** Is that solitude something you'd like to give people a sense of? Your art is coming into the city. How can you give city-dwellers your experience of solitude and what relevance does that have now to people's lives?



*RF* I don't know how relevant it is. I try and give people a certain amount of my experience and it's obvious to me that they don't get the whole thing; if I walk along the beach or walk along the river and see these fish, what I experience is much different than what people who walk into a gallery, who get the experience second-hand, feel. I think, though, that it helps if I make it as real and as vivid as possible. That's one of the reasons I like the medium, plaster and rubber: the detail is infinitely perfect. I think it's by making things that vivid, that clear, that it's a lot easier for people to grasp some of the experience.

*LR* Your exhibitions — how do you hope they will change the lives of those who see them — those people who may never otherwise enjoy your kind of life first-hand?

*RF* All I think I would want is for them to have some sort of sympathy for the animal that helped create the object because the object itself is not an animal — it's an object, it's a sculpture, it's whatever, it's a piece of rubber. But, if they can see behind that to the animal that helped to create it and have sympathy and understanding for it, then that's about all I could ask.



## R.Fish / IMAGES

detail *Salmon Rack*, 1978, latex, life-size.

R. Fish (Robert Field).

detail *Salmon Rack*, 1978, latex, life-size.

spawned-out salmon.

*Salmon Mat*, 1978, latex and canvas, 274 x 426 cm.

detail, R. Fish's journal.

Installation at Vancouver Art Gallery, June-July, 1978.

(Foreground: *Salmon Rack*.)

*Mother Dogfish and Babies*, 1978, latex, life-size.

*Dogfish (School of)*, 1978, latex and fibreglass, life-size.

latex salmon-cast.

R. Fish making cast on the banks of the Chehalis River.

detail, same site.

*Hanging Shark*, 1978, latex and fibreglass, life-size.

*Photography*: With thanks to Robert Keziere and Jim Gorman of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Alvin Balkind, "Introduction," in *R. Fish*: an exhibition catalogue (Vancouver: The Vancouver Art Gallery, 1978), p. 8. Alvin Balkind was the curator of the R. Fish exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 10.