

Art Green / INTERVIEW & IMAGES

Art Green, a recent immigrant to Canada, has just begun to exhibit in B.C. His paintings present a number of preferred motifs simultaneously and symmetrically within the borders of illusionistically painted rips. The colours are deep and resonant; the medium is oil on canvas.

AG After art school some friends and I formed a group called the *Hairy Who* which attained great notoriety in Chicago. We put out a comic book with each show and in the last show we did, we covered the walls with garish linoleum. One art critic, groping for a way of describing our work, said it reminded him of looking out of doors on a rainy day and seeing a wet hose pipe in the backyard. We became very famous in Chicago, and that can be detrimental to someone who is just out of art school. I did less and less work and the last year I was in Chicago, I hardly painted at all, because I was working at three teaching jobs in the school system.

AR Does Chicago contemporary art differ from the art of other American cities?

AG Chicago art is concerned with the primitive, with very personal experiences, with the art of insane people. It is less interested in formal concerns than is New York. There are lots of art museums where surrealist art is featured, Ivan Albright might be the best known Chicago American apart from Claes Oldenburg who lived in Chicago until he was twenty-three. His work is personal in the way much Chicago work is personal — he has always said that his art is original because he made it up as a kid. He didn't speak English, so he created his own private parallel world for which there were road maps and a daily newspaper. As in Claes Oldenburg, much Chicago art arises from personal circumstance. Jim Nutt, whose work is the best known of all *Hairy Who* artists does paintings that are strong and primitive. One would assume from his work that he is a complete acid freak, whereas in reality he is concerned with the classical and lives a traditional life.

AR How did you come to Canada?

AG I was offered a job at the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, in 1969, the self-proclaimed conceptual art capital of the universe. It was a great shock to come from a place where I was overvalued to a place where I was undervalued.

The president of the school in Nova Scotia came up to see me one day, looked over my shoulder and said, "Well, I guess you can't call what you're doing art? Just what would you call what you're doing?" But he was really keen on conceptual art. When I first got there, there was a huge argument going on between the man who ran the art gallery and a conceptual artist who had been paid a thousand dollars for this idea for an exhibition, which was to spill five gallons of black paint on the gallery floor. The artist himself had refused to execute the idea, then was furious because the person who actually poured the paint on the gallery floor had moved the can a little, as he was pouring, screwing up the artist's concept.

Then Vito Acconci [a New York based conceptual artist] came up to make a lithograph at the school's print workshop that involved him putting lipstick on and smearing it on the stone — it was called *Kiss Off*, or something like that. Vito announced that he was going to do a print on the director's body, and so the director, thinking this was going to be a world-beater thing, something that would go down in the annals of art history, got video equipment to document the event. So what Vito did was to have the director roll up his pant leg, and bit him very hard in the leg, hard enough to draw blood and then rubbed printer's ink into it. This monoprint got infected, it was festering (allegedly) from Vito Acconci's teeth!

It's not that I hate conceptual art, it's that I hate fads in art where suddenly everyone is doing the same thing, and really it is that thirty-thousand people are doing one or two people's work. And when the fad is over, everyone can dump it, but the one or two people who started it have, in a sense, their work discredited. And there again, in the Nova Scotia environment, I did less and less work. But after two years were up, I got a Canada Council grant and began to paint again.

AR Has your work changed since you came to B.C. in 1972?

AG I think it has. I have just started to put mountains into my paintings and my colour sense is changing. I must point out, however, that the landscape I have been using is not the landscape around us. In one painting I have included a moon over water — this came from a postcard that I got when I married. It is such a horrible image that you only know that it *is* the moon over the water because you have seen the real moon over the water. I used it because it fitted in with the way I select images, though it is there in my work, possibly, because I now live in B.C. I am concerned with the tension that is set up between the real landscape we know and this type of commercial image.

Similarly, I used to use an ice cream cone a lot in my paintings, a perfect, idealized ice cream cone, like those pictures of Tastee Freeze cones with a nice rose-red outline around them — all airbrushed and perfect like the girls in *Playboy*. When you buy your ice cream and hold it up against the picture of it, there's no resemblance, but you accept it and eat it. That was what brought me to the tires I use in my work. In the thirties Firestone ran ads of huge tires with a racing driver beside them and these tires came down like a waterfall with colours, cascading, like a rainbow. *Fantastic*. If you saw a car with tires like that you would stop dead in your tracks.

Similarly with the wood-grain in my paintings, I don't really look at wood, but do a schematization of woodgrain; my fire is not real fire, it's printed fire. I like to paint things that project a tension between the idea of them and the reality.

AR Was technique stressed in the art school you went to?

AG Well, my own technique is rather limited but it serves my purposes. I remember that the artist Magritte said that he only wished to paint well enough to become a hack painter, because he was more interested in representing ideas. But when I went to school it was in the dying days of abstract expressionism. The class stars were people who had beautiful signatures — Art Green is too flat for that. The guy who painted next to me, called Herbert Zeiden, drove an abstract expressionist teacher we had quite crazy because he would begin with pure painted abstraction then, half way through, out of the painting would loom a train with a very specific engine type (like Pacific 242), and soon tracks would be going in and out. The teacher would feel that the pure aesthetic moment had been destroyed.

So I had a hard time. I am not really interested in painting. At school I preferred drawing. My paintings are colourful, but I am totally uninterested in colour. I am taken aback when someone comes up to me and says, "Ah, that's amazing, that red is wanting to come out but you've held it back and that blue . . ." I am totally blind to any of that, I don't know what the hell he is talking about. Or someone else will say, "You've tied the canvas right in the middle, there. It shouldn't work, but it works . . ." And I just don't understand. I think colour and design concepts like that are aids to teaching that come after the fact, but you can't make a painting out of them, and if you did, it wouldn't be very interesting.

EXHIBITIONS

Hairy Who. Three exhibitions, Chicago, 1966-1968.

Three Man Show. Chicago: Allen Frumppkin Gallery, 1968.

Hairy Who. San Francisco Art Institute, 1968.

New York: School of Visual Art, 1968.

Washington: Museum of Modern Art, 1968.

Three Man Show. Paris: Dorothy Speyer Gallery, 1969.

One Man Show. Sackville, N.B.: Owens Art Gallery, 1973.

One Man Show. Burnaby Art Gallery, 1973.

Two Man Show. Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, 1974.
1974.

One Man Show. Chicago: Phyllis Kind Gallery, 1974.

One Man Show. Vancouver: Bau-Xi Gallery, 1974.

Canadian Canvas. Cross Canada travelling group show, 1975.

IMAGES

Undivided Attention, 1974, oil on canvas, 48" x 72".

Deceptive Practices, 1974, oil on canvas, 48" x 36".

Irreversible Condition, 1974, oil on canvas, 72" x 48".

Troubled Sleep, 1974, oil on canvas, 72" x 48".

Photography: Mike Maxwell







