GLENN TOPPINGS REMEMBERED /

Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, December 15, 1977 - January 22, 1978.

Fine Arts Gallery, The University of British Columbia, January 31 - February 24, 1978.



GLENN TOPPINGS is an artist who is still talked about warmly. He was a central figure in the art community when he died in 1972. Greg Snider, of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, has organized a small exhibition of Toppings' shaped canvases, fibreglass kayaks and sculptures, and his collaborative works. Photographs from the collection of Michael de Courcey give some sense of the milieu in which Glenn produced his last works. Ann Rosenberg has prepared an oral history catalogue with the help of several of Glenn Toppings' friends.

Bibliographical and research assistance was given by Keith Bunnell. Off-printed as a catalogue for GLENN TOPPINGS REMEMBERED, the article will appear in *The Capilano Review* No. 13.

I remember Glenn Toppings as a man who could speak directly with great honesty. I admired the work he did. It has been a pleasure to learn more about Glenn from his friends and associates.

This much is certain. He was a person who projected himself clearly to all who knew him. He was frequently ahead of others in his opinion of what art is or should be, and of the role of the artist. He was prepared to give his energy, ideas and technical skills to others; he was able to articulate well and to live out difficult philosophical positions. His personal integrity was renowned.

The few works that I have been able to see attest to his great interest in the nature of materials and in craftsmanship. They also express artistic preferences: a love of colour that gives way to an intentional sobriety; a depth of glazing and sheen of silver and fibreglass brilliantly polished; a jointing of parts that contribute to a whole; curving convex ridges as though a knife, inserted, had raised up and shaped a tough and resistent skin; tear-shapes, soft circles, rectangular appliqués and, sometimes, peculiar ball-like feet. It is not difficult to sense that all works are from the same hand and mind.

At the time of his death, Glenn was considering a return to personal sculpture.

the black bird flew in thru an open window of the room behind his closed eyelids....¹

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PART 1/ PAINTINGS AND JEWELRY

(Continuity provided by a taped interview with Colleen Bourke, who was Glenn's wife for eighteen years and a friend up to the time of his death.)

ANN: So, let's get right into it. How long did you know Glenn?

COLLEEN: He was just eighteen. I was in high school and he had finished, though he hadn't graduated. Just back from his third summer logging, he was playing a little pool for money and playing on the ex-Brits, the Britannia Rugby team. After we were married, he worked for Canadian Pacific Airlines and coached their baseball team. He was with them long enough to get his five-year pin and by the time he left he was an executive — the company efficiency expert. In his last year there, three men in their early forties died of either heart attacks or brain hemorrhages — stress related diseases — because the airline had grown very rapidly and the men [former bush pilots] couldn't adapt too well to the pressures. So Glenn said that before he went that way he would try something else. The irony is that he died at 41 a death related to the fibreglass he was using.

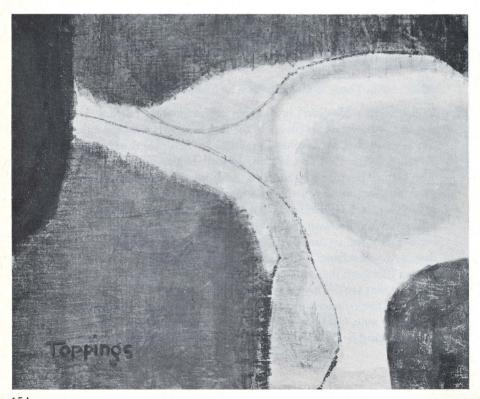
(By the way, did you know Glenn had a cleft chin like Jeff Chandler?

ANN: No, I only knew him when he had a beard.)

COLLEEN: He didn't have much professional art training. He took the odd commercial art course in the first two years of our marriage, but in those days we were very practical — didn't think of being artists. Between 1951 and 1955, as I recall, he was designing sets for The Little Theatre and was at that time involved with art-related projects. Also, we were living in a houseboat community that included artists like Herb Gilbert and Glen Lewis. He began to become interested in life drawing, and he took some painting classes. He was, incidentally, the set man for a fashion show sponsored by the downtown merchants, which was the first live production of the Queen Elizabeth theatre. As there was nothing really new to the fashions that year, Glenn emphasized the important colours. He devised a three-faceted board set - you see that type of thing on billboards now, but here, at that time, it was an unknown device so there could be three quick changes for the three main fashion show colours

I think it's important to know that Glenn was an East End boy, who had hardly any shoes when he came from the prairies because it was the time of the dust bowl — the height of the Depression: children would put on their bathing suits when they saw a cloud and it always turned out to be dust, not rain. So, on York Street in Kitsilano during the first two months he was here, for him to see the rain on the shining pavement, all the lights glittering, the cars going by, was something special — something that he always remembered.

His parents were working people. His father, who had been a teacher and a farmer, became a milkman here. During the war, his mother had become a welder — or something like that. Afterwards she became a teacher, as she had been on the prairies — a very beloved teacher whose students kept in touch with her. So, eventually Glenn decided to become an artist and, in order to justify that decision to his folks and mine — who thought we were far out because we lived on a houseboat and owned an MG-TC car — he said he was going to take an industrial design course in Europe. We didn't know then that Chicago was the only place you could get that kind of training.

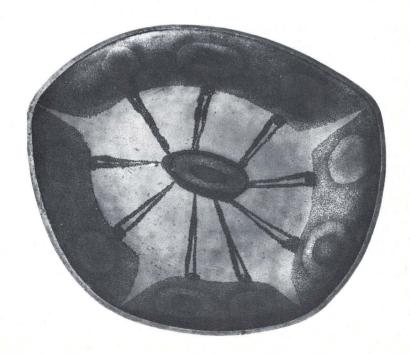


ANN: You went to Europe not knowing what you'd do?

COLLEEN: Yes, we certainly did. We went to Paris and there they'd never heard of industrial design. Glenn enrolled in the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, where a life model was available; but mostly he worked at home and took things to the atelier to be criticized. Soon we moved to Italy, where he did some really good paintings which he showed at a three-man exhibition at the Galleria Numero in Florence in 1957. I still have one painting which he refused to sell.²

ANN: And then you came back from Europe?

COLLEEN: Yes. We ended up coming back sooner than we had planned — back home via the Panama on a freighter. We'd sold our houseboat previously and there was no money left: we had to stay with parents for a while. Then we had a three-way partnership with a little jewelry-making company and stamped out copper earrings (hand enamelled) by the gross. I can't remember the quantities, but it was ridiculous. Soon we got into heavier copper stuff that involved many glazes and firings and sold for high prices, back then. The Dorays still have an ashtray that would give you an idea of what the things were like.



We next were living on Howe Street and the walls were peeling, so Glenn made a big canvas to cover the worst wall. He also worked on his jewelry and worked as a checker for Canadian National on the waterfront. As usual, people were trying to hire him and as usual he was resisting — trying to remain on a more casual basis.³ He stayed with CN for quite a while, then in 1962 he started installing shows for the New Design Gallery and working as part-time director for the Arts Club. By 1964, he was doing installations for the Vancouver Art Gallery and the UBC Fine Arts Gallery.⁴ But it was frustrating the way that people called on him when they had impossible jobs to accomplish on limited budgets. I gather from people who are more sensitive than I am, that his brilliance was in knowing at what level to hang works, in properly organizing a gallery room so that individual works were respected and, of course, in being very inventive with cheap materials.

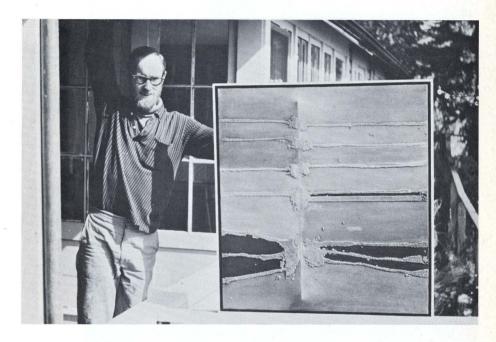
While he worked at the Arts Club he painted quite a bit, and, after we moved to Sunshine Falls, Glenn told Alvin Balkind, whom he'd worked for at The Club, and Abe Rogatnick, of the New Design Gallery, that he would like to have a show. They agreed because they were friends — perhaps they had some idea about his paintings — I remember when we brought them by boat to our house they were just stunned when they saw what Glenn was doing. So, in April, 1962, he had his first one-man exhibition at the New Design Gallery and was favourably reviewed.

Note: "Neither the titles... nor the colours, which may be predominantly purple or orange-red nor the forms refer literally to the sea, yet... the illusion of vast underwater spaces is unmistakable. By treating the canvas so that it resists or absorbs the paint, Glenn Toppings has created a surface now gleaming, now mat, as when sunshine strikes the water or submerged rocks cast shadows into it.... The surface is further varied by incrustations of plaster, following the current trend in which sculpture and painting mingle... Another device, which appears to be original with Toppings, is the placing of slats behind the canvas to push it forward into slight ridges. At the point where it is so stretched, it forms a lighter streak... In other instances the slats produce wave-like crests or crosses. Whatever the effect, the viewer, placed at a reasonable distance is not aware how it has been managed, so that no suspicion of gadgetry mars his impression..."

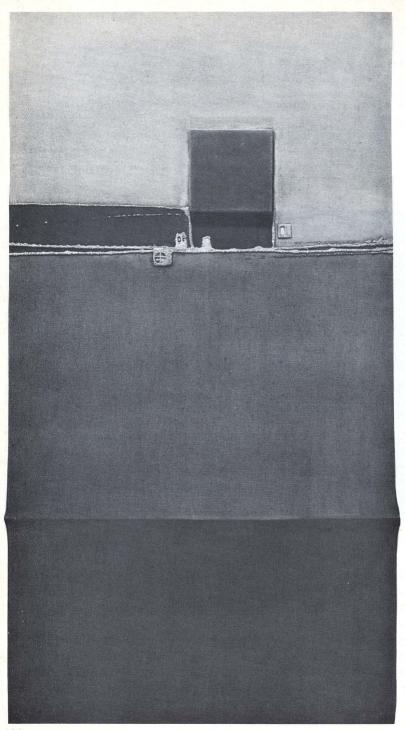
⁻ JOAN LOWNDES

ANN: Then the 1962 New Design Gallery exhibition was the real start of Glenn's painting career?

COLLEEN: Yet, it was: he had lots of exhibitions and his works progressed very quickly. The first ones he did were in very seductive colours [pinks, mauves, pale greens] 6 and soon he thought these coloured ones were too pretty — too facile; by the time he had his last show with Dorothy Cameron in Toronto, he'd worked through to dark colours like black and brown.



The artists back there were reasonably respectful of his paintings, but treated him like a hick. The most awful thing was Gerald Gladstone taking him around and saying, "Well, my boy, how much is this painting or that painting?" — and I think they were all the same price, about three hundred dollars and then Gerald giving him a lecture on pricing. "You don't understand," he said. "They should all be priced differently; some people want bargains while others want something a little bit better, and so you see, if you'd priced your show . . . blah, blah." He didn't sell anything in the show and a lot of other things put him off — like how Toronto artists fawned over the



critics and how we were given a fantastically expensive party by people we didn't even know. We were hicks, I guess, but we thought *they* were dilettantes getting prestige for themselves.

The Inn on the Park, just new then, asked for some of the paintings and so Glenn let them have several. They were sent back in a damaged condition; they hadn't even been properly crated.

The only bright note was in a letter from a woman who likened his paintings to the Japanese Garden of the Seven Rocks. Glenn didn't reveal himself too much, although we had many heated discussions about art, but I know he often felt misunderstood — though not in the sense of being put down, nor in the sense of being hurt, because he was very secure in what he did. But he did pity people with a limited viewpoint, especially people who thought that because he had done something like the shaped canvases, that he should progress — proceed — in the way they expected. He wouldn't argue with such people: he'd just go ahead and do something else, and it was soon after the Dorothy Cameron Show that he more or less gave up painting.

Note: "I remember the day that he came back from his Toronto show. He was really fed up with the gallery scene and he told me he was not going to paint again and, to a large extent, he didn't. The hucksterism in Toronto really got to him, and the Inn in the Park when they were after this and that."

(from a taped interview with Bud Doray)

ANN: The shows and the reviews kept coming - 7, 8, 9, 10

COLLEEN: Yes, but he was getting turned off. When he had the show in Toronto with Dorothy Cameron, the scene really put him off — the hype! Even in those days....

ANN: What else do you remember him doing at this time?

COLLEEN: He continued to make jewelry, though now it was in silver and other materials. Perhaps it was the beginning (of the

expression) of that attitude which turned him away from the *art object*. It was a delight to him to find a humble pebble on the beach and elevate it to the stature of a gem. He took a lot of trouble with his pendants: he would make his own clasps and usually suspended them on a silken shoelace with silver pieces bent around the end somehow.

ANN: I've certainly always seen a connection between Glenn's jewelry and his sculpture — particularly the kayaks. And it's funny you should mention the elevation of stone to gem, because Audrey Doray told me that she had a ring of his that she wore for years. It had a copper rectangular face with three holes in it, looking a little like a conglomerate rock, and when she wore it, people would ask her if the rubies, the diamonds — the gems — had fallen out. I guess that would be another proof of how his work caused certain reactions that were



not intended. And I guess, too, that by about 1967 he was changing direction. . . .

COLLEEN: Yes. I know he was thinking about doing sculpture and perhaps he was already collaborating with Brian Fisher on the Montreal Airport mural (and he'd done some things for Audrey Doray). Then we found ourselves talking about "separation" one day and, almost to our surprise, we went ahead and did it. We had always gotten on. At that time, however, our work was taking us in different directions. We grew apart at the time that Intermedia was beginning — a thing which I was more directly involved in than he was.



NOTE: The reviews of Toppings' work were generally favourable and combine with other information to give certain insights unavailable through the interviews.* Meanwhile some negative criticism offered by writers who didn't know Glenn's work or milieu, prompted him to examine his own motives for making art (see Notes 9, 10). Several years after he made his decision to strike out in new directions, his words (as quoted) reflect a distrust of the art scene:

"The reason I abandoned painting is that it's most distracting and disturbing to have an exhibition in the hope that there's a community of literate people only to discover that literacy is so limited that you say to yourself: 'Am I doing it for that?'

"I found that I was more concerned with three-dimensional possibilities and with environmental factors than decoration. I'm not saying that paintings are just decoration but this is the way they're used whether you want it or not."

Anon., "Film lures our artists from painting and sculpture." Ref. to Glenn working with Tom Shandel. *The Vancouver Sun*, March 26, 1971.

Another quote articulates his reason for moving into collaborations:

"I don't even think about art any longer, just about things and enjoying them . . . I have to find some way of living with the fact that I have a propensity to make objects. . . And I like to see what happens when two people who have relatively well-developed ideas about what they want, are able to co-operate."

Joan Lowndes, "Singular sculptors," Rev. of Directions '69', The Vancouver Art Gallery, September 1969. The Province (Spotlight section), September 12, 1969, p. 8.

As late as 1964 Glenn still shaped his canvases aesthetically:

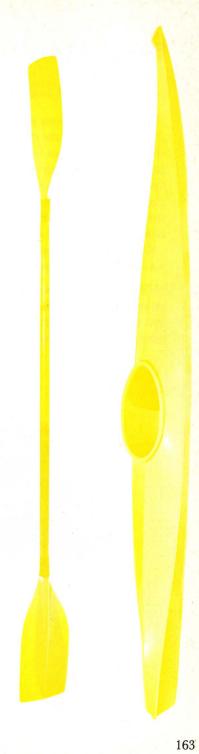
"I want to eliminate any reference to the realities of the outside world, to be concerned only with the purely aesthetic forms in a composition that are not limited to the flat picture plane."

Anon. "Glenn Toppings," Western Homes and Living, (April, 1964), pp. 8-9.

By 1967, he had turned back to the real world to find a suitable outlet for his austere vision.

New Design Gallery, "for immediate release: Glenn Toppings at the New Design Gallery, October 16th-November 2nd." [Press release, 1963.]

^{*}One learns, for example, that the stretched canvases were: "a canvas sheath stretched over carefully placed wooden ribs creating taut surfaces and contours which impose a volume on the space about the painting"; and that they were given colour and texture by: "Latex, Varathane, Polyfilla, and oils, imposing one material upon another to expose the nature of each."



PART 2/KAYAKS AND SCULPTURE

(Continuity provided by taped interviews with Colleen Bourke, Joan and Justine Haggerty, and Jackie Haliburton.)

JOAN: I met Glenn properly (although we'd known each other slightly before) on the day of the first moon landing in the summer of 1968. It was really an incredible day — we were at Carole [Itter] and Brian Fisher's playing croquet and watching TV. When those guys finally landed, I reacted very violently: I was really upset — felt really invaded — and Glenn picked up on that in a way. The next day we went up to Sunshine Falls, and that was the beginning of our relationship. It lasted about four years.

Glenn didn't have any children, but he had Justine and he felt she was his spiritual daughter. . . .

JUSTINE: I was only about four or five when I first knew him. I remember Glenn as the most considerate person I've ever met. He was into two things: his work and people. He was always doing things for people, and he used to make household appliances for us. I can



remember a couple of things that happened when he was here. I can remember especially the Christmas at my grandmother's when I got the table; Glenn looked particularly proud to see how pleased I was with it. I guess he just decided that I needed a table . . .

JOAN: Not exactly. I said, "Just go and buy a table!" I remember being impatient: it took months and months for this table to *materialize*. I mean, I didn't know he was making this *piece*. He said, "I'll just knock her up something at the shop."

JUSTINE: It's so beautiful. I never did understand how that thing could be wood: it's so smooth....

JOAN: Well, the top's laminated and it's sanded, right? . . .

ANN: Why did he make you a cloud, do you know?

JUSTINE: He just wanted to make something for a kid that was really alive.

ANN: And the other story?

JUSTINE: We had an orange and white cat called Young Man. He was very independent and curious, and one day when Glenn was taking a bath in our orange bathtub the cat came in, walked over to the bathtub and jumped in. We laughed at that!

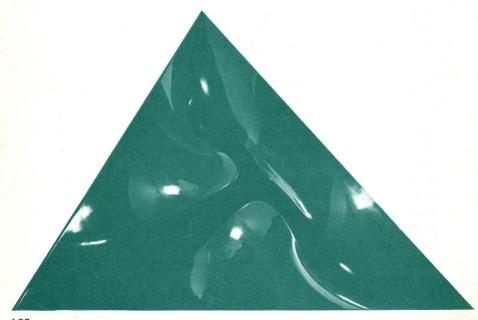
JOAN: The cat matched Glenn's beard.

ANN: Did he play with you a lot?

JOAN: He played frisbee, and if you went to The Grange at lunch time or in the late afternoon, you'd find him playing. I remember driving down there the day I'd finished Daughters of the Moon (a five year project), and they were all out there playing and I yelled out, "Hey, I've finished the book!" and they all said, "Oh, Joan! That's really great." — but I mean, no one was really there except me. So really he was an artist and I had a literary mind. He was very admiring and I was too, but I couldn't give him feedback to the degree that Jackie could. I'm visual and artistic but not in my bones the way she is. . . .

ANN: What work was he doing when he lived with you?

JOAN: When I was involved with him, he was sitting on committees to form policy at Intermedia. And the kayaks happened: I remember him collecting all the data he could find on kayaks, then selecting the bits and pieces that he liked and combining them. He collaborated with Dennis Vance for example on Fat Emma—a big brown special thing you could ride in, which he spent weeks and weeks finishing: there would be one bubble and he would resurface the whole thing. Then, the Selman/Toppings Black Night Rip. When I knew him he was involved with many different things. He made his last piece of sculpture when he was living with us—a green piece that he sold to Brian Fisher. It fits into a corner.



Glenn was usually in his studio and he was always teaching people. I just know he would hate to be made into a myth. He would resent his friends for doing that. Even when he was alive, they used to speak of him as being a superb craftsman, and he hated that. And he would say there were people who would come into his shop who knew a hundred times more about fibreglass than he did — real boat builders. 12 He didn't even like having his photograph taken because he felt that part of him would be stolen, and yet the irony of it is that there was something about him that made people want to eulogize him — perhaps it had something to do with the fact that somewhere along the line he'd decided to be a good person all of the time. I don't think I can come to the bottom of — go deep into — why he put down being made into an image and yet, at the same time, (in some sense) needed to be made into one.

When our relationship started, he was out behind a packing crate at The Grange and in the end that's where he went back to — to a monastic kind of life. I didn't find it a problem sharing him around because I was involved in my life and work too. When I was with him, I did a very thorough domestic trip, yet I don't think that was what he really wanted; it was still the Sixties, and we didn't create as flexible a situation as we might have now. I mean, now, he could have lived behind his packing crate and come to visit. I think that's what blew it in the end. He didn't express the little things, thought it wrong to be resentful and so, suddenly, one day, it was just over! And even after his death, everybody misses him so much.

JACKIE: I knew Glenn in the last year of his life when he was back living at The Grange. It was really *awful* there, and everyone thinks it contributed to his death. Sometimes he stayed with me....

ANN: So, he never took any precaution against fibreglass?

JACKIE: I guess he didn't and, talking to him, I could see that *not to* was a part of his philosophy of living. It seems that he really didn't care about himself that way, yet he cared about other people. I guess he never thought it would happen: no one ever does, *really*. When I knew him he wasn't *making* anything: he was teaching at U.B.C., working at Metromedia and doing various things for The Vancouver Art Gallery. But he told me he was going to start making things — I have a list somewhere that I wrote down the day after he died. ¹³ I do remember that he was going to make a kind of ball that you could

look into — a series of them.... I think he knew he was dying (maybe not yet consciously), and so he was in a rush. That feeling of creativity — there's something about it that is eternal.

I didn't think he was living properly, and I knew he was putting a lot of energy into community things and other people. He was involved in beginning video with Dallas Selman and Werner Aellen, did workshops and showed other people how to use it. He made two videos that I remember: one where he compared three fairs — the PNE, a country pleasure fair and one I was involved in at Trout Lake, East Vancouver. It was a really nice comparison because the PNE was all hard hype; the pleasure fair quiet and slow; and the last, city-like — city-ish — with lots of children laughing. The other one was about playschools.

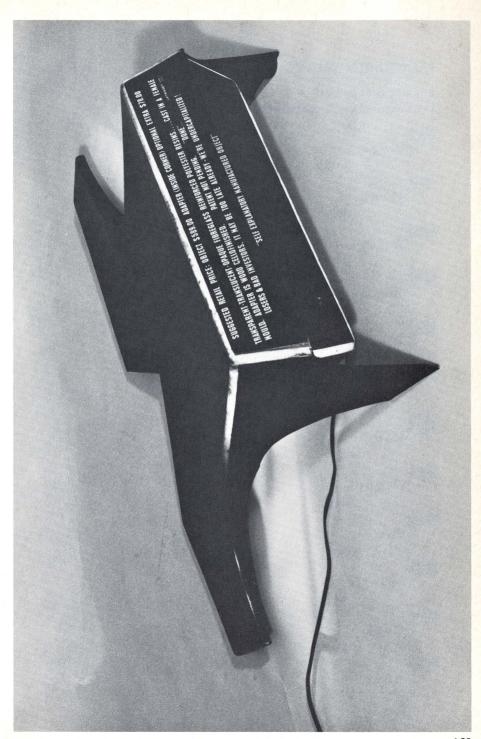
People thought of him as a truly quiet person and, when I knew him, he may have been trying to go back to something more *introspective*. He felt he had probably killed himself because he lived the way he did, and he was *really regretful*, but I suppose he couldn't have lived *any other way*. He worked right up to the end and the night before he died, he phoned to cancel out on The Cecil. He said, "I just don't think I should." I guess he just wanted to die in his own place at The Grange.

COLLEEN: Glenn made this fibreglass corner piece, an adapter. It had a little plate on it and it was an attempt to go against the preciousness of art. I remember he was excited by it because it was also an intellectual statement to other artists. I think the only time I ever saw it was in the room of the funeral home where his body was. There was this fake Constable on the wall and someone brought this piece in and put it into the corner: it was the only real thing in the room.¹⁵

Note: In the artscanada note that appeared shortly after Glenn's death (see Selected Sources, below) there was a photocollage that included a view of Glenn's own table, upon which was an allusion to the still controversial message inscribed on the "adapter piece." In neat Letraset the maker posed Glenn's life-as-art-object with the words:

Glenn Toppings 1931-1972





PACIFIC RIM/WAKE

For Glenn Toppings:

to be chanted by the members of The Grange.

black

Anger

wing

black

Hand

wing

black

Bridge

wing

black

Wind

wing

black

Еуе

wing

black

Boat

wing

black

Cave

wing

black

Night

wing

black

Tear

wing

black

Mouth

wing

black

Cock

wing

black

Angel

wing

black

Cunt

wing

black

Anchor

wing

black

Tongue

wing

black

Tree

wing

black

Laughter

wing

black

whisper

wing

black

prayer

wing

black

cancer

rising

*

the black bird flew in thru an open window of the room behind his closed eye-lids

the wind the blackbird's wings make lift'd up his arms his body itself felt lighter

high above the winds the winding Fraser the cold night air leaves his blacken'd wings

*

"The sea has no renewal no forgetting no variety of death is silent with the silence of a single note"

*

A Wake

Awake Children BLACKBIRD WINGS SHADOW YOUR BREATH AWAKE!

> A Wake O Death

> > !

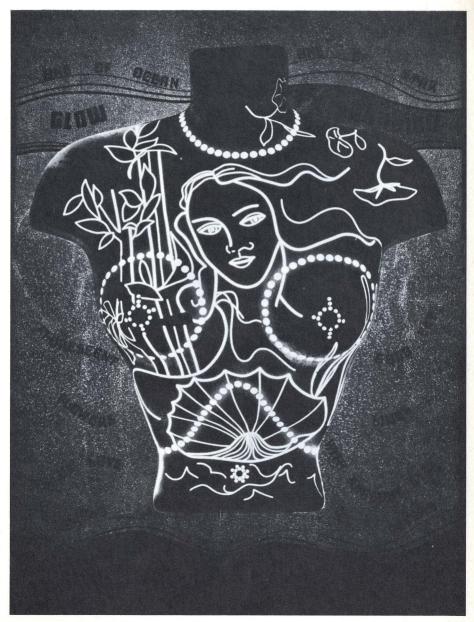
- ROY KIYOOKA

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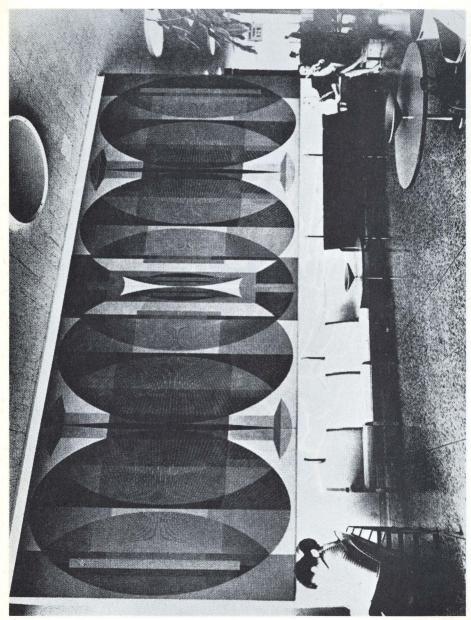
Note: Glenn made a black wing sculpture that hung for a while on one of the concrete pilings beneath Granville Bridge on Granville Island. It was, perhaps, taken down by The City; in any event, it is lost. Roy, who was not living in Vancouver throughout all of Glenn's later years, had no knowledge of the sculpture and yet it is powerfully evoked by his chant.

PART 3/COLLABORATIONS

Audrey Doray/REBIRTH OF VENUS17

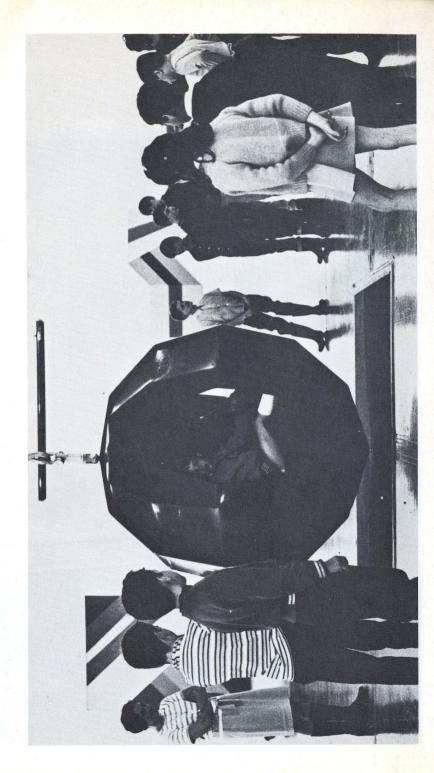


Brian Fisher/NIGHT FLIGHT (AT MONTREAL AIRPORT)18



Claes Oldenburg/SAW (hard version)19





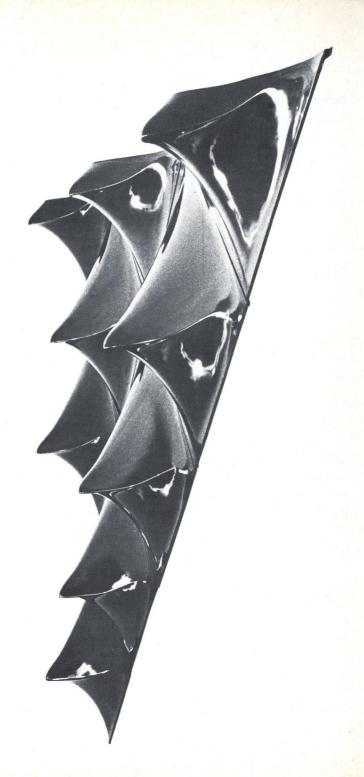
Dallas Selman and Glenn Toppings/BLACK NIGHT RIP²¹

"One day Dallas and I were crossing the bridge on our way to the pub when we started to talk about making an ocean. We got so intrigued that we turned around and came back and did a couple of sketches. It turned out that what we had in mind was very close. Both of us knew how difficult it was to collaborate but it worked out surprisingly easily and with no compromise. We didn't settle for the middle ground — we were both on high ground and achieved something greater. . . . It's one of the most satisfying things I've done. . . .

"Fibreglass could possibly be exhibited out of doors; it could stand exposure if certain minimum requirements were met, for example, a daily waxing.

"I don't like permanent sculpture. Fibreglass is permanent but the environment doesn't have to be. Fibreglass is so light it could easily be moved from one street to another. Our exposure to everything is limited but if we see sculpture in a new environment, it reveals a different aspect."

(based on a Joan Lowndes interview with Glenn Toppings.) 22



PART 4/GLENN TOPPINGS AT LARGE

(it would have been nice — but impossible — to include statements by all the artists and gallery workers Glenn knew well. However, while we regret not having contacted Brian Fisher, Dallas Selman, Herb Gilbert, and the members of Topping's immediate family, we feel this sample of opinion will create interest in a fuller study of the artist.)



CAROLE ITTER/First of all, Glenn kindly recommended me for a job in scenic design before we had even met; later, I took Colleen's place at The New Design Gallery and saw a good deal of both of them after that — mostly at Sunshine Falls. For those of us who hadn't had much experience with that sort of thing it was really exciting; they had the best of urban and rural environments *together*. You'd go by boat for one, two, or several days, and there would be good food, good liquor and good talk (mostly about art). Glenn offered encouragement to younger people.

Once, Brian and I, my sister and Glenn went across Canada. We were seven days on the road in a Volkswagen that couldn't go very fast and we discovered that Glenn was the best entertainer because he remembered all the ribald songs that he had learned in the East End

as a kid, and he could sing them for hours. And I remember how he was always *there* in every situation, doing something about it. I see him now employing the rope (for all our things were tied on top) and remember *just how* he did it.

He had a huge respect for everyone he talked to and that's how he encouraged. Let me give you an example: I wanted to fly planes, and when we got to Montreal (where he was working with Brian, finishing the mural at Montreal Airport), Glenn bought a sportscar and let me drive it. I felt I was testing it, so I drove as hard as I could. I took a corner fast and he said, "You'll have no trouble getting your pilot's licence." I really went on with *more confidence*.

I also remember a fine idea for an exhibition he had when he was teaching at S.F.U. He wanted to have heavy-duty machinery all over the campus, treating it like large scale sculpture to be looked at. Insurance complications prevented the exhibition. Too bad!

ROY KIYOOKA/Looking back on it, I think the person who was most like Glenn was Rick Gomez. They both had a kind of stand-offishness toward the art scene and they were men who were not verbal. They were emphatic at the level of craft, both being exceptionally intelligent with their hands: it was the area in which they trusted themselves most. Dallas Selman could relate to both of them, but he had a different turn of mind. Eventually the suspicion that Glenn had of the art world had the unfortunate effect of undercutting his belief in his work as art. It was a boat or it was this, but he had great difficulty in calling what he did art. I believe that his essential rejection of art denied him, to a certain extent, an aesthetic.

Glenn and I had our contentions because he saw me as playing the art game. I lived next door, but I was older than the others at The Grange and had been doing things for years — I kept my independence. The space that Glenn had was a co-operative space in the sense that it was the studio where all the tools that people could share were kept. I think that was an important thing that Glenn and his studio-mates accomplished. It was a place where younger artists went in their formative years.

There was something about Glenn's art that made me uncomfortable. The most telling occasion involved a chess game. We were using a chess set he had carved and it was very intelligent in the modification of the standard chess piece designs, but the chessmen were very awkward to play with. Like him, they were tall and lean; because they

were made of light cedar, they always wanted to topple. I found it frustrating to deal with this when trying to play chess, but people have innately different senses of scale, and Glenn's differed from my own. I think there were few people who would disagree that in the late Sixties Glenn was an important figure, but as an artist he was just beginning.

I think, too, that he was a teacher in the most important sense. First of all, he was willing to work with people, and you have to learn contact with someone. To get away from a literate base to a sensate base, you learn through the act of doing, and Glenn was a practiced someone to watch. He was a fabricator: he could put things together. His curriculum was the operating principle of the U.B.C. Studio Program for some years after his death.

GORDON PAYNE/When I think of Glenn, I think Softball. Stretch (his baseball pseudonym) was a great first baseman. The first team we had was the Granville Grange Zephyrs. And The Grange was the studio inhabited by Gary Lee-Nova, Dallas Selman, Roy Kiyooka and others. For a time I saw a lot of Glenn; my own relationship with him was based on a personal rapport. We were good friends; he was a gentlemanly guy.

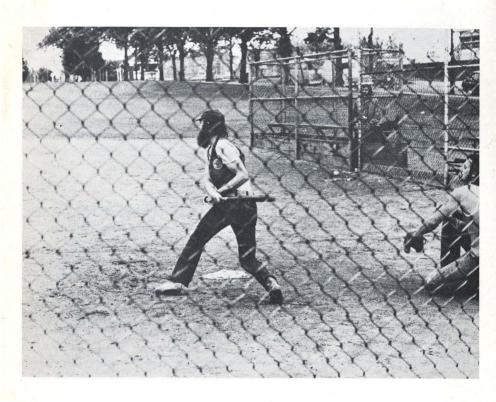
A gentle but omnipotent wind summons its god of the lightning ball and thunder wand to its source in the south.

PRAYER

- Oh God of the perfect win loss record and .666 batting average, hear this invocation from this inferior .405 average first baseman
- Return this gentle Zephyr's velocity that it might subdue the High wind, the Angels, and six other Kosmic forces in a tournament to be held on August 19th, 20th, 21st and 22nd
- This joust of Kosmic karmas will benefit the Peoples Defense Fund and the Feed In in equal parts
- Join the god of the bunt and the change of pace Dazzy Vance that you both may gust, for a wind that blows alone is uncontrolled
- Oh indefagatable [sic] arm, communicate with me on the microwaves of Bell.

Your obedient servant of the first gate to the eternal diamond, Horatio (Stretch) Toppings²³

(addressed to Gordon "Give 'em" Payne, former Z. pitcher)



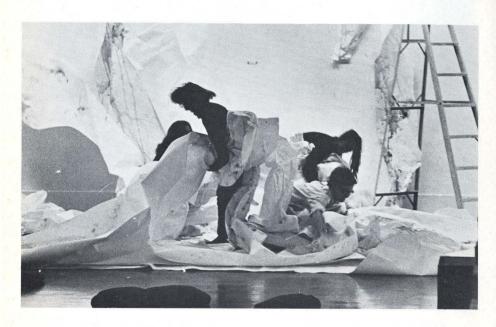
WERNER AELLEN/Although he wasn't one of the main people at Intermedia, he was one of the *movers*: when there was energy required, Glenn was always there. At meetings when we were discussing a show, for example, he could be a catalyst or coagulant, helping people toward their own decisions. He was a good listener and would give attention to anyone who had a creative urge. When we had our three shows at The Vancouver Art Gallery he was always there, even though his things were not involved, assisting Dave Rimmer in setting up the TV wall or whatever was required.

He became curious about video at the time Metromedia was starting in The Grange. He would take a machine and go out to try something. There were a lot of novices around, people with very little artistic talent. Glenn would take time with these people and I really looked up to him for that.

I know that he wished video could be more like film — with each frame exact. Video, as such, was not Glenn's medium because at that time it was so primitive, but he did experiment with it. I certainly remember the two videos that Jackie Haliburton mentioned and another with some artists on the grass in front of The Grange.



GARY LEE-NOVA/What was occurring in Vancouver among the artists in the late Sixties was experimentation in moving from traditional forms like painting and sculpture into visual art that existed in a different form of time: film time, video time, quarter-inchreel-to-reel-tape time. And because all that technology was so fresh and really didn't come with built-in systems, the materials made at that time in these media very, very rapidly disappeared. First there was the context of Intermedia public exhibitions in Victoria and Vancouver in which such materials appeared; then they were exposed and dispersed throughout the community of artists. None of them, fortunately or unfortunately, were treated very preciously as were works in traditional forms like painting and sculpture. The temporary, temporal ephemeral art forms were definitely coming into sharp focus then, as was the environmental piece in new media.



I think that Glenn used video in a dynamic way, especially when he was teaching at S.F.U. and later at U.B.C. he got the students into acts of seeing and having visual experiences through the aid of video, instead of the more traditional way of introducing art students to the visual world through the medium of pen and pencil. All this went by in a blur (and anyway I was very young when I knew Glenn at The Grange) so I can't remember my exact response at the time. But while I can't pull anything specific out of my memory, I can say that what Glenn was doing with video seemed quite right and significant for the time.

TOM BURROWS/My history with Glenn goes way back to the time when he had finished a series of stretched canvases for the Dorothy Cameron Gallery. For some reason, he received negative responses, which put him off, and so he started stretching canvas around frames to build his boats. He was living a rather extreme existence at Sunshine Falls which excited me then, and which may have influenced my present life style on Hornby Island.

He told me stories about his days in the logging camps — how he used to sleep in long-house bunks with airtight heaters. There would be about twenty men in a bunk house. You'd throw matches into the heaters and wake up to them bouncing and roaring. Then everyone would go to work driving trucks down the logging roads to the wharfs, and sometimes brakes would go and the trucks would go off the road. How he *transposed* to the art world, I have no idea!

I'll never forget how he helped me out the December before he died. I'd been squatting on the Dollarton Mud Flats and, just before my house was to be destroyed, I decided to move it further out onto the flats. Glenn showed up and, like a foreman with his logging skills, showed us how to move this mass of materials. He certainly wasn't healthy, but he was out there doing it. It was an amazing feat.

And of course I saw him when I came back from England in 1969 and soon we were both working in the Fine Arts Studio Program at U.B.C. By then I was making sculpture and he was a grand source of ideas. He had an amazing conception of how to use materials and he was pretty free with his information. We were working together and he was bringing to our work the experiences he'd had at S.F.U. at the time of the P.S.A. Department revolution. When he set up the program for U.B.C., at first I couldn't understand what was in his head, and yet soon it became clear that he was in favour of student control of the program. In the year after his death, I was acting chairman of the studio department and I instituted all of Glenn's ideas. He was sort of a unionist/anarchist. He was involved with such things as the formation of the Canadian Artists Representation (C.A.R.).²⁴

And I'll tell you something else: the day before he died, he put something to me which seemed to reflect a habit of his thought. He was very interested in television and saw the interviewer, or the people controlling the programs, as having an inordinate amount of power in the interpretation of a situation. At that time, I was doing video and he had done some too. He said this to me clearly: "Be careful about interpreting people's ideas when you're in a position of power." So here I am, ironically, making this statement.

DORIS SHADBOLT/He was a person who became increasingly involved, increasingly able to give his qualities of concern and so he was often asked, by whatever social agencies or energies were trying to make themselves felt, to lend a hand. And I remember that shortly before he died the Vancouver Art Gallery was organizing Art Probe. It was at the time when the New Democratic Government came into power and everyone was concerned about the changes that such a party would bring — wondering, for example, if there would be more support for the arts than there had been under Social Credit. And, oh, you'd hear that Rosemary Brown was interested, or someone else, and there was hope in the air, so the VAG decided to organize a forum for expression and opinion. It was Tony Emery's idea. Soon there were a lot of pink and green papers going around — questionnaires. Everyone was to have an opinion and a voice in this great thing at the gallery. Glenn seemed to be the logical person to ask to undertake the co-ordination of the thing. He'd just come back from a Canada Council job. He came to one or two meetings, but he had to opt out.

GLENN TOPPINGS/

There was a time when painting was a documenting thing. The painter used contemporary situations, historic, religious and so on, like Rembrandt's documentation with portraits. We as artists are using every medium available to us to facilitate the recording of time. Film is more kinetic sculpture, it's closer than video to a high art form.²⁵

STATEMENT

1972

It is not possible to actually believe that the romance of The Garret still exists. Art galleries are museums and should not attempt to be "to day" because "to day" is out there, not *in* anywhere.

Why don't we realize the priorities are so critical? There is no time for contemplation until we have dealt with hysteria. Why do we categorize when what is needed is communication; where is our humanity in the face of isolation and alienation.²⁶

- GLENN TOPPINGS

FOOTNOTES/

(quotes from articles and other materials are exactly reproduced except where otherwise indicated)

- ¹ Roy Kiyooka, "Pacific Rim/Wake (for Glenn Toppings)," transcanadaletters (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1975), unpaginated.
- ² Audrey Doray remembers Toppings' first paintings as resembling dry fresco. Glenn may have been influenced by the frescoes he was seeing in Florence.
- ³ People were anxious to hire Glenn and to promote him because of his great honesty as an employee. Bud (Victor) Doray told me that when Glenn worked at the CN docks as a checker a position in which many indulge in a little pilfering he "wouldn't have stolen a banana let alone a coconut." Glenn further amazed Bud by scrupulously reporting the tiny income he made as a projectionist at the Medical Centre.
- ⁴ Many people (including Abe Rogatnick and Alvin Balkind) have stressed Glenn's fine abilities as an exhibition installer, noting especially that he had a "way with materials." Doris Shadbolt noted that he was the person The Vancouver Art Gallery went to when they had technical problems. "At that time there was no restoration facility around, [and occasionally] there were particular problems that arose with contemporary work that [one knew Glenn] would understand and one really crazy time the gallery had bought a Stella and as the delivery day came closer we did some checking and realized that the painting wouldn't get through the door of the gallery... we were in a great flap... We knew that when he took hold there'd be no problem and thank goodness it was a nice day. The Stella was laid out on the grass and Glenn performed surgery on it. That's one dramatic example of how he made his technical know-how available."
- Joan Lowndes, "Glenn Toppings at the New Design Gallery, Vancouver," Canadian Art, (July/August, 1962), 254.
- ⁶ A sense of the sumptuous colour of Glenn's early work is evident through the slides of Glenn's work Gary Lee-Nova took when he was working alongside him at The Grange, his studio on Granville Island under the bridge.
- 7 It is difficult to make the various documents at our disposal mesh, but working from known catalogues, Glenn's curriculum vitae and reviews, the following exhibitions are indicative of his exposure. The majority occurred between 1963 and 1964:

[Three Man Show,] Galleria Numero, Florence, Italy, 1957. 44th Annual Exhibition of Northwest Artists, Seattle Art Museum, 1958. 29th Annual Exhibition, The Vancouver Art Gallery, October, 1960. 51st Annual Exhibition, B.C. Society of Artists, The Vancouver Art Gallery, May, 1961.

15th Annual Contemporary Exhibition and Sale, organized by the Women's Auxiliary to The Vancouver Art Gallery, 1963.

The Unquiet Canvas, a group show at U.B.C.'s Fine Arts Gallery, 1963. 3rd Paris Biennial of Canadian Painting, organized by the National Gallery, Ottawa, 1963.

5th Biennial of Canadian Painting, organized by the National Gallery, Ottawa, 1963.

Vancouver '63, (no catalogue published), Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1963.

80th Annual Spring Exhibition, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, April 5 - May 5, 1963.

Painters from the West, a group show at Galerie Agnes Lefort, Montreal, May, 1963. (Other participants were Lockhead, Snow, Eyre, Gordon Smith, John Koerner, Shadbolt, Tanabe, and Kiyooka.)

Two from Vancouver, The Dorothy Cameron Gallery (second, Jack Harman), May 4-20, 1963.

[One Man Show] at The New Design Gallery, Vancouver, October 16 - November 1963.

[A Group Show] at The Playhouse Theatre, Vancouver, December, 1964.

[Toppings and Eyre] Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (Gallery XII), February, 1964.

Joy and Celebration, The Fine Arts Gallery, U.B.C., Vancouver, July 3 - August 18, 1967.

Directions '69', The Vancouver Art Gallery, September 9 - October 5, 1969.

8 "Glenn Toppings avec 'Q O' étonnera la visiteur. Ce peintre se sert de sa toile pour y insérer (derrière son cadre-support) des pièces de renfort qui font onduler le canevas, soit en relief, soit en creux." After remarking on the subtle colour, the reviewer adds that it is a rigorous visual work: "trop froidement calculé."

Claude Jasmin, "A L'Ouest du bon et du moins bon." Rev. of *Painters from the West* at Galerie Agnes Lefort, Montreal, May, 1963. *La Presse*, May 25, 1963.

"The most obvious and striking characteristic of Glen [sic] Toppings' paintings at the Cameron Gallery is that they bulge and sway... [A description of method ensues]. This obviously takes a lot of work and Mr. Toppings must think the time well spent in order to defeat the tyranny of the flat rectangle of the canvas. In other words, his whole impulse is architectural and sculptural. He is obviously not a born painter, his work shows no traces whatever of spontaneity and his colors are particularly obscene when he ventures beyond the monochromatic range of browns and blacks. And yet Mr. Toppings can send a picture soaring with a tiny shaft of blue or orange piercing the monochrome. There is an unconvincing atmosphere at this exhibition, a sense of contrivance, as if Mr. Toppings were straining for an effect he had defined intellectually and not yet fully achieved emotionally... Mr. Toppings has devised the most pretentious scheme for naming pictures I have ever run into."

Anon., Untitled. Rev. of Two From Vancouver at the Dorothy Cameron Gallery, Toronto, May, 1963, The Star, May 11, 1963.

"Little about either artist's work [Toppings or Harman] reminds the Toronto viewer of the Vancouver art to which he has become accustomed. The pastel English lyricism of Shadbolt and Korner . . . are quite absent. Yet, if it is at once apparent neither artist belongs to [the main schools] of west coast painting, neither does it appear that they are collectively creating a third. . . Toppings is concerned with form and structure and composition in his painting, yet he refuses to achieve his effects in the traditional manner. His intent is to discover a new manner (which emphasizes architectural) qualities. To this end he has developed a new stretcher. . . Toppings' great difficulty . . . is having constructed a setting of considerable interest, he has no lucid idea of what use he should put it to"

Harry Malcolmson, "Two From Vancouver at the Dorothy Cameron Gallery, Toronto," Canadian Art (November, 1963), 318.

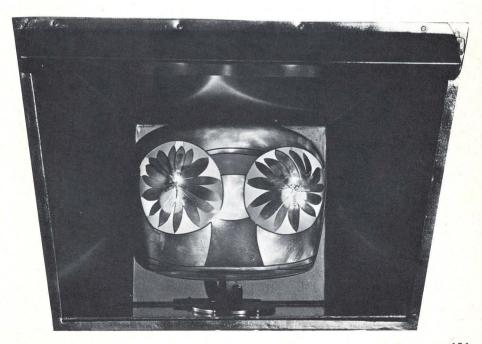
¹¹ In the late Sixties, Intermedia was a very important centre for creativity in Vancouver. It was founded in the recognition that there should be an environment that would serve as a melting pot for ideas originating from individuals with greatly differing backgrounds. Intermedia was subsequently incorporated on a non-profit basis under the British Columbia Societies Act. It became a place where painters, sculptors, film-makers, dancers, musicians, technicians, behavioral scientists and others could explore possibilities of artistic expression by combining the various disciplines in relation to available equipment.



"There have been very few artists who haven't been harmed one way or another by public relations — harmed in their work which they've altered to accommodate some myth. People really enjoy myth-making.... I've been the subject of a number of myths. One of them is that I'm a craftsman. There are hundreds of people working in boat building who are more skilled in fibreglass."

Joan Lowndes, "Singular sculptors." Rev. of *Directions* '69' at The Vancouver Art Gallery, September, 1969. *The Province*, September 12, 1969.

- 13 The list has not yet been rediscovered.
- 14 The Cecil is a favourite hangout of Vancouver artists and intellectuals.
- 15 It was an outstanding quirky piece in the exhibition Joy and Celebration, that was mounted at U.B.C.'s Fine Arts Gallery in the Summer of 1967. In a very fresh and visually exciting show which (incidentally) included some collaboration pieces, Toppings' early fibreglass work shocked me by its verbal cynicism. Somewhat crudely made in almost a black-purple, it glowered forth a message that had a lot to say about Glenn's disenchantment with the art scene and the art market. I remember approaching him with the comment: "I don't think Vancouver is ready for this!" It castigates simultaneously the commerciality of art and the motives of the typical art investor.
- 16 Roy Kiyooka, "Pacific Rim/Wake (for Glenn Toppings)."
- Rebirth of Venus and Armoured Lady were technically assisted by Glenn Toppings. The former's plexiglass case was made as part of a medical exhibit employing light and sound that Glenn did for Bud Doray. The box of Armoured Lady was constructed specifically for this art piece for Audrey Doray.



- ¹⁸ Night Flight was painted by Brian Fisher during Expo year. It has a fibreglassed surface that Glenn Toppings provided.
- The Oldenburg Saw (hard version) was made for The Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition, New York 13. Glenn oversaw its construction. The laminated wooden top was made to specification by Gerry Geisler; the aluminum and polyurethane foam blade was fabricated at The Vancouver International Airport.
- 20 Judging by the ridges on Fat Emma's exterior, I would imagine that Glenn had a good deal to do with the sculpture's visual appearance.
- This collaborative work received excited reviews. Charlotte Townsend called it "the best sculpture for quite a while in Vancouver."
 Charlotte Townsend, "Directions '69', The Vancouver Art Gallery...."
 Canadian Art, (December, 1969), p. 52.
- This statement was adapted from: Joan Lowndes, "Singular sculptors".
- 23 Glenn Toppings, "A gentle but omnipotent wind summons its god of the lightning ball..., A poem about baseball." Georgia Straight, August 17-20, p. 6. Another reference to Glenn Toppings as "Stretch" is contained in: Brian Fisher, Winter Hearts and Flowers: (Vancouver: I. B. HESHE & IT WORKS, 1972), unpaginated.
- 24 Glenn, according to several sources (including artist John Chambers, London), was involved in the formative stages of this society, which is devoted to getting better rights for artists.
- This quote is excerpted from a note on Glenn's 1971 participation in a film by Tom Shandel called Another Smith for Paradise. The film was about an entrepreneur-type artist who in the movie's last moments unveils a plaster-over-wire sculpture of a hand in the configuration of The Finger (obscene gesture). Glenn made this with Gary Lee-Nova.
 Tom reminded me that Glenn was interested in Polaroid photography. He

Tom reminded me that Glenn was interested in Polaroid photography. He said that Glenn had worked with Werner Aellen on a film called *Stop the City*.

Anon., Untitled. The Vancouver Sun, March 26, 1971.

26 Glenn Toppings, "Statement 1972," The B.C. Monthly, (April/May, 1977), unpaginated.

SELECT LIST OF SOURCES/Prepared by Keith Bunnell

(The variant spellings of Glenn Toppings' name and various other irregularities have been duplicated in this list.)

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- Anon. "Glenn Toppings, artist, cancer victim at 41." The Province, 7 March 1972, p. 21.
- Anon. "Glenn Toppings." Western Homes and Living, April 1964, pp. 20-21.
- British Columbia, University. Fine Arts Gallery. Joy and Celebration: July 8-August 18 1967. [Exhibition catalogue.]
- Dorothy Cameron Gallery. [Toronto.] "First Toronto showing for two from Vancouver: Sculptor Jack Harman and painter Glenn Toppings; Plus Montreal's Louvin." [Press release. May 1963.]
- Emery, Tony. "Words for Glenn Toppings." artscanada, February/March 1972, p. 60.
- Finlayson, Dodie. "The canvas no longer a plane." The Province, 26 October, 1963, p. 3.
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- Lowndes, Joan. "New approach out at SFU." The Province, 16 August 1968, (Spotlight section) p. 10.
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- Malcolmson, Harry A. "Two from Vancouver at the Dorothy Cameron Gallery, Toronto." Canadian Art, November 1968, p. 318.
- Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. 80th Annual Spring Exhibition: April 5 to May 5 1963. [Exhibition catalogue.]
- National Gallery. 5th Biennial Exhibition of Canadian Painting 1963. [Exhibition catalogue.]

- New Design Gallery. [Vancouver.] "For Immediate Release: Glenn Toppings at the New Design Gallery, October 16th November 2nd." [Press release. 1963.]
- Selz, Peter with Alvin Balkind. "Vancouver: Scene and Unscene." Art in America, January/February 1970, p. 122-129.
- Toppings, Glenn. "A gentle but omnipotent wind summons its god of the lightning ball..." Georgia Straight, 17-20 August 1971, p. 6. [Untitled prayer invoking the "God of the perfect win loss record and .666 batting average."]
- Townsend, Charlotte. "Art for today: Electric Irwin turns sight into sound and Fat Emma swallows up people." The Vancouver Sun, 10 September 1969, p. 63.
- Townsend, Charlotte. "Directions '69: The Vancouver Art Gallery, September 9 - October 5 1969." Canadian Art, December 1969, p. 52.
- Vancouver Art Gallery. [Exhibition catalogue for *Directions* '69. Headed "Dennis Vance 1940 Glenn Toppings 1930 Dallas Selman 1941 The Vancouver Art Gallery, September 9 October 5."]
- Watmough, David. "Artists' work adorns theatre." The Vancouver Sun, 17 December 1964, p. 33.

IMAGES/

- (1) Glenn Toppings

 photography Gary Lee-Nova. Transferred to black and white by
 The Vancouver Art Gallery.
- (2) Sicily, 1957, mixed medium, ht. 21¼", w. 25¼". photography Tod Greenaway studios.
- (3) ashtray in copper enamel style, n.d., approx. 5" x 4½". photography Tod Greenaway studios.
- (4) Glenn Toppings at Sunshine Falls. photography Gary Lee-Nova. Transferred to black and white by The Vancouver Art Gallery
- (5) AQI, 1963, mixed media, ht. 57", w. 30". (Shown at the Paris Biennial of the National Gallery Ottawa, 1963). photographer unknown
- (6) rock pendant, n.d., silver over stone, ht. 1.3", w. .84", d. .49". photography Tod Greenaway studios
- (7) pendant, n.d., silver, ht. 21/4", w. 1.3" d. .15". photography Tod Greenaway studios
- (8) paddle, n.d., wood and fibreglass, ht. 8", l. 88½". yellow kayak, n.d., fibreglass, 175". photography Tod Greenaway studios
- (9) Justine's table, n.d., laminated wood, ht. 2034", w. 33½", l. 54½". photography Tod Greenaway studios
- (10) Corner Piece, 1971, green fibreglass, ht. 46½", w. 66", d. 29". photography The Vancouver Art Gallery
- (11) Self-Explanatory Manufactured Object, 1967, fibreglass, ht. 15½", w. 51", d. 35". photography Tod Greenaway studios
- (12) Audrey Doray, Rebirth of Venus, 1967, mixed media with light and sound, ht. 28½", w. 24½", d. 11¼".

 photography Peter Thomas
- (13) Brian Fisher, Night Flight (at the Montreal Airport), 1967, fibreglassed acrylic, ht. 10', l. 23'8". photography from Architecture Canada (September, 1960), p. 30. Tod Greenaway studios.
- (14) Claes Oldenburg, Saw (hard version), 1969, laminated wood, aluminum and polyurathane foam, l. 14', w. 3'4", handle 6½" thick, blade 1" thick. photography The Vancouver Art Gallery (Jim Gorman)



- (15) with Dennis Vance, Fat Emma, 1969, suspended spherical fibreglass module equipped with sound sensitive induction loops, 5' diam. photography The Vancouver Art Gallery
- (16) with Dallas Selman, Black Night Rip, 1969, 9 modular units in polished fibreglass with assembled dimensions as 11' x 13', ht. 16".

 photography The Vancouver Art Gallery
- (17) Carole (Fisher) Itter at the opening of The Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition 955,000.

 photography The Vancouver Art Gallery
- (18) Glenn as 'Stretch'. photographer unknown.
- (19) watching video at Intermedia.

 photography Michael de Courcey. Printed by Tod Greenaway studios
- (20) Intermedia performance at The Vancouver Art Gallery.

 photography Michael de Courcey. Printed by Tod Greenaway studios
- (21) Performance at Intermedia.

 photography Michael de Courcey. Printed by Tod Greenaway studios
- (22) Audrey Doray, Armoured Lady, 1969, mixed media with light and sound. A trapezoid ht. 16", w. at top 23", w. at bottom 19", d. 6½" (on average).

 photography Peter Thomas

PART 5 / INSTALLATION AND A NEW PIECE

While we prepared this oral history catalogue and Greg Snider of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria arranged the exhibition, there was little opportunity for collaboration. In fact *The Capilano Review* editors were able to preview only a few of the works ultimately included in the show. It was a pleasure, finally, for us to discover that Toppings' work had stood up so very well. The exhibition was reviewed by Russell Keziere for the CBC and by Ian Wallace for *YVR*, March 1978.

After the catalogue was completed Carole Itter discovered in her files a photograph of the "black wing sculpture" referred to in a note under Roy Kiyooka's poem *Pacific Rim/Wake*. I assumed through hearsay that *Fat Emma* had been destroyed, but learned that only the electrical components are damaged. *Fat Emma* is now the plaything of Michael de Courcey's children.

— AR (August 1978)

ADDITIONAL IMAGES

- (23) Justine on her table at the Fine Arts Gallery (opposite). photography Sajiw Terriss
- (24) Glenn Toppings with black wing sculpture (next page).

 photography Carole Itter
- (25) Installation at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (following page). photography The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria



