

Leslie Poole / INTERVIEW

A former student associate editor of The Capilano Review, Aaron Steele interviewed artist Leslie Poole in his Mount Pleasant house in Vancouver in March, 1984. A condensation of that conversation re-edited by Poole contains reference especially to the general idea and the mood that inform his recent work in the Neo-Baroque series. Initials identify the speakers. The interview predates the first showing of the landscapes, still lifes, figures (male, female and child), the dogs, the self-portraits that constitute Poole's current cycle. During the late summer and fall of 1984, the works alluded to in Issue #34 were shown at the Madison Gallery in Toronto, the Hett Gallery in Edmonton, and the Heffel Gallery in Vancouver. A drawing retrospective was staged at the Charles H. Scott Gallery at Vancouver's Emily Carr College of Art and Design.

AS ... In the Neo-Baroque series there is more of a wholeness in that you're not limiting your subject matter. . . .

LP I wouldn't say I'm not limiting myself in any way—I'm too familiar with myself to think that I'm not suppressing a lot that I haven't caught onto yet. When I say I'm not going to censor and that when something pops into my mind I'll just do it, I think that probably there are ideas that I don't wish to acknowledge slipping into my mind under the ideas that I do use. So I paint a dog, for example, and I wouldn't be surprised if the dog were covering up what I really want to let out.

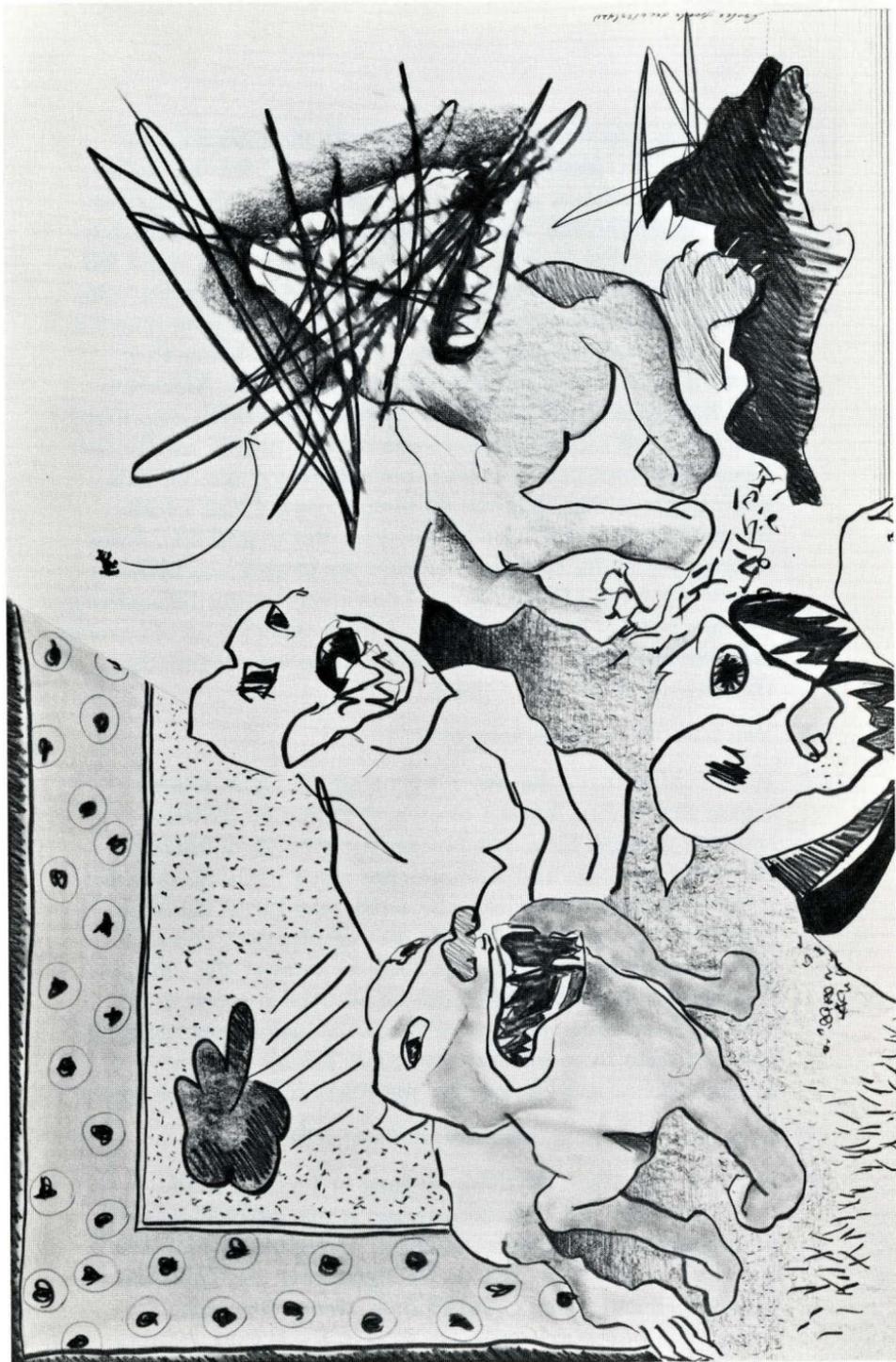
AS And then what do you do?

LP Well, I always try to deal with the issues that come up. I'm very fascinated by, "Why dogs?" The answer I've come up with is that animals are a powerful symbol for our emotional side.

AS What about the duality of the dogs?

LP What duality?

AS A dog sits in your lap and is man's best friend, but he is also able to turn into a snarling beast.



LP Okay, yes. The dualities that I deal with most are emotion versus intellect and also form versus content; I see the dog as being the emotional side, that is, versus intellect. So I'd agree with the duality you mention. Anyway . . . the other thing that crossed my mind lately is that we had a dog when I was a kid and it was considered to be my dog or maybe my mother's dog. It wasn't that clear. One day when I came home after school it was tied to the clothesline. I guess I figured I'd better let it loose, and it ran out and got run over by a truck. As soon as that happened it seemed that it became by mother's dog, that I had killed my mother's dog. It was the first time in my life that I had dealt with death. I think that's a great reason for kids having pets so that they can do that, because I had a really devastating time dealing with the grief. But in addition, I was feeling very guilty because I felt that my mother was blaming me for the death of her dog, and I don't feel that she did anything to stop me from feeling that way. I think there's a lot of turmoil and difficulty, that guilt in the relationship with my mother showing up in the dogs I paint.

AS You said "form versus content"?

LP Well, I think that's the way it's generally thought of but I meant the duality. What I think is, it should be content revealed through form. Art History is constantly a battle between Classicism and Romanticism and I maintain that the great works of art are always by artists who blend the two together into a good solid whole. But despite that, you still get people saying that they are 100% for form or the contrary, that form is nonsense and content is all. And it seems to me that a compromise between the two is the logical conclusion, but few ever seem to go for that resolution. I don't know why. I guess because most people are not ready to learn to be whole.

AS Have you read Jung, his theories about individuation?

LP No, I've never read anything by Jung or Freud. I think a problem with our education system is that psychology and philosophy are not seen as important enough to be included in a basic curriculum. You go through school and come out of grade 12 and haven't studied those things. Then you

specialize and if that specialization is something that excludes psychology and philosophy, you never learn about them. In my case that happened, and I've never organized myself to start learning the basics of Freud and Jung. I am inclined to start with more recent developments such as Transactional Analysis.

AS Have you been through Transactional Analysis?

LP Yes. I am convinced that . . . T.A. is solid, commonsense, psychological theory and what I'm interested in is not just T.A., but T.A. mixed in with a good dose of Gestalt—not taking anything and going wholly overboard, but trying all the things that come around and finding out from them what living is about.

AS It amazes me that you haven't read Jung because you know all the things he talked about, but of course that was one of his theories.

LP I'm not aware of his theories. . . . When I've talked with people who are psychologically aware, it is generally Freud who comes up rather than Jung. I think one of the reasons that I haven't gone into those things—or that I didn't earlier—is that I came from a very strict Fundamentalist religion and psychology and psychiatry were frowned upon. The idea was that if you had a problem you didn't go to a psychologist, you prayed about it. . . . I was involved in that religion from ages ten to twenty, when I left home. Psychology was a very strong taboo with me. I can remember the names of Freud or Jung coming up and I would have an immediate negative reaction. That's why in my earlier years, I wouldn't explore those things.

AS A lot of your art seems to have been made to exorcise your childhood. Would you agree with that?

LP Yes, exorcise or . . . I guess that's as good a word as any. It's just that *exorcism* makes me think of some evil in there that you want to get rid of. I think of it more as certain things having happened (that I don't necessarily see as evil) which I don't understand but that make me react in certain ways that I would like to change. . . . I did at one time think that it was evil, that my parents had done incredibly unkind things to me. Now I realize that I have a choice, that every child doesn't

act or react the way I did. I might've reacted in a less traumatized way to the death of my dog but I didn't, and I need to accept responsibility for that.

AS Sometimes you're called a Neo-Expressionist. Does it bother you to be labelled?

LP No, I don't care if I'm labelled or not. Unfortunately the people who tend to label do it almost to limit understanding instead of to expand it. I don't care if I'm called a Neo-Expressionist or a Classicist—if I were labelling my current work I would call it Neo-Baroque. Why not? Many artists say that they don't want to be labelled or that they don't want to be labelled Neo-Expressionist. I'm only concerned about the way that it is used to restrict. As Neo-Expressionism is so content oriented, the label could alienate me from Formalist viewers, which to me is unfortunate because I think I'm a Formalist every bit as much as I'm content-oriented. I believe that you cannot get your content across without understanding the form you're using and translating the content through the form that will best express it. And the kinds of things that I want to say, I feel I can't say through, for example, Renaissance Realism. It just doesn't work. If I do a completely photographic painting of a soul in anguish, somehow to me it is a very different kind of painting than if I do it with an expressionist brushstroke. You can present the two of them as souls in anguish, but as soon as you do it in Realism it's a different kind of suffering. It's a tighter one, held in, using the intellect to try to understand why he is going through his anguish, instead of letting it tear me apart and dealing with it more emotionally and directly. Although I can do it photorealistically if I want, I usually don't, because it's not the kind of statement I want to make. Many critics see looseness as ignorance of form and there seem to be a number of critics who come out of Formalist traditions who think that form is something geometric. It's astounding to have Formalist critics review work and to realize that an understanding of what form really is is lacking in their education.

AS Yes, I was reading the other day about the problems the Formalist critics are having facing up to content in art. It seems that they are still trying to describe everything as if it was done by Donald Judd—that it's 40 inches square and this exact colour and the lights are set up to hit it this exact way—and go on from there to seek some deeper meaning in the work. They simply don't know what to say so they just keep describing the work.

LP Yes, it's astonishing to go through the art magazines and discover that they are not that different from reading newspaper art reporting aimed at the least common denominator of public awareness. You read it and it's not criticism; it's straight reportage: "I went there and I saw these very pretty works presented in this way and I think you should see them too." They don't use the same bubbly, cute terms, but they are doing the same thing, talking about the surface. You wait for the punch line and it never comes. But perhaps even this is better than the obtuse "art jargon" critiques.

AS What kinds of things are you thinking of when you're working? Some people working expressively would get carried away, using their fingers or anything that was there. Obviously you are still in perfect control technically.

LP I guess what I want to do at this point can be done generally with a brush stroke or a line so that I seldom need to get carried away, if that is what it is. What's going on is that my unconscious is telling me what I want to get across and that it can be gotten across by this or that kind of brush mark.

AS What about the kinds of thought processes?

LP Well that's very difficult to talk about. I seem to draw a blank when I wonder what it is that I think about during the act of painting. I referred to it as a battle for a number of years. . . . There was me and there was that canvas. We were in a battle to the death and one or the other of us was going to win; there was a very strong sense of trying hard to overcome what I saw as The Painting. Now I feel that it is not the canvas I am fighting so much as, probably, anxiety—anxiety representing a fear of changing, that fear of revealing things that I don't want to know. Anxiety is present as a kind of censor that keeps saying, "You can't do that; let's be reasonable; no, no, that's

too messy; you can't get away with that." Simultaneously, my hand, almost ignoring this censor, acts on its own, painting the brush strokes I both want and fear, brushstrokes that come alive in the tension between freedom and restraint. I'm trying to consciously think my way through: I'm wondering how to paint a particular tree. I put marks down, but not what I want in my head. I keep wondering, "Should I put a mark down as a line?" and, "How am I going to get the sky to fit around it now without ruining the whole thing?" Meanwhile my hand is doing it.

It's almost like three or four levels of thought are happening simultaneously. I can't really, when I'm all through, go back and talk about what it is I was thinking about. It's almost as though form and content are amalgamating.

AS Does your painting make myth?

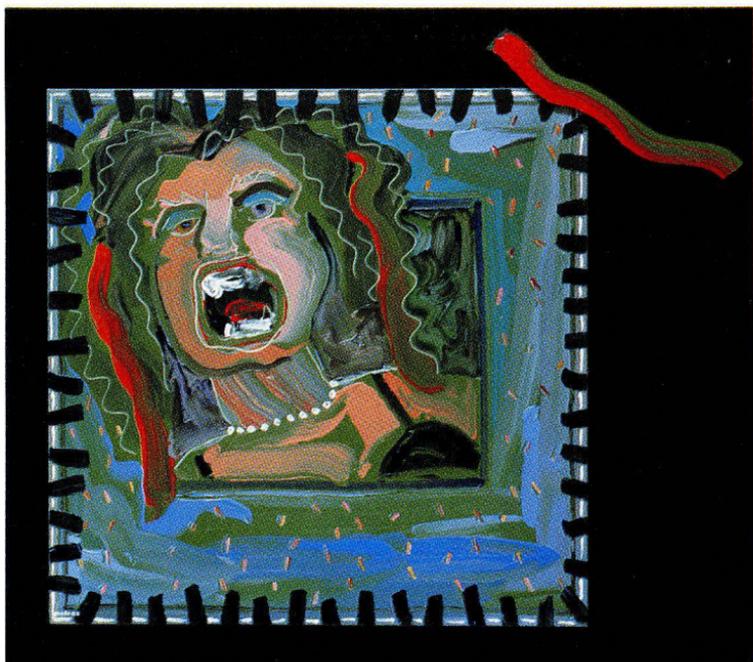
LP My idea of myths is that they are universal epiphanies or revelations about what it means to be human or what mankind is about. They're revelations about how human beings function. They are also about the archetypes occurring through all kinds of art whether it's music, painting or whatever. Though I believe in those basic universal truths, I would never sit down and say, "Okay, now here's this myth about Medusa, so I must do a painting of a woman with hair that looks like snakes. . . ."

I believe in my own myths and the myths that are inside us as a function of our belonging to the human gene pool. They are a part of what it is to be human. Instead of wading through all the Joseph Campbell books, which I meant to do but never seem to have time for, I dig down deep inside myself to find out who I am. If I dig deeply enough, I will come to the universalities that we all have inside of us. In that way I carry on the tradition of artists dealing with and creating mythology.

AS But do you see yourself as a hero? Is what you're doing heroic?

LP No I don't. I'm not the kind of person who wants to be a star, the modern version of hero. I would like for my work to be the star. I don't want to lose my privacy. I don't go out very much. . . . I don't have a very large circle of friends. If I were interested in being a hero I would go out more. Perhaps I'll end up being called reclusive and that will make me even more interesting than if I were accessible. The mystery grown!

. . . I accuse some painters of trying to be stars at any cost. If they have to make good paintings to do so, well they will even do that, but frequently they are so busy trying to be stars they don't get good paintings done.



AS Have you thought of any career besides painting, ever considered maybe philosophy or your own restaurant?

LP No, I don't think so. I'm always interested to look back, say, five years and think, "I never thought I would own my own house and have seven galleries across Canada and in the States. I'm always surprised when I think that twenty years ago, when I lived in Prince Edward Island, I would never have thought that I would be living now in British Columbia and be a reasonably well-known artist.

When you say, "Would you own a restaurant," I say, "Certainly not," but really, surprising things happen. What I hope is to be a painter all my life. I wouldn't be surprised if I decided to write, but I think that it's highly unlikely.

As a child I wanted to be a concert pianist. My parents wouldn't get a piano, so I never took lessons. . . . I wanted that with such a passion I still think I'd have been fantastic. When I couldn't do that, I thought I'd settle for being a writer. But then a relative suggested that if I wanted to go to university to study painting, which I had been doing as a hobby, that he would pay my way. I ended up, by default, taking the third choice. So I'm a painter, but I suspect I will always think about the other choices.

After graduating from Yale, I saw myself as a relatively competent painter. It was distressing that I couldn't draw but I thought it wasn't important; no need to let that defeat me. By drawing very carefully and then tracing onto the canvas, I could still make powerful paintings despite that struggle with drawing. In 1971 I taught at the University of Alberta for a year and felt that was a disaster. I was incompetent and uncomfortable. I thought that, though I couldn't teach or draw, my ability to paint was never in question.

When I came to Vancouver in 1974, financial survival depended again on teaching. Drawing courses became available at Langara. I found I was teaching as I had been taught, and I didn't believe in it. I bought every book on drawing I could find and discovered exciting exercises that I could develop—things that could stimulate—and wrote up my own course. I started learning to teach. That was much more rewarding, and I started getting positive responses from students. I realized with some considerable surprise that I could really enjoy

teaching. After I'd been teaching for two years, I began to do drawings. I was astonished to discover that just the process of looking critically at students' work had radically improved my ability to draw. . . . My vision had improved; my ability to correlate had improved. All I basically had to do was train those drawing muscles and get on with it.

I guess the first time that I realized that I could draw very well was when Paul Wong (Bau-Xi Gallery owner) told me that one of my drawings was worth ten of my paintings. I don't agree with that, but it was certainly a way to realize that my drawings are as relevant as my painting. . . . I'm quite confident now and think of myself as being as strong a draughtsman as a painter, and a good teacher.

AS The drawings you showed me upstairs were certainly as strong as the paintings.

LP Yes, I agree. I watch my hand do it so easily now and I have great sympathy with my students. I can remember those years at university trying to draw a figure. You draw one side of the leg and then there is a real quandary about how to draw the other to get both sides to fall opposite one another. That took years of practice and now I don't have to think about it. It simply works; my hand just does what I want it to do.

I firmly believe that when you draw you have to be aware of what is going on at both sides of the line of, for example, an arm, because you are not just representing a figure, you are creating a drawing. You must be aware of negative and positive space at the same time. I was amazed to discover when I started doing montages that that was happening—that I was aware of creating a good design on one side of the line and a good design on the other without thinking of it; just doing it. I found it very exciting.



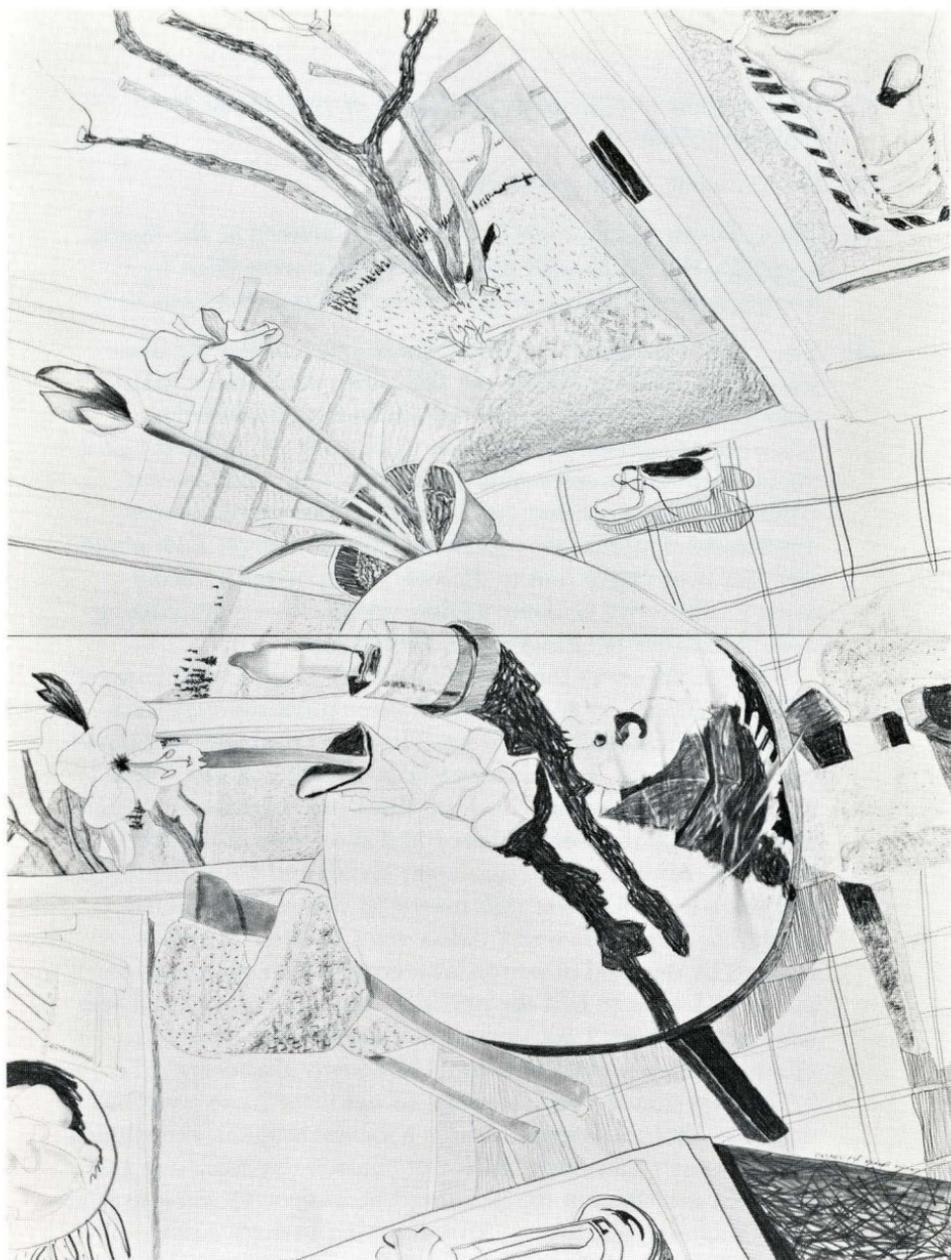
AS Do you want to talk about the figures in your recent Neo-Baroque series?

LP Do you want to ask questions?

AS Okay, I want to know the way you have arrived at the figures, especially the works with two figures. Were these done by leaning against the canvas and tracing around your own body?

LP Yes, I did that also in the montages in more or less the same way... but this is probably the first series where more than one figure has started to show up somewhat consistently... My work has almost always been to do with the isolated figure. People have made comments about that, and there are Art Historical references that can be made with regard to what the isolated figure might represent. I never thought a lot about this, but it probably had to do with seeing myself as being alone in the world or alone against myself. Now I am making these two-figure paintings more consistently.

I started the series then when Gary was away. I was by myself and just plunged in and did about three paintings that were extremely emotionally upsetting. The way I deal with emotional upset in my work is by trying to lie to myself and say, "This is a really bad painting." So I did three paintings that I thought were probably the worst things I had ever done in my life. With *Dog/Mask* my reaction... was severe and I was depressed and scared; my fear was that maybe in two or three days I would like *Dog/Mask* and I didn't want to like it. I didn't want to be the kind of person who created that grotesque a painting. I went to bed the next day and stayed there and was just coming apart. I got up and did another one nearly as upsetting, then a third one that was equally shattering. My feeling was that if I went ahead and did three more paintings that were that traumatic, I'd be in a mental hospital. I concluded that you can't take large chunks of yourself day after day and put them out there in the painting because you're going to take away whatever you are... After finishing perhaps eight paintings, I got really upset, scared: a severe anxiety attack. I had a testing of the soul and found out I didn't like it, so I backed off the painting rather than face the anxiety, fear and emotional upset. Without being aware of it, I tried to tighten up in the painting, tried doing things that were safer.

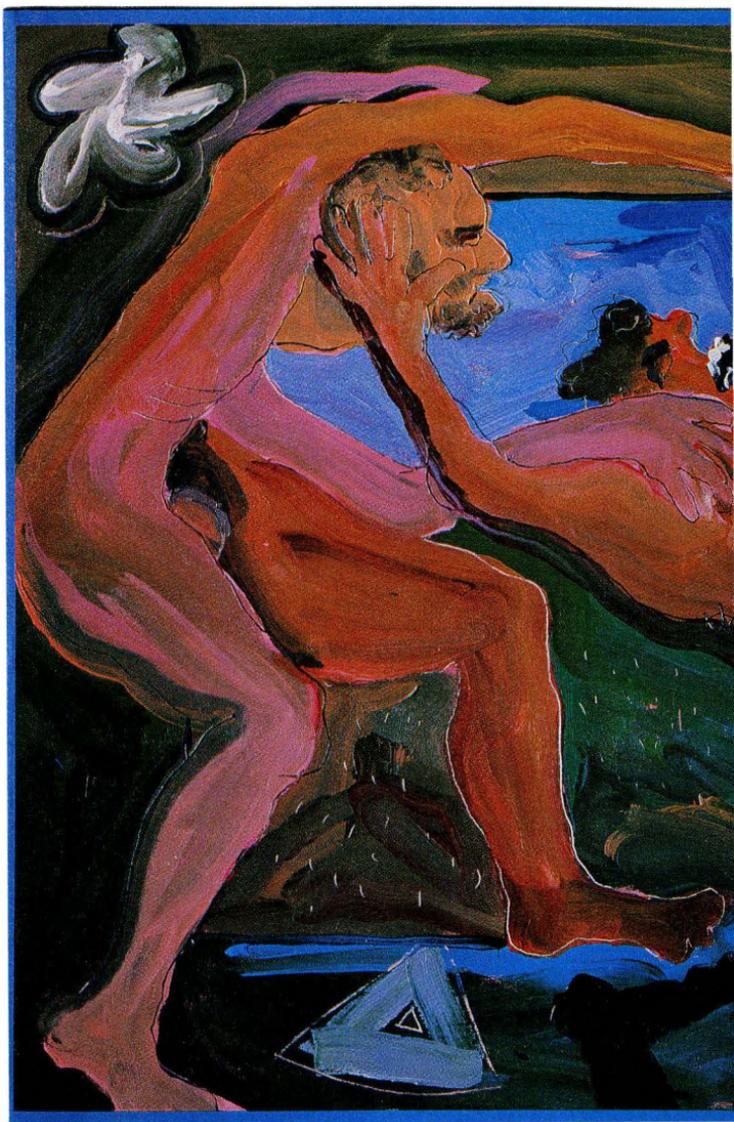


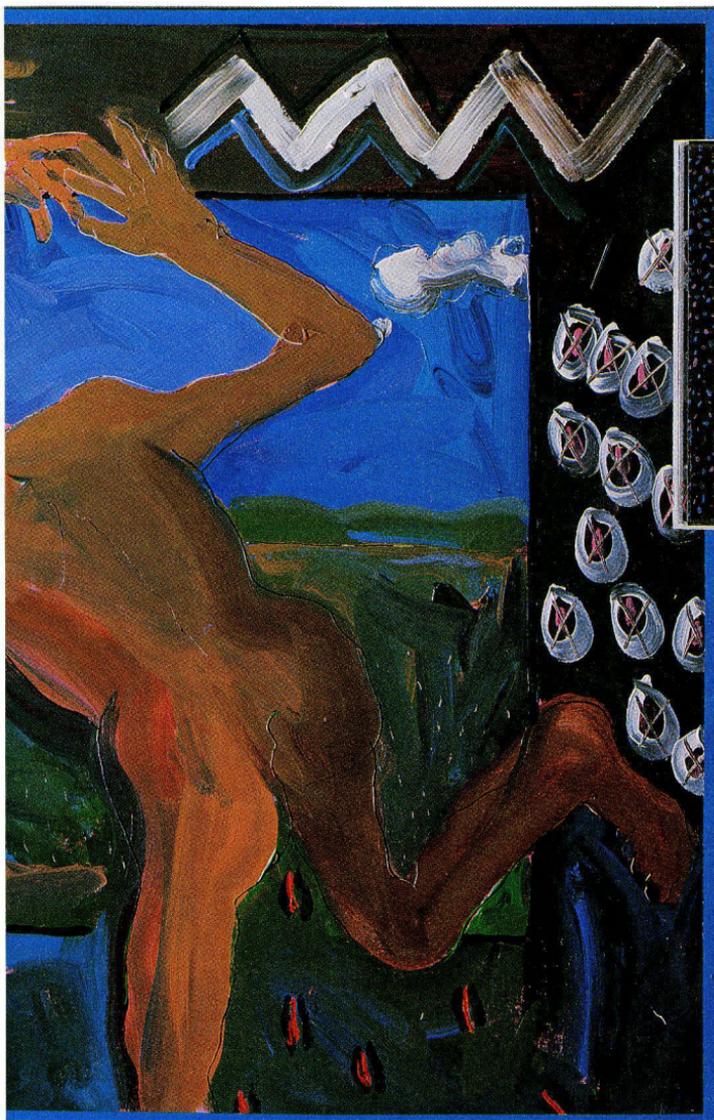
Well, of course, as soon as I played it safe, I got more anxious because I wasn't satisfied. . . . I went through a two month period of . . . loss of faith and hope because I'd always thought that I could paint as hard as I wanted for as long as I wanted and I would be all right. I began to think maybe I really can't do this, maybe . . . I have to ease up and do lower quality paintings and that was a shock to me, as I'd never considered that. So these foundations that I'd built, where I believed in myself come-hell-or-high-water, . . . crumbled under me. . . . I did some paintings . . . that were ill-resolved . . . because they were safe and they weren't the gutsy kind of work I wanted. Now I look at them as documentation of having gone through that period.

I had a drawing that I really liked and wanted to do a painting . . . (a looser version of the same work). The painting, however, was tense, careful, overtight. It was not the feeling I wished to express. I made the next set of stretchers and did the third version. There was a great sense of relief when I realized that I had loosened up again. Now having resolved that, I've been painting furiously the last week, doing paintings that I'm very happy with and with which I feel I have resolved my crisis. . . . I'm quite excited that it occurred, because although it was exhausting, it pushed me further than I would have come. I've also decided that I was right, at the critical point, to recognize the limit of my endurance. When pressure on oneself begins to feel like self punishment, it is time to review one's motives.

AS Do you think these are literal, narrative works? Are there stories behind these paintings?

LP Not really. What it boils down to is that I don't have the story beforehand. . . . I deal with it afterwards. In a way, that is . . . the difference between Modernism and Post-Modernism, because Modernism, I think, is more deciding what you want to do and then doing it, whereas Post-Modernism is more concerned with expression first, evaluation later. In the latter there is a great element of trusting a well informed unconscious.





AS Great way to put it! Would you like to talk about the kind of constructions you are doing in the Neo-Baroque series?

LP One of my concerns about Expressionist art is with the possibility of form out of control. I've loosened up dramatically in the last ten years. Let's say I paint for forty more years: I can't get forty years looser. What's going to happen next? And what happens after the expressionist brushstroke? One of the things I want to do is to somehow slow down. If I can't slow down the actual speed of working on the canvas—which I've tried and haven't been happy with—I can slow down the whole process of actually doing the painting, by painting extra parts and adding them on. To make it a little clearer, Expressionism is emotional. It's fast and gutsy and scary. I believe firmly in a balance of form and content and in a balance of emotion and intellect. With the looser paintings—the *Iris*es, for example—the emotion is in the central images and the intellect comes in at the borders. . . . Now in these recent, freer works, it's inaccurate to say that I've thrown intellect out the window and gone completely emotional. You've got to start taking time into account—all the years spent learning about colour, form, line, etc.—when I did my intellect-feeding homework as it were. This intellectual, formal information is now in the unconscious and informs, the emotional statement although the result may appear to be completely emotional. I worry however as I think in many ways the painting doesn't look to me like a 50/50 balance of intellect and emotion. So what I came up with was to add the intellectual borders outside the canvas edge because I didn't want to keep the borders in the paintings. . . . I began making masonite cut-outs to attach to the works. They are conceived, designed, cut out, attached after the work on the canvas is finished.

This adding on becomes an additional intellectual process to balance the very emotional things that are going on in the paintings.

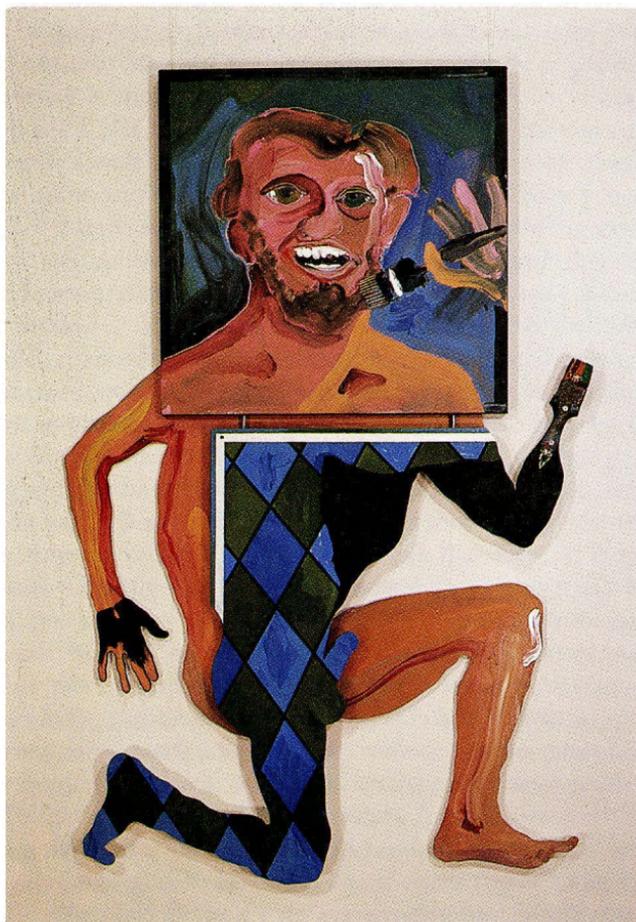
AS Could you summarize the theme that underlies all of these works?

LP Generally, or at the moment?

AS We could start in general and then get specific if you wish.

LP It sounds to me like you're asking me to discuss what I'm thinking about, and that comes down to a discussion of content. I don't know how much agreement or disagreement there is on what the content or subject matter of painting is, on what painting is about. . . . Susanne Langer has said that the purpose of art is to express an emotion, that each work of art represents one emotion whose purpose is to enrich your life. I like the sound of that, except that I find it hard to believe that a whole . . . novel I read over eight days is expressive of one emotion. There are others who suggest that the purpose of art is to represent the soul of our society, the soul of human beings. My own belief is that the basic content of art is the ever-present concern of human beings to deal with life and death. . . . I think that form represents life (Eros): content represents death (Thanatos). That's what the major battle is about. . . . I think everybody has anxiety and that the primary source of anxiety is that everybody is going to die and it doesn't make sense to us. I think the role of art is to deal with that mindboggling problem that everybody who has ever lived on the face of the earth sooner or later will die. To me that is what it is about.

I am trying to understand that, to deal with that issue, consciously and unconsciously. The only way I'm ever going to understand is to find out who I am, where I came from, what life means to me. I dig down inside and I find those universal parts of myself: the child, the parent, the adult, all those people inside who are my essence. As I deal with these issues, particularly in using form to transform them into art, I understand why I act the way I do and where certain fears and joys come from. . . . I can't really paint about death yet without horrifying myself, so I paint tough issues that I can deal with in symbolic form, that will give me information on an emotional level. . . . that will teach me what this battle between life and death is about. I think what happens is that as I get older I can confront this [issue] more and more. I think when I'm in my 70s and 80s and know death is approaching, I will dare to confront that anxiety and let the fear of it and the resolving of it create the heart of my art. I hope when the time comes I'll be ready to deal with those things, that there'll be no failure of nerve. What I know of myself suggests I shall not fail.



IMAGES

Running, 1983, graphite drawing, 101.6 x 152.4 cm. *photography*: Robert Keziere

Aria, 1983, acrylic on canvas & masonite, 107.6 x 124.4 cm. *photography*:
Robert Keziere

Woman VI, 1980, mixed media on mat board, 149.9 x 101.6 cm. *photography*:
Robert Keziere

Still Life/Cockatoo, 1984, graphite on paper, 152.4 x 203.2 cm. *photography*:
Robert Keziere

Rites of Spring, 1984, acrylic on canvas, 153 x 237 cm. *photography*: Robert Keziere

Painter 2, 1984, acrylic on canvas & masonite, 158 x 98.4 cm. *photography*: Gary Maier

COVER

It's a Boy, 1983, acrylic on canvas & masonite, 164.0 x 124.8 cm. *photography*:
Gary Maier *colour separations*: Cleland-Kent Western Ltd.