STEPHEN PHELPS
Recent Works

Gallery 1.1.1.
School of Art
University of Manitoba

November 26-December 19, 1984
Most of the so-called serious painting of the last few decades has been non-representational. The reason for this can be attributed to the dominance of draconian theories like Formalism, a theory that holds ‘important’ painting to be synonymous with the pursuit of purely formal elements, like line, colour, and composition.

Painting’s obsession with these elements has yielded an art virtually incomprehensible without words. Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Pop, Neo-Expressionism, take your pick, all rely on wordy platitudes to keep them aloft, and all are variations on an overbearing theme that has tried to dictate a fixed route of march away from subject matter for two generations of painters.

The artist, or painter, who finds himself most at odds with contemporary art’s dogmatic sensibilities is usually the lowly craftsman who can only grieve over the diminishing demands on good old fashioned painterly technique.

Sadly I am one of those. Though there is more to it than a pining for traditional pictorial devices.

My education as a painter went the usual route, blundering from great big expressionist dabs of paint at the end of a house brush to tiny micro-whisks of textures from a delicate number 2 Grumbacher. My gradual defection to recognizable images was not so much a reaction to the rhetorical overload of pipe-bearing instructors as an abiding insistence on greater visual legibility, and perhaps a bid for a wider audience.

Also, I saw too many fellow students being sucked in by the potent lingo of modernist styles, regurgitated from one year to the next, and each of which had its own unique appeal. Abstract Expressionism offered a release from physical angst by demanding a lusty windup and follow through with each stroke. Minimalism gave the anorexic intellect licence to vaporize subject or content into a genteel haze; pop art, a chance for frustrated punsters to score witty points against crass commercialism; and finally, performance art, along with early video, an opportunity for the more militant exhibitionist to declare war on art’s conventional confinements.

Somewhere in this creative clutter persisted the illustrator, a.k.a. figure painter. Some dabbled as well in drapery folds; others in landscapes. But all could expect to be treated with condescension by whatever avant-gardism was carrying the school flag that year. Because most of these gentle throwbacks would never matriculate beyond calendar artists, the few intent on mastering time worn techniques with new directions in mind were dismissed in one and the same breath.

It was understood that the serious artist was someone who plunged whole hog into exhibitionistic effects, and scrambled styles and obeyed some vague prescription dicta emanating always from New York — all in the desperate pursuit for “pertinent” art.

One of the most intriguing trends certainly was a form known as concept art, a theory that stressed process and documentation over the finished product. This had im-
lications for all painters. There was a rumour that con-
cept art was going to bury painting once and for all. No
more stuff to hang.

But painting survived and has entered the Eighties by
looping back on that juncture where it tried briefly to
dematerialize. Now we have anti-modernist art, the
underside of the same bandwagon, and a hot ticket for
emerging painters that goes under various labels — Neo-
Expressionism, New Wave, and even Bad Painting.

Representational artists have no ally here. Recogniz-
able images are invoked but treated in a deliberately
sloppy way, guided by strict stylistic calculations. It is
Yves St. Laurent run amok. Charged with low energy
resentment, or high-flash ultra chic gestures, the latest
fashion in painting is full of urgency and dazzle that
strains to speak to our desperate times. It is no accident
that it looks like badly recycled pop art with an obvious
family resemblance to graffiti. It is painting once again
being led by the nose, by fashion dictates, or harnessed to
deterministic theories.

The representational artist has to be cynical before the
claims of this New Wave to have constructed a radical
new figuration for painting. A reasonable grasp of theory
reveals that it is only the other side of the formalist doc-
trine. New Wave, Bad Painting, whatever, it has merely
transacted a swing in the argument's pendulum — proof
that symmetrical reversals go only as far as their model,
and can never be radical new departures.

But how does this diatribe relate to my own work? It is
my belief that the painter, representational or otherwise,
ignores the theoretical discourse that informs contempo-
rary painting at its own peril. The result: you have too
many amateurs who pick styles for themselves as you
would a coat; and too many serious talents that wind up
throwing in the towel in the face of what is perceived to be
an unintelligible parade of fashions.

That said, I believe the series of convulsions that de-
scribe modern painting are directly traceable to the domi-
nance of technology and the daunting perfection of re-
production techniques that renders the painter's craft
obsolete. Artists like to think of contemporary painting as
a series of heroic, if vain, showdowns staged against the
ideological weight of the market place. But this is only the
sideshow. The main feature finds the painter/craftsman in
a losing battle with the camera, computer and laser.

I like to count myself among those artists, representa-
tional artists, who are onto the struggle, but undaunted by
it, and who boast an intransigent allegiance to the antique
elements of painting.

My bias for strict legibility may peg me as an illustrator,
but should not be taken for an appeal for a return to the
comforting harmonies of traditional painting. There is
more to it than reverence for old fashioned technical
facility. Our classic pictorial devices, the mechanics of
picture making, have served for centuries, too long to be
thrown out with the bath water by the hit and run attacks
of nihilistic theorists.

So, a nimble wrist, a knowledge of colour key, and of
modelling techniques are obviously important to this
painter.

Most of the studies in this show are inclined to confron-
tational poses, with an obvious fondness for the burles-
que. I suppose the subject matter could be credibly de-
scribed as quirkish. There is, in fact, an injection of
feeling into every work that rides a deliberate seam be-
tween the sinister and the ridiculous.

I like to range well off the beaten path for my subjects,
and enjoy thrusting them into familiar contexts, into tradi-
tional portrait or full figure formats. The challenge is to
strike a sort of balance that through careful rendering
manages to offset their "shock value" with something
more endearing and enduring.

But these are not images transcribed verbatim by the
eye from photos or nature. The point is that photography,
for all its legerdemain could never capture them.

In the more recent work, I've broken away from sharp
declarative compositions, resorting, in the Climbing
Series, to a more lyrical use of figures and props. There
are technical interests that bind them, however, chiefly
reflected in the use of graphic devices like articulated
line, contrasting chroma and the occasional application of
muting sprays.

Finally, as gruelling as painting can be, it is the only
process that could have brought these images into being.
They are willed into existence through deliberate pain-
staking care; and if there is any magic here, it is the magic
that affects all painters when the hand/eye skills involved
seem to marshal themselves at an unconscious level. What
in fact drives these particular images out into the light is
best left unexamined. Suffice to say they are not guided
by any system of ideas or by mystical longings. The first is
better served by philosophies, the other by religion. The
artist is only an entertainer, I believe. The ones to avoid in
this game are the artists who take themselves too
seriously.
STEPHEN PHELPS: BIOGRAPHY

BORN: 1949 Montreal, Quebec
EDUCATION:
1977 - 79 M.F.A. (Scholarship, Teaching Assistantship)
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
1969 - 73 B.F.A. Honours
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS:
1980 • Gallery Move, Vancouver, B.C
1979 • Snegrove Gallery, Saskatoon, Sask.
• Shoestring Gallery, Saskatoon, Sask.

GROUP SHOWS:
1983 • Carnegie Center, Vancouver, B.C.
• Transamerica Pyramid Gallery
San Francisco, California
1981 • Vancouver Art Gallery,
Vancouver, B.C.
1978 • Mendel Art Gallery,
Saskatoon, Sask.
1976 • Open Space Gallery, Victoria, B.C.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

1. Veronica, 1982
   Acrylic on Canvas
   48" x 60"
2. Civil Servant, 1982
   Acrylic on Canvas
   36" x 48"
3. Ascent I, 1984
   Acrylic on Canvas
   42" x 54"
4. Ascent II, 1984
   Acrylic on Canvas
   42" x 54"
5. Ascent III, 1984
   Ink on paper
   19" x 24"
6. Rehearsals, 1983
   Acrylic on Canvas
   36" x 48"
7. Maneuvers, 1983
   Acrylic on Canvas
   42" x 54"
8. Fertility Rehearsals, 1979
   Acrylic on Canvas
   42" x 54"
9. Shadow Figures I, 1982
   Acrylic on Canvas
   36" x 36"
10. Shadow Figures II, 1982
    Acrylic on Canvas
    36" x 36"
11. Beach Scene, 1983
    Acrylic on Canvas
    36" x 48"
12. Archimedes Principle, 1979
    Acrylic on Canvas
    36" x 48"
13. Ascent IV, 1984
    Acrylic on Canvas
    42" x 54"
14. The Hunt, 1982
    Ink on Paper
    17" x 24"
15. Aerial Assault, 1982
    Ink on Paper
    20" x 30"
16. Behind the Barn, 1979
    Ink on Paper
    32" x 26"

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CREDITS

Exhibition curator: Dale Amundson
Installation technician: Zared Mann
Catalogue photos: Barry and Ken Smutlyo
