

*Heart Attack & Vine*  
July 15 – August 14, 1994  
103 Vine Street, Hamilton Canada

The Contemporaries Ride Again

*all together and alone in the here and now*

by Bryce Kanabara

What's always been evident in the work of these artists is their evolving concern for the marvel and tragedy that participate in what we call the human condition. Partly, this concern comes with the passing of years. Although they are not old, they, like many others of their generation, have begun to feel the touch of time on their bodies and know the susceptibility of their bloodstreams and organs to sudden devastation by a myriad of contemporary malignancies.

Time and fate are invisible and unstoppable agents that play lurking roles in the backdrop of our lives. They insinuate themselves in the images and themes of the works in this exhibition. What could be a more cogent way to express the contemporary condition of the body and soul than through representations of people? In paintings and sculpture of human beings the Contemporaries reflect and meditate on their personal indignations, fears and entrancements.

***Judi Burgess** represents lone women in opulent surroundings that frequently look like enormous art nouveau set designs. This combination of the figure with the decorative reminds us of works by Gustav Klimt, but we can trace Burgess' predilection for romantic trappings back further to the jeweled props and attire in Delacroix's Moroccan paintings. A pervasive melancholy seems to fill up her women and spill out into the paintings' languorous shapes and spaces. Themes of isolation and pessimism so typical of Klimt are suggested – but Klimt's extroversion (which often expressed itself through the erotic) is missing. Burgess' paintings are not exuberant outpourings of emotion. In them, she seems caught in a pull between romantic longing for another time and place, and a subjective reality which freezes her in **this** time and place. This separation of the individual from her aspiration is artfully conveyed in several of the paintings by the figure's ambiguous interactions with the rest of the picture. In **Spectrum**, she fingers like a heart string, one of the linear motifs which descend from the top of the painting. And the fall of the woman's shadow in **Kaleidoscope**, is not **into** a receding space, but **on** what is revealed to be a flat, painted backdrop. They are strangely suppressive works and like the women who appear in them, they're tense, private and disquieted.*

***Raffaele Caterini's** artist's-model series of paintings cannot be regarded as strictly an aesthetic or formalistic exercise. They're not like Philip Pearlstein's object-arrangements of naked women, furniture and patterned textiles. Nor should his paintings be compared with the naturalistic reality of Courbet or Manet, even if those French artists were the stylistic forbears to what Caterini is doing. Caterini's project*

*seems to be a persevering study of a theme which may allude to Pearlstein's neutralized approach to representational painting, but is, in fact, fraught with psychological undertow. The model is depicted in a variety of (most often, reclining) poses. And she is always entirely framed and contained within the picture – within the cell-like room. She's captivating and captive ... and observed. (The implied observer is not necessarily the artist.) The selection of poses is frankly ambivalent. At once, the woman (the same woman in all the paintings) seems to be depicted as both indifferent to the viewer and yet, provocative towards him/her. The colours of the body, mostly yellow-orange, are sometimes set in sharp contrast with the complementary blue blanket, or the red, blue sleeping bag on the green sheet. Highly vulnerable to criticism for a number of socio-political reasons, these paintings, nonetheless, are important declarations on issues concerning the contentious status of the nude in contemporary art and the primacy of the artist's compulsion. As if in response to his critics, Caterini's latest paintings depicts the artist's side of the studio containing only the tools and materials used in picture-making – brushes, paints, solvents, rags and empty canvases.*

Their perspectives on life are particularized and localized. As such, there's a subjectivity at the core of the work they do that discretely asserts the individual sensibility of each artist. Not that there's everything new in the motives that permeate and agitate the works. In style and technique, they reflect an unabashed indebtedness to the work of artists they have studied and admired. The works unapologetically evoke the allurements of art history and the lives of famous artists. There's a mighty romanticism at the base of all this. It's not a post-modernist dalliance with strategies of appropriation. Clearly, the works come from the here and now, but evoke the then and there. And it's not nostalgia that's promulgated, but the value of maintaining a conduit to the traditional sources of some of their tenaciously-held thoughts and feelings about art-making.

***Lisa Wöhrle's*** ability to paint representationally with ease and fluidity sustains much of her work. She's well aware of this asset, and perhaps it's one reason why she needn't look far from her day-to-day experience for her images. Many (if not all) of the figures are portraits of real people she's encountered. Sometimes they're executed under the stylistic influence of earlier Twentieth Century painters such as Egon Schiele and, in others, Wöhrle sheds derivative associations and scumbles into a virtuosic, painterly free-fall. In recent paintings, she's documented the artists' night clubscene ... they're documentations of semi-decadence that recall similar scenes from between-the-wars European art. Here, there are black halter tops, black tank tops and black spandex pants, cigarettes, glasses of beer, rock bands and humourless young cultural workers earnestly engaged in consolidating a life-style. Wöhrle is a people-watcher with a gift for understanding and depicting how we're all players in the great human psycho-drama. With unsweet compassion she shows us the desperate negotiations that take place among people and the lonely enterprise of their lives. Her's are the most naturalistic works in the exhibition. They're episodes that feature immediately familiar people set in familiar places and circumstances. They disclose both the hapless soap-operatic nature of our daily adventures as well as the poignant bliss of zestful, contemporary living.

**John Kinsella** lures us into his clamorous paintings with a glimmer of comic relief. Actually, they're dark forays into disillusionment. People crowd and swarm together, ostensibly in displays of community – but their relationships to one another seem motivated by desperation, not camaraderie. In previous paintings, there were clowns, puppeteers, puppets, and people who appear wooden, as in paintings by Max Beckmann. Kinsella presents us with entertainers, props, and toy-like contraptions which aren't just for kids. Under the greasepaint, the faces of the clowns are wizened and unsmiling; the toys are sinister instruments; and there's an unwholesome menace permeating the air. In a way, the figures are compellingly tragic. They are child/adults, precocious and joyless. In each of them, Kinsella draws the portrait of Everyperson ... innocent but proven guilty. The latest paintings include characters in different guises, playing different roles, but they are, essentially, the same taut and earnest personages. In one, a tattoo-armed, Toronto Queen Street couple toast each other with wine across a table ... In the background is the ubiquitous Kinsella arcade, and a bull's head and a wine skin. Is it a parody of Christian and pagan symbolism? Has this painting something to do with the annual bull and wine festival in Pamplona? Kinsella's restless struggle for expression finds him scurrying through the bins of iconography in search of fresh props for his disenchanting repertory cast.

On looking at a few of his figurative works, we might think that **Paul Ropel-Morski's** shape and forms flow straight from his subconscious. There can be no other excuse for those bald-headed and balloon-bodied figures. Perhaps (we surmise) his thoughts and images have been pre-empted and commandeered by Venutians – his aesthetic sense seems, at times, so unpremeditated. Where do these bizarre and disturbingly hammish images come from? Ropel-Morski most sustains the neo-expressionist anarchic verve that prevailed when these artists were finding their voices in art school. For him, it's embedded in his conscious like a first language. He turns his attention, as some of the others do, to the things around him – but he imbues them with exaggerated passion and significance. Objects are selected, then grossly enlarged to indicate their symbolic importance to him, then the parts are faceted together to make a painting. Ropel-Moski seems to respond most spontaneously and purely to experience, and in assuming the risk that accompanies bravado, produces paintings that are often hybrids of perplexity and eloquence. If the spirit of Max Beckmann was invoked in the work of Kinsella, it resonates as loudly in Ropel-Moski's: "All objective minds strive for self-representation", Beckman said. In recent works, Ropel-Morski has turned his sights on the regional, and painted Hamilton-scapes and characters. And, in a wry gesture of acknowledgement to the current appetite for text, he superimposes cut-out wood words such as "North End", and "Village Boy".

Despite the apparent collectivity of their activities as artists, there's much about aloneness in these works – even in ones that include more than one person. The artists seem to be inordinately aware of the imperial role of isolation in our lives. This recognition carries their concerns about art-making past the imperatives of fashionable thought and onward, ironically, to a strong identification with the tradition of studio-painting, with its implications of solitude, haven, battle-field and therapy room.

These works are made as potent diversions from fears, or in some instances, preoccupations that lead us into the enchanted constructions of the imagination. In a way they are truly retro-modernist; they make us remember what we've learned, not what we haven't learned. It's a steeped sensibility.

**Ferdinando Bilanzola's** paintings are unfolding narratives, many of which are about his ethnic (Italian) community. We can detect the accent. Despite their visual clarity (Bilanzola has a taste for the sort of forms that we find in comic books or animated films) they're complex in content. They're easy to read but not readily understood. They are as immediately engaging and yet as unsettling and mysterious as a Fellini film or de Chirico metaphysical painting. Voraciously-scaled figures populate the scenes, different activities (some of them, unspeakable) are taking place in all quarters, and we sense, too, the presence of Stanley Spencer, George Grosz, Georges Seurat. Although Bilanzola's themes of life, death and human relationships are universal, they're firmly contextualized within his ethnic perspective. Foods (cheeses, sliced sweet peppers on a plate, red wine) and domestic customs and costumes make us aware that the scenes are being played out in a particular locale and vernacular in Bilanzola's imagination. In his new series, he makes monochromatic, ink on paper paintings of people's heads and crams them into the picture frame. **But ... Are they Canadian?** Indicates a shift in Bilanzola's focus from the particular environment of ethnicity to the generalized realm of race. It contains three racially distinct portraits of people caught in a collective expression of astonishment. The only colour, curiously, lies in the small flowers that replace the pupils of their eyes.

**Paul Cvetich's** sculptures of sometimes headless, sometimes limbless figures are ironic commentary on the way broken, classical antique Greek and Roman sculptures have acquired the aesthetical status of High Art. They acknowledge the emotive power that artists have achieved through incompleteness or lack of wholeness – from Michelangelo's unfinished marble prisoners for the tomb of Pope Julius II, to Rodin's Balzac. Besides its critique of traditional taste, however, Cvetich's abraded bodies proclaim human mortality. Over the past year, though, he's produced a two-dimensional series of acetate transparencies based on anatomical photographs from old medical journals. Cut in halves, mixed and matched, these combinations of upper and lower parts of male and female bodies are clearly an extension of the artist's aesthetic sense. In one of the untitled, montage diptychs ... the pictures are bordered at the top and bottom by black strips created by the exposed sections of the film emulsion and tape. The strips are a concession to Cvetich's formalistic concerns – his sculptures are usually set in or against a similar (albeit three-dimensional) rectangular framework. But it's also important to recognize that the work is implicated in current issues of sexuality and gender (those black strips do remind us of those censor bands used to cover "private parts"). Thus, as has Bilanzola's latest works (which reflect concerns about race), it's crossed into the territory of cultural ideology and politics.

There is no collective expression of complaint or declaration of ideology. Their works are not exhortations to action. They do not aim to drive us into the streets with placards, or

to urge us to write letters to the editor. Yet, all their works are sensitive to the exquisite vulnerability of human beings to pain as well as to beauty. They are alert to the context of actual life, the way people think, believe and experience. They understand the common longings of the educated and the uneducated, the privileged and the underprivileged. There is much here that suggests that experiences have been lived in and out by these artists, and not just thought about.

*Bryce Kanbara*  
*Hamilton, July 1994*