

ALEX LIVINGSTON by Cliff Eyland

This is a brief version of Alex Livingston's forty years: he has lived in Halifax, Canada since 1980; his paintings have been shown in numerous group shows and solo exhibitions across Canada and in London, England; he has been a visiting artist and panelist in various university and gallery settings; he is on the faculty of the Studio Division at the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design; he has received several grant awards from the Canada Council and the government of Nova Scotia; his work is in private, corporate and public collections, notably Telesat Canada, Nova Corporation, Purdy's Wharf Development Corporation, the Canada Council Art Bank, the Nova Scotia Art Bank and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.

This publication accompanies a University of Manitoba School of Art Gallery III exhibition of a small selection -- not a retrospective, but a focused view -- of Livingston's oil paintings of the past few years. This is the artist's first solo exhibition in Manitoba.

In 1988 I characterized Livingston's early work within a discussion about a contemporary art movement called "neo-expressionism." As a graduate and then teacher at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Livingston was at the centre of a furious debate:

*Study with [the late] English/Canadian painter John Clark was important to Livingston's work. Clark participated in a introduction of lush, big figure painting at NSCAD in the late '70s and early '80s, a period experienced by students as an ideological glass bead game involving faculty such as Benjamin Buchloh, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Bruce Barber (committed to socio/critical work) and a group of painters including John Clark, Ron Shuebrook and Judith Mann (this overview is too simple and symmetrical - I am describing only one of many features of the College's intellectual*

life at the time.)

Within an [early 1980s] art world revival of expressionism, NSCAD painters like Clark and students like Livingston consciously distanced themselves from the developing trend, despite apparent morphological and procedural correspondences: the Buchloh faction, as might be anticipated, condemned the painting revival outright, no doubt seeing Clark and his compatriots as another colonial variation on a new and regressive international style.

The buzz around the painting studio, fluently articulated by Clark, was negative on neo-expressionism. It was seen to be less a revival of painting than a take over of painting by conceptual art. Also, it seemed to Clark and others that neo-expressionists were not interested in the structure of painting but only the imagery and subject matter. As Clark described it (and who could disagree) there was a strange mixture of obsessive attitudes and stylistic detachment in neo-expressionism, particularly in the German painters: obsessiveness was almost being used as a system, but with an ironical distance in the work. The attitude of neo-expressionists seemed to reflect a strategy designed to fill up the work with meaning.

[*Vanguard*, Summer 1988 p.33 -- reproduced in Cliff Eyland and John Murchie's *The 100,000 Names of Art*, Halifax: St. Mary's University Art Gallery, 1992 pp65-67]

John Clark's tragic early death prevented his entry into an era in which debates about painting moved beyond a preoccupation with neo-expressionism. Livingston's mature work, however, has lived up to its early promise:

*As painting reverts to a position in contemporary art as one medium among many, confusion about surfaces which look -- superficially, is it possible? -- like each other will recede, and*

*artists like Livingston and Clark will be assessed with greater seriousness. Livingston, Clark, and others may well be pulling off the project of a reinvestment of devalued imagery, but it is ironic that a decade of neo-expressionism in painting may have inhibited the effort.*

[ibid.]

Alex Livingston has become one of Canada's most accomplished painters by absorbing and then moving confidently beyond the neo-expressionist world of his youth.

Questions about biomorphic form which Livingston addresses have in the past twenty years been associated more and more, at least in the popular imagination, with recent revolutions in computer technology and genetic engineering. Karl Sims is an artist and programmer whose computer system mimics evolution while embodying a common idea about what biomorphic art should do:

*In Sims version of natural history, computer algorithms provide the parade of new life-forms, multiplying and mutating faster than a jarful of fruit flies. But instead of environmental challenges and competition, it's human beings -- Sims or anyone else using one of his programs -- who, by whatever criteria they choose, select the winners and losers. The double-barreled software-wetware approach is crucial: Computers are great at performing calculations quickly, but they're lousy art critics.*

[Mark Frauenfelder, *Wired* magazine, October 1998, p.164 ]

Years before Sims' invention, biologist Richard Dawkins imagined how new creatures might be conjured through computer modelling. Like present-day genetic cloners, Dawkins, unlike Sims, is less fanciful, concerned only with what could actually exist given the right earthly conditions:

*Technically, all that we are doing , when we play the computer biomorph game, is finding animals that, in a mathematical sense, are waiting to be found. What it feels like is a process of artistic creation.*

[Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p.66]

Like Dawkins, fellow scientist Stephen Jay Gould examines the relationship between artistic imagination and biology in his book *Wonderful Life The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*. But instead of new creatures, Gould addresses the frustrating complexities of imagining long-dead ones. Gould looks backward. It takes genius, he says, to make a drawing of a whole prehistoric creature from the evidence provided by a squashed fossil form:

*The reconstruction of a Burgess organism is about as far from 'simple' or 'mere' description as Caruso from Joe Blow in the shower, or Wade Boggs from Marvelous Marv Throneberry. You can't just look at a dark blob on a slab of Burgess shale and then by mindless copying render it as a complex, working arthropod, as one might transcribe a list of figures from a cash-register tape into an account book. I can't imagine an activity further from simple description than the reanimation of a Burgess organism.*

[Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life...*; London: Penguin Books, 1989, p.100]

Alex Livingston's art demonstrates how traditional painting -- the application of oil paint to a surface within an art historical tradition -- can be renewed as it meets biology, or more accurately, as it meets representations of biological things half-way. Possible living creatures, squashed dead ones and computer-generated biomorphs are not as important to Alex Livingston as grappling biological forms within the self-imposed technical limits in emphasis

of a personal sensibility.

This grappling produces its own morphology. Contemporary painters do not ignore computer technology when they make paintings, they are simply using a different medium. Livingston is attracted to art history's inventory of images and the characteristics of paint -- the dripping, the viscosity, and the brushwork. This attraction is as irreducible a factor in the creation of Livingston's work as hardware is to the computer artist. Both Livingston and a computer artist like Sims play with and against pictorial conventions. The difference is that Livingston does all his image-making directly through the sensuous medium of paint on canvas. Sims cannot give his creatures the tactility and presence that Livingston's painting has, and Livingston cannot produce (but can only suggest) the innumerable computer-aided variations in form that populate Sims' world.

Again, the formal problems of painting, the positioning of imagery and the use of colour and drawing are as fundamental to a painter as the genetic code is to a biologist or a computer code is to the computer artist: Sims must adapt his forms to the codes of computer programming just as a painter like Livingston must adapt his ideas to limits of paint and the space of pictures. Both play with pictorial conventions, and both search for new forms as they incorporate old ones into new images, and both have limits.

Let me compress twenty years of Livingston's painting into a few sentences. (This may remind the reader of how the Burgess shale made one of Gould's *Canadaspis*' into a fossil, but bear with me.) Livingston began his career in the early 1980s with paintings of plant and animal forms in which the sensuous qualities of paint were as important as the invented forms themselves. Later on he began to use more fanciful biomorphic imagery (even if his flower paintings, for example, still suggest real plants).

Livingston's art school paintings, none of which are included in this show, were generally organized in a landscape format which survived into his mid-1980s work; increasingly, however, Livingston began to organize a painting as an even distribution of forms across the entire surface. Snakes began to turn into DNA spirals and the landscape format was compositionally "table-tilted." Livingston's interest in the formal organization of a picture became explicit as works began to be organized in a cubist or "flat bed" manner.

Livingston's work entered an early maturity in the 1990s in works like *Midnight Betrothal*, (cat.1). In *Midnight Betrothal* and *Writer's Pipe* (cat.2) a viewer is offered a generous spread of biomorphic forms. Animal and humanoid creatures jump from tendril to stem, completely comfortable in their floating world. A thin film of whitish paint attaches each head or plant to the painting's ground like a wispy umbilical cord. Space is shallow and watery, like that which surrounds the tiny specimens in a slide under a microscope.

In his most recent work, for example *Conference* [cat.12], based on ancient book engravings, Livingston follows a series of small studies with larger works as if to re-enact in steps the development through a landscape format toward an all-over composition as in the *Midnight Betrothal* era of his work. In *Conference* the book engraving sources are scrupulously respected, which makes careful placement of the borrowed images within a composition that much more important.

Livingston's most recent paintings play with scale and ground as they raid the visual archive of the real and unreal creatures that populated the imaginations of the Middle Ages. The historical subjectivity which every age brings to the appearance of animals is highlighted as Livingston's personal painting style is combined with an old style, as if to remind viewers that any method of depicting forms -- however

imaginative -- is also, and paradoxically, an expression of the limits of an era's imagination: a technology of depiction is also a technology of subjectivity. From this point of view Livingston's paint brush has more in common with Sims computer program than we may at first think.

Alex Livingston Gallery One One One List

(All works are oil on canvas; measurements are in inches.)

1. 1994 *Midnight Betrothal* 86"x68"
2. 1994 *Writer's Pipe* 86"x68"
3. 1995 *Flora #1* 72"x60"
4. 1995 *Untitled* 55"x48"
5. 1996 *Untitled (flowers, bird, insects)*  
16"x20" (collection Jan Peacock)
6. 1996 *Flower Study* 30"x40"
7. 1996 *Four Flowers* 18"x24"
8. 1997 *Owl* 36"x30"
9. 1997 *Moths* 30"x36"
10. 1998 *Fox & Abstraction* 12"x28"
11. 1998 *Greyhound & Abstraction* 24"x50"
12. 1998 *Conference* 41.75"x59.75"