

HAROLD TOWN by Cliff Eyland

Douglas Fetherling, in a review of a biographical book about Harold Town, said this:

The couple of characteristics that distinguished Harold Town's career as an artist were both extreme. One: he was heroically and theatrically prolific, famously so; he worked in any number of media and genres, one right after another, in fact, sometimes several at once. Two: he had serious personality problems. [Fetherling p. 76]

Harold Town was once famous, but he is now obscure. He was born in 1924 and died in 1990, having lived most of his life in Toronto. In 1953, he was a founder and member of the "Painters Eleven," a group of Toronto abstract expressionist painters which included Jack Bush, Oscar Cahen, William Ronald and Jock Macdonald. Painters Eleven took their cues from contemporary post-war American artists such as Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock. Paul Duval wrote in 1972:

Harold Town was one of the most naturally endowed of Painters Eleven. He could manipulate any medium or style to which he turned his attention--and he turned his attention to many. Prints, drawings, collages, paintings, sculptures issued easily and prolifically from his clever hands. His works contain a brilliant, if sometimes brittle, wit, and often a touch of the theater. Town [was] a performing artist, who constantly [appeared] to be challenging the earlier achievements of others--Picasso, Motherwell, Cahen, Klein, anyone at all. [Duval p. 141-142]

William Withrow wrote: "Town's ability as a draftsman is undisputed. And his single autographic prints, produced between 1955 and 1957, were surely among the most beautiful art objects ever made by a Canadian artist." [Withrow p. 76]

Clement Greenberg was the leading critic of abstract expressionism when he visited Painters Eleven Toronto

studios in 1957. He made some lasting friendships there; as the subsequent history of Canadian art would prove, Jack Bush benefited most from this contact, and Town, amongst the significant Painters Eleven artists, the least. In fact, Town (and Walter Yarwood) declined to participate in this bid for critical accreditation from an American critic, refusing to pay part of the critic's expenses. Was Town's refusal to pay "tribute money" (Barry Lord's phrase) to Greenberg an expression of an historically appropriate Canadian cultural nationalism? Lord says no:

Town's refusal to pay Clement Greenberg's fare, like his moving into the Group of Seven's old Studio Building, and his comparisons of his colour and texture to those of Tom Thomson, are all just the saleable cultural-nationalist poses of an artist who is really a sell-out. He is today [1974] the darling of the Art Gallery of Ontario Women's Committee and all right-thinking Rosedale matrons. [Lord p.206]

Town's painting style during the 1950s could very well be characterized as being "American" in some senses of the word. Abstract expressionism did, after all, originate in America and its generous all-over paint licks do appear in Painters Eleven work. Lord noted a contradiction, and saw Town's nationalism as posing:

Town's attitude was not entirely due to patriotic zeal. He was just as committed to US abstract expressionism as [William] Ronald was, but he wanted to develop his own colonial version in Toronto. By now he was Toronto's best-known painter, thanks to his public-relations skills, and he was openly vying with Ronald for honours. In 1956 it was Town who exhibited at the Venice Biennial and by 1957 he was already selling well enough to quit commercial art and begin working full-time at his painting and print-making. [Barry Lord p. 205]

Town became a celebrated Toronto painter and writer without Greenberg's help (but, significantly, with the support of Robert Fulford, the leading Canadian art critic of the day). After the Painters Eleven broke up

in 1960 he became an even bigger force on the Toronto scene. " He has been called the 'Picasso of Canada' said Withrow, "clearly something of a legend in his own time." [William Withrow p. 74]

Town mimicked Picasso's prolific graphic facility with his pen and the bravura of American abstract expressionism with his brush. Collectors at the Laing Galleries in 1961 "lined up outside the door and arguments broke out over the right to acquire certain pictures." [David Burnett p. 39] Town made bombastic statements and hyperbolic remarks. He was colourful. His column in *Toronto Life* magazine kept him the spotlight when his work wasn't in a current show. All reports tell of Town's caustic wit in conversation, his confrontational manner, and his life as a party-goer.

Was Town the paradigmatic ROC artist (meaning a "Rest Of Canadian," that is, a non-Quebecer)? Does not Canada produce good imitators and cultural chameleons? Town's nationalism seems dated, but only because now Canadian artists believe so strongly in free trade. Town created beautiful forms and colour combinations That can be appreciated--and mined--for their graphic inventiveness by today's burgeoning abstract painting movements. Some of the dense abstract works from the 1960s and 1970s look good now. I especially like mid-1960s works such as *Optical*, 1964 and *Centrebiz* 1965 reproduced in David Burnett's Art Gallery of Ontario retrospective catalogue; *Silent Light No. 11* 1968-69; and the *Snap* paintings from the mid-1970s also look good. In fact, Town's "colonial" abstract expressionism is as good as the genre gets.

But much else, for example all of his sculpture, must be dismissed. Town's early 1960s visual and verbal musings on the "tyranny of corners," like much narrow technical theorizing, are silly, and the much praised *Enigma* drawings are but elegantly grotesque technical exercises in unfeelingly rendered anxiety.

Town's titles are particularly irritating, but it should be remembered that he worked in a climate of bad titles; nevertheless, the cute one-liners grate on a contemporary viewer's nerves. Few can now appreciate

*Gateway to Atlantis, No. 2*, (an autographic print) without thinking that Town called it that because a mildly poetic title might lend the blue in this work watery resonance. Much of what Town said about himself and his art was simply portentous. He is quoted by William Withrow, for example, as saying: "I paint to defy death." [Withrow p.73]

I include two *Stretch* works and the John and Yoko portraits in this installation, all from the permanent collection of the University of Manitoba School of Art. Their 1969-71 dates are within a few years of the Duval, Lord and Withrow books on Town to which I refer in this essay.

David Burnett sees the *Stretch* works as the low point in Town's oeuvre:

They appear trapped rather than transformed by their virtuosity, and if they were received with little enthusiasm when shown in the early 1970s, they are not paintings that the perspective of fifteen years values in the light of subsequent development. Those who claim a decline in the attack of Town's work, can most readily point to this series.

[David Burnett p. 135]

I disagree. Surely Town's early 1980s *Musclemen* and *Toy Horse* series rest nearer the critical bottom than the *Stretch* works. The *Stretch* works are of interest now because they are visual puns that anticipate the abstract literalism of Peter Halley's 1980s "conduit" paintings. Aside from the coincidence of the *Stretch* works with the concerns of 1980s abstract painting, the *Stretches* make for rich contemplation of the principle of the eternal return of forms and issues in contemporary visual art. Too bad that Town's defence of his *Stretch* works has nothing of Halley's rhetorical savvy: "Everything stretches in our society; this picture is about pulling cellophane out of a box, or spilling ketchup." [William Withrow p. 74]

The John and Yoko portraits date roughly to the pop couple's visit to Canada, when they were campaigning

for peace by means of performance art "bed-ins." Hints of the gap between Town and the cultural scene of 1970 can be seen in these drawings, which convey no sense that John and Yoko were artists, too, despite the fact they shared with Town a mania for publicity which tended to trivialize their serious work. Town's portrait of Yoko Ono is particularly off-base: he makes her an ingenue, her gaze seductively averted from the viewer. Lennon is treated as rough customer, not by means of a striking likeness, however, but in a caricature of a ranting hippy. Town was always concerned with being fashionable and slightly offensive--he was a dandy, after all--and the mischievousness in his *Stretches* and the John and Yoko portraits was deliberate. But by 1970-71 this sort of thing just wasn't smart enough. By then the art jokes were being made by university educated people who were leaving artists such as Town, who had grown up in their studios, way behind.

Authors quoted in this text :

Douglas Fetherling review of *Hot Breakfast for Sparrows: My Life with Harold Town* (by Iris Nowell, published by Stoddart Publishing) Toronto: *Canadian Art*, Winter 1992 Volume 9, Number 4.

Paul Duval *Four Decades The Canadian Group of Painters and Their Contemporaries 1930-1970* Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1972.

William Withrow *Contemporary Canadian Painting* Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Limited, 1972.

Barry Lord *The History of Painting in Canada Toward a People's Art* Toronto: NC Press, 1974.

David Burnett *Town* Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1986.

Works in this installation by Harold Barling Town:

1. From the *Popsters and Celebrities* series: *John Lennon*, 1969-70. Edition 177/180. Original Lithograph on steel plate. 50.8x35.5 cm (Acc.#96.0024)

2. *Stretch Blue on Yellow*, 1970-71. Serigraph Edition 42/99. 72.2x130 cm (Acc.#96.0012)

3. *Stretch Red on Blue*, 1970-71. Serigraph Edition 58/99. 72.2x130 cm (Acc.#96.0014)

4. From the *Popsters and Celebrities* series: *Yoko Ono*, 1969-70. Edition 73/180. Original Lithograph on steel plate. 50.8x35.5 cm (Acc.#96.0029)