



**All Around
Me...
All Around
You**

**BERNICE
VINCENT**

recent works

Gallery 1.1.1.

University of Manitoba

FitzGerald Building

February 8 to March 1, 1996

How time flies! It was only when I started to write this that I realized that I've known Bernice Vincent and her work for twenty years. It seems only yesterday that I first visited her suburban home and studio in London, Ontario. I remember the texture of the drive there on a cold, snowy December evening in 1975, the smells of her house when I entered, and our long conversation about art in London, about the many artists from there who had achieved national and international attention, and about her work that would be shown at the Forest City Gallery early the next year. It astonishes me that my memory holds such clear detail despite all of the life events that have crowded the intervening years. But of course time doesn't fly. Nor does it creep along. We can't waste it or lose it or spend it or even use it carefully

because it is a continuum. We're only placed within it; we can't control it. Like two other artists from London—Jack Chambers and Greg Curnoe—Vincent's work is firmly located in its time and place. It is more than a record of time, however; it is a testament to life lived.

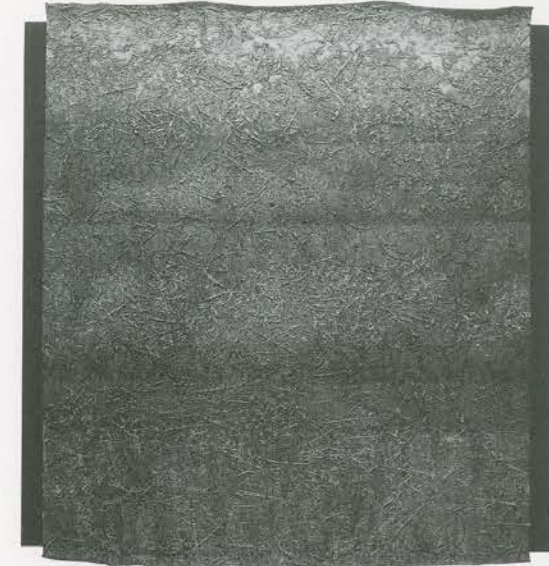
This notion of time as a continuum is central to a large body of Vincent's work. Although she had been painting seriously since the 1950s,¹ during the later 1960s, like most women artists of her generation, she was more occupied with parenting than with painting.² After painting a number of portraits of objects in her house in the early 1970s, in 1974 she made a series of small paintings of a section of the sky at different times during the day. She once said of these first time-based paintings that they were "an interesting thing I could work into my life. I could do a little painting, run out and put some laundry into the machine, come back and do a different little painting, go off and do something else, come back and paint the same area of sky again. It turned the day into a real event." The paintings, in other words, gave shape to the day. They provided a way to register a conscious life being lived. She said, further, "I tried to get the

painting as close as I could to what I saw. I wasn't looking for exciting things to happen in the sky; if nothing happened that was important too."³

These small paintings done in a day soon gave rise to a number of larger and more ambitious paintings that record a series of days, a month, or the four seasons. Two qualities unite these works. First, there is a commitment to discipline. Once a decision was made to paint a series the task had to be completed. Concerning the paintings of a month, Vincent has said, "I got to paint on Saturday and Sunday. I promised myself to keep with it. The rule of the game was that if I missed a day I'd have to start over again with a different month."⁴ Painting became equal with the other stuff of life that previously might have got in its way. Second, all of the works arise from intensely careful observation. To see and to represent a view with the exacting attention to detail shown in these works takes one through its surface, into its substance.

All Around Me ... All Around You is the culmination of twenty years of experience with painting the passage of time. It is a circular painting environment comprised of fifty-two panels which depict specific observations made each week between the spring equinoxes of 1992 and 1993. The surface of each panel facing the interior of the installation is painted in the style of High Realism while the exterior face is an abstraction of the interior face's colours and forms. There is also a written text for each panel which gives the date it was painted, its view, and occasionally a comment on the weather, the presence (or absence) of human activity, or life (and death) events.⁵

The work recalls a film by Jack Chambers, *Circle* (1968-1969), which, through time-lapse photography, shows the passing of a year in his backyard in London. Where his work, and most of



ABOVE:
Out of Winter,
Early May, 1995, 1995

OPPOSITE:
Winter Solstice in the Ravine by
the Variety Store, 1994, 1995

Vincent's earlier time-based works, are from a fixed point of view, *All Around Me ... All Around You* shows scenes from various locations in and around her home and studio. The selection of each subject was made intuitively. In part this connects us directly with the Great Canadian Narrative—our unpredictably changing weather.⁶ She shows us days that are too wet or cold to allow painting outdoors and others that invite it. Further, intuitive selection gave her the opportunity to paint slices of life that traditionally have escaped the attention of painters. Garbage cans and plastic-wrapped furniture receive the same penetrating look as favourite plants and people. She believes it is important to look at everything, that everything should be treated with equal respect.

One of the qualities I find most appealing about this work is its format. Vincent had used long, narrow vertical sections in other paintings in the early 1980s. They suggested, she says, "glimpses, like you see looking out the window when the curtains aren't quite closed."⁷ We are accustomed to thinking of vision as essentially horizontal; the foreground, middle ground and background of landscape paintings are horizontal layers. Time seems more to be measured by the vertical. Think of the marks on a chart recording a heartbeat or the bars of a musical score. Standing inside *All Around Me ... All Around You* we bring the horizontal of space and the vertical of time into an equilibrium because we "read" around the work. The density and intensity of the continuum of time are given a visual equivalent.

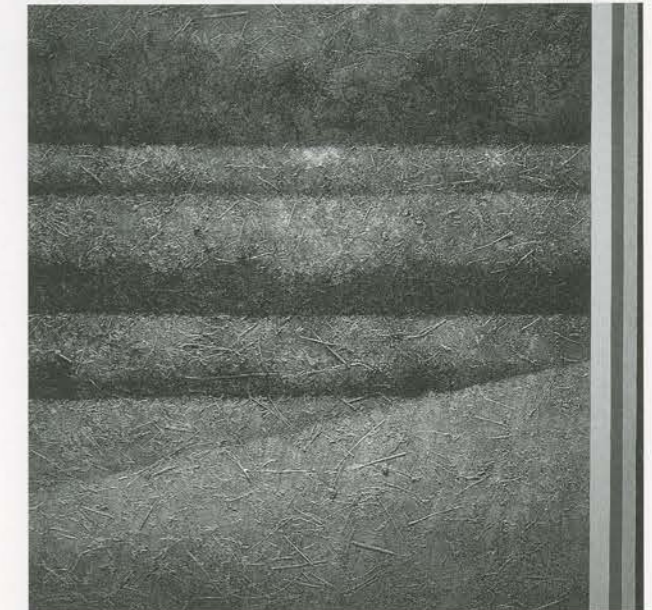
Perhaps it is not surprising that Vincent's work changed radically in 1993. Even when her work most closely approached High Realism its abstract qualities were as important as the subjects it depicted. Concerning a painting about an apple she wrote: "To some degree the painting is also about paint and about the painting as 'object.' That is to say, it is about the arrangement of forms and colours on a flat surface.... [It] is as much about two circles which enclose interesting modulations of colour...and the various and repeated forms created by the shapes of the seeds and the shape of the core and the fine lines which define it."⁸

Similar analyses could be made of the realist sides of *All Around Me ... All Around You*. When she decided to paint the "backs" of the panels (the surfaces that face out toward the gallery) she chose to simplify the images on the "fronts." She found that she genuinely enjoyed painting these abstractions and that they caused her think about patterns on North American Native blankets, early Egyptian decorative patterns and other early examples of abstraction. She realized that she had been looking at abstraction "out of the corner of [her] eye"⁹ for a long time.

During the rainy fall of 1992, corn was left standing in the fields of Southwestern Ontario. Recently she recalled seeing a place during a drive in the countryside "where we couldn't see anything but the sky and the walls of corn stalks that surrounded us on both sides of the road. The forms and textures created by the burnished, pale brown corn stalks were overwhelming."¹⁰ She had been saving dried plant material that fall without knowing what she would do with it. Her most recent works, abstract landscapes, use it to echo textures found in fields.

The notion of time as a continuum is also present in her most recent paintings, as is the meticulous attention to, and now the incorporation of, nature's detail. It is partly because of the influence of her work that I recall the many times we have spent together through the years so clearly.

Robert McKaskell, Curator



FOOTNOTES:

1. After graduating from Southwestern Ontario's then most acknowledged program of art education, the Special Art Program at the H.B. Beal Technical School, in 1954, she received a scholarship to study at the Instituto Allende in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.
2. With her husband, Don Vincent, she had two children, Charles and Esther, born in 1965 and 1968.
3. Quoted in Robert McKaskell, *Changes: Bernice Vincent, London (Ont.): McIntosh Gallery, 1986, pp. 9-10.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. A major death was that of Greg Curnoe, a leading figure in London's, and Canada's, art community. He was killed while bicycling near London. His death is commemorated in painting # 34. In a recent letter to me (undated), Vincent wrote: "After you left I read this diary [the text for *All Around Me ... All Around You*] again. Knowing what I know now, the first part seems like a description of some of the events that led up to Greg's death. So many times I wrote about the rain.... Now I wonder if the land had not been so saturated, the great pools of water might not have remained on the fields after that November 12th storm. The barn would not have looked like it was floating and the truck driver who drove into the cyclists would not, as he testified, have been distracted by the unusual sight. Also, if it had snowed that Friday instead of the following Sunday the bicycle club would probably not have gone on that ride."
6. In addition to its unusual amount of rain, the weather produced erratic temperatures both in London and Winnipeg in the summer of 1992. It is unusual for there to be a frost warning in Southwestern Ontario in July. Nevertheless, "the plants don't seem to mind" (painting # 18). We are shown small fruit forming on her pear tree in June (painting # 14) and the pears being harvested in September (painting # 24).
7. Interview with the artist, December 29, 1995.
8. Bernice Vincent, unpublished manuscript.
9. Interview with the artist, December 29, 1995.
10. Undated letter, Bernice Vincent to Robert McKaskell.

Works in the Exhibition

All Around Me ... All Around You,

1992-1993

acrylic on paper and board, 52 paintings,
each 38 x 1 1/2 x 1/2 inches;
photocopied text

Out of Winter, Early May, 1995, 1995

acrylic, sand, dried plant material on board and
paper, 51 x 48 inches

Winter Solstice in the Ravine by the Variety Store, 1994, 1995

acrylic, sand, dried plant material on board,
48 x 48 inches

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FRONT COVER: ***All Around Me ... All Around You,***
paintings # 49, 50, 51, outside face

BACK COVER: ***All Around Me ... All Around You,***
paintings # 49, 50, 51, inside face