

VANCOUVER

It has been two decades since Vancouver last captured the attention of the national eye. In the '60s, Canada's West Coast was the psychedelic, blacklight, acid-tripping capital for artistic extremists. When N.E. Thing Co. Ltd., (Ingrid and Iain Baxter) bagged a complete domestic interior (down to the bagged feces in the bagged toilet) in 1966 at the University of British Columbia, and Jack Wise transcended the here and now with his mystic union of Zen and introspective phone-pad doodling and Vancouverites shelled out a surprising number of votes into the top hat of mayoral candidate Mr. Peanut, Vancouver's art scene was transformed into a festival of talent, energy, imaginative experimentation and theatricality. Names such as Anna Banana, Doctor Brute, Flakey Rosehips and Marcel Idea will always live with us; and can we ever forget the time Eric Metcalfe (a.k.a. Dr. Brute) painted the entire facade of the Vancouver Art Gallery with leopard spots in the days before the more austere stone felines crouched at the gallery's doorstep?

The '80s find an invigorating theatrical stance returning to Vancouver's art scene. This scene emerged as a mature entity late in 1983 when the newly located Vancouver Art Gallery opened its Arthur Erickson doors for the inaugural exhibition, *Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983*, and when, in a Yale-town warehouse, a group of local artists simultaneously opened the *October Show*. The VAG retrospective's definition of the city's artistic place and taste was enshrined in its 440-page catalogue recounting a history from Varley to Oraf. But a segment of the city's artistic community had anticipated the need for a more substantial overview of new Vancouver art. Thus the *October Show* was born. Initially, the idea was not to be in conflict with the VAG retrospective, but rather to supplement it. Yet as Steve Harris, one of the *October Show's* organizers, commented in the exhibition's catalogue, "If [former VAG director] Luke Rombout thinks the *October Show* is a 'marvellous idea,' where does that leave its organizers? Holding the bag and the responsibility for future Vancouver-centred exhibitions."

The new VAG in fact has displayed an increasing internalization and lack of dialogue or daring since its move to the austere

formality of the old courthouse building on Georgia Street. Blue chips, big names and mega-sponsors have been the shaping hands behind its exhibition programs. Henry Geldzahler's second-rate selection of first-rate artists' works in Rothmans' *American Accents* or David Bellman's deadly assemblage of drawings by non-objective sculptors for Seagram are just two VAG shows that tell the tale of the corporate collection shuffle that has kept local Vancouver artists dancing barefoot in the streets.

Today, entirely separate from the VAG, a new Vancouver art community is generating a collective organization of artists and non-commercial gallery directors dedicated to maintaining the excitement and communication started by the *October Show*. Soon after the 120 artists had vacated the 32,000-square-foot *October Show* space, a number of offshoots appeared. First, a new alternative art magazine, *Issue*, was launched. Caustic, tongue-in-cheek, politically biased and often self-indulgent and immature, *Issue* nevertheless stands as a hot voice next to the VAG's cool and cadaverous *Vanguard*. Another important recent development has been the formation of the Vancouver Artists League, headed by *Vanguard* editor Russell Keziere, with Western Front director Hank Bull, Contemporary Art Gallery director Christine Elving, Video Inn director Paul Wong, Intermedia director Ed Varney and Barbara Daniel and Todd Davis of the Unit/Pitt. The League's purpose? "To create a coalition of existing artist-run centres and artists' societies in Vancouver."

The meetings of the Vancouver Artists League are held in the Ultrasuede Lounge of the Montgomery Cafe, the focal point and caffeine oasis for Vancouver's artists, self-styled critics and the local bohemian contingent. Built in the '50s as a Silk Hat and Stork club, the Montgomery is decorated in true '50s style: the soda fountain's grey Arborite counter snakes around a bar enhanced by Vancouver artist David Ostrem's silkscreened images of 45-rpm records and musclemen, the upper-level Naugahyde booths feature a black-and-white pinto motif, and a portico of dancing, cutout flames provided by Ewan McNeil—a member of one of

The new Vancouver art
proclaims itself from
the hoardings: it's
downtown, down-market
and high decibel

By ARTHUR PERRY

I. Braineater (a.k.a. Jim Cummins) at the Montgomery Cafe—his manic and compulsive passion for making art is matched only by his genius for self-promotion.





1. Braineater *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1984), plywood and enamel, 182.9 x 83.8 cm. (72" x 33" x 1/4"). Collection: the artist. Courtesy: The Art Gallery at Harbourfront.

Vancouver's best bands, the all-male Beverly Sisters—frames the scene.

As artists' tax rights and the upcoming *Art City 84* (this year's equivalent of the *October Show*) are discussed in the lounge, plans for the presentation of various art-related events are constantly in the works backstage. Video nights are always major hits; Eric Metcalfe and Hank Bull's video, *Sax Island*, and Paul Wong's notorious video *Confused* were recently screened to full houses. The '84 summer produced lecture nights with local artists such as Ian Wallace and Julie Duschenes. Plans for poetry readings and other events tumble into the Montgomery daily. Far from the chic, sleek, pink-lined world

of Granville Island's nacho and margarita bars, the Montgomery exudes a downtown, non-organic aura of raw cosmopolitan energy. Across town, the old Lecky Paper warehouse serves as a communal studio for artists such as Michael Banwell, Greg Murdoch and Lori Goldberg, whose reggae night, following Dan Joy's one-night exhibit at the Unit/Pitt, drew more than 300 people into her studio space.

Some of this new energy, this theatricality, was evident in *6 Vancouver '84*, an exhibition of current Vancouver art on display this summer at Toronto's

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MICHAEL LUBIN

(Left) I. Braineater's art sources range from Rubens to Big Daddy Roth. His three-eyed monster was a companion piece to the four-legged *Harry Screams I'm Not a Table*.

(Right) Georgiana Chappell's *Time Island* created a fantasy world of light and magic. Two store-bought ceramic dogs introduced a burlesque element.



Georgiana Chappell, *Time Island* (1984), mixed media installation, 465 x 620 cm (1183" x 244"). Courtesy: The Art Gallery at Harbourfront

Art Gallery at Harbourfront. More than anything else, the show was the product of its curator, Alvin Balkind. Happily, Balkind realizes that Vancouver is no more Shadbolt and Onley than Montreal is Molinari and Gaucher or Toronto is Ronald and Town. A former curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the VAG, Balkind has always loved to include eccentric and borderline talents in his artistic selections. "I like to swerve away from the expected," he explains. "What I look for is vitality, a surge of being, art that is in touch with the zeitgeist. It's my intention to be in conscious opposition to the genteel tradition in art."

For Balkind, art curatorship is an ongoing process of excavation, an unearthing of the "quixotic, visionary, emotional, sensuous" strains in art. In the VAG's 1977 exhibit, *Four Places*, Balkind included the contents of Allan Detheridge's studio—ladders, garbage and all—along with a black sedan filled with Gathie Falk's ceramic watermelons. Other unexpected favourites of Balkind's have been R. Fish's rubber casts of dead salmon; Mark Prent for Pacific beachcombers.

For the Harbourfront exhibit, Balkind again made his choices with an eye to the eclectic. His six selected artists—bill bissett, Georgiana Chappell, Julie Duschenes, David MacWilliam, Greg Snider and I, Braineater—

are all to varying degrees representative of the Vancouver scene. All but Snider come from the ranks of the *October Show*.

Balkind wanted to select artists whose work had no, or very little, previous exposure in Toronto. "I tried to find artists who would challenge the Toronto audience," he explains. And in light of the eccentricity of the Vancouver art scene, Balkind was the perfect curator for such a task. In the end, *6 Vancouver 6* showed two polarities, defined by Balkind as "the purist intellects versus the wild-eyed romantics." The academic element was represented by the formalist triangle of Duschenes, MacWilliam and Snider. The work of these artists shares a strong intellectual, semiotic, structuralist base. I, Braineater, the only native British Columbian in the show, spearheads the wild-eyed romantics such as Chappell and bissett.

Of the artists represented in *6 Vancouver 6*, Georgiana Chappell and I, Braineater (a.k.a. Jim Cummins) most clearly reflect what is new and exciting about Vancouver art. Like many current Vancouver artists, they work outside the commercial gallery system. In the '70s, hopeful artists slicked back their hair, buffed up the scratches on their portfolios and scraped the

paint from their shoes before making the rounds of the city's blue-chip galleries. Today, with Vancouver art moving back to the street, into studio-located exhibits and smaller non-commercial art spaces, artists like I, Braineater and Georgiana Chappell rely instead on self-promotion.

Braineater works out of an old Pender Street office building where he lives with a number of other artists including Dan Joy, the Blond Boy. For Braineater, one-month or even two-week shows are a thing of the past. One night only, be there or be without. Such hype not only sells art but creates an event. Both Braineater and Joy incorporate musical performances into their openings as an added draw. With each show, Braineater makes just enough money to create works for his next exhibition or write a few more songs for his next album (his latest effort includes "Tin Pins and Cat Fur," "Frosted Lips" and the classic "I Here, Where You").

Braineater's passion for making art is manic and compulsive—his art sources range from Rubens to Big Daddy Roth. He selects culturally dynamic subjects in much the same manner as Andy Warhol did some 20 years ago. Braineater's sensual persona (enhanced with just the right amount of eyeliner), his interest in music *à la* Velvet Underground and popular imagery from

magazines and glitz sources and his narcissistic self-portraits place him in the tradition of Warhol's theatrics and pop culture. At a recent Unit/Pitt opening, Braineater fans bought out his show within half an hour.

Yet Braineater is much more than just style and image. Of his seven works in *6 Vancouver 6*, two are owned by VAG curators and a third was purchased by Ian Davidson, one of Vancouver's leading collectors. The art emerging from Braineater's Pender Street "Factory" is a potpourri that slides from punk to popular culture to pure kitsch. He rides a non-directional dervish where a cutout monster leers with three eyes, tongue drooling, while a living room sculpture with four legs is titled *Harry Screams I'm Not a Table*. Braineater's exhibitions present a classy, sassy bas-relief, a modern-day Parthenon frieze which sparkles in the high-powered video lights of his openings like costume jewellery strung across the gallery walls. Promoting himself and his art with elegant black-and-white screened posters, Braineater proclaims to the streets of Vancouver: "WHEN YOU THINK OF CANADA, THINK BRAINEATER."

Georgiana Chappell does not put up brash posters, wear Braineater eyeliner or sing in a rock band. What she does is create stark studio installations of light and magic and then invite as many people as possible to come and view her work. Like Braineater, Chappell is a master of the theatrical. Her first installations appeared in the basement of a Hastings Street store in Burnaby. Using spotlights, coloured filters and mysterious objects enamelled with car paint, she transformed this awkward space into a cave where substance dissolved into an unreal echo of reality. Ritualistic and sexual, Chappell's early installations hovered hauntingly on the brink of the bizarre.

Chappell's Harbourfront work, *Time Island*, was at first dark and intimidating. It took time for the eyes to detect the lofting clouds painted on the black walls: the installation, contained within a 15 foot by 20 foot room, was severed from all natural illumination. The central figure in the piece—a store-bought ceramic German shepherd—rose on its own cloudlike form, a burlesque Cerberus standing guard over Chappell's celestial chamber. (A less obtrusive colleague gazed from a corner of the room.) In this fantasy world of electric light, Chappell played the role of a shadowy shaman.

Many other Vancouver artists not in the Harbourfront show are, like Chappell and Braineater, creating major works in spaces far from Gallery Row. One of the most notable works in this vein was Joey Morgan's 1982 seaside installation *Tide Catchers*, which snared a healthy quantity of sea bunk

after its exposure to the ins and outs of the Pacific. For her more recent *Fugue*, produced early this year, Morgan chose an abandoned warehouse as her site and filled the space with a cacophony of recorded sounds: breaking glass, cracking wood, bulldozers tearing down walls and the brittle snapping of a piano being demolished, added as a coda. These sounds were projected hourly through the warehouse via speakers. Like *Tide Catchers*, *Fugue* had an ecological intent—to underline the destructive powers of nature and parallel them with the entropy of the cityscape.

Another Vancouver artist creating important site-specific works is Michael Banwell, who in 1980 placed stylized geometric houseforms in a vacant lot near Vancouver's Chinatown. Other important on-site works include Richard Hambleton's morbid white outlines of murder victims that sprang up throughout Vancouver in the '70s and sculptor Sally Michener's elaborate 1981 series of ceramic totems which—until they were smashed to shards by vandals—faced out onto False Creek from Granville Island.

Of course there are still Vancouver artists who rely on the formalist ideals of the late '60s and early '70s, represented in *6 Vancouver 6* by the works of David MacWilliam and Greg Snider. MacWilliam is certainly a virtuoso stylist, one of the more gifted of the old guard of modernist painters in Vancouver, whose paintings, although formal and cold, are nonetheless appealing. His vessel-like forms have an iconic power as they float like undecorated party hats in a field of serious colour. But while the presence of these works is at first arresting, their severity soon wears thin and a state of apathy is all that prevails.

Greg Snider's Great Lakes sculpture is, intentionally or not, somewhat more droll than MacWilliam's images. In spite of the figurative element in Snider's work, his truth to materials places him in the tradition of Tatlin, Morris, Serra and Andre. Wood must be wood, steel must be steel (leave all millmarks, please). Perhaps David Rabinowitch's floor-hugging slabs of steel, with the occasional hole to drill the point home ("This is solid steel. Just try to lift this mother"), are Snider's closest modernist allies. His *A Representation of the Great Lakes in Inch-and-a-Half Galvanized Steel Arranged in a Space Like This*, consisting of heavy cutouts of the Great Lakes stacked into a teepee form, lives up to late modernism's mandate to be explicit. The steel slabs have been galvanized with acid to dull the surface into a dead grey, a process Snider intends as an analogy to acid rain. But the dullness of the piece is not confined to its patina. Like MacWilliam's paintings, Snider's lumpy-

Alvin Balkind's sampler of Vancouver art told a story from '70s formalism to '80s funk

David MacWilliam is a virtuoso stylist whose vessel-like forms have an iconic power as they float in a field of serious colour. His work was in stark contrast to the I, Braineater/bill bissett axis of *6 Vancouver 6*.



David MacWilliam, *Vessel* (1962), enamel, oil and urethane on canvas, 181 x 198 cm (71 1/4" x 80") Courtesy David MacWilliam

edged interlocking lake silhouettes seem a pale pastiche of postmodernism when compared to the newer expressionistic, emotional and theatrical art of the '80s.


The final two painters in *6 Vancouver 6* are certainly Balkind's idiosyncratic favourites. Both Julie Duschenes and Bill Bissett have come to paint from other art forms: Duschenes began her career as a printmaker, and Bissett is an established poet. Neither artist is indicative of the important developments now happening in Vancouver painting. Duschenes's small still lifes pull paint around silhouettes of cups, jugs and skulls with an even tentativeness. Her grammar-school handwriting bites into her flat backgrounds causing it to float, lost and uncertain, in a dialogue that is more disjointed than dramatic.

Of Bissett, who has his first major retrospective at the VAG this fall, Balkind comments: "His is an ecstatic, childlike vision of

angels, bird people and radiant figures." Yet this vision is translated into halting arches of bright colour that smother his portraits with pointillist war paint; he fragments the painted figure as he does the written word. As a poet, Bissett has skilfully fragmented words to create his own imagery, but in paint he appears awkward and self-conscious, as if working in a medium beyond his creative means.

In a more coherent assemblage of Vancouver art, neither Bissett nor Duschenes would be likely to be included, but it is just such unorthodox digressions that make Balkind such a provocative curator. *6 Vancouver 6* was ultimately Balkind's show—a sampler rather than a definitive representation of the variety and vigour of Vancouver art today. It will be up to future curators to present alternative interpretations of current work: the large allegorical drawings of Neil Wedman, the flaming chairs of sculptor Al

McWilliams, the painterly scenarios of Allyson Clay, the classic Spackle and graphite vistas of Greg Murdock.

Meanwhile, as art, music and performance again mingle, as artists open up their studios for self-generated exhibitions, as the Vancouver Artists League gets rolling and *Art City 84* rekindles the energy of last year's *October Show*, as *Issue* magazine and *Vanguard's* Russell Keziere become more involved with local art events, as one-night openings and performances continue at the Unit/Pitt, as artists begin to hold lectures and video nights at the Montgomery Cafe, as studios become meeting places and dance-halls rather than isolated garrets—Vancouver's art scene is pulsing faster and stronger than ever before. I VANCOUVER. I HERE. WHERE YOU? 

Arthur Perry is the art critic for the *Vancouver Province*.