

A New Consciousness of Form

JOHN KORNER

Concerning the author of this article, his fellow painter J. L. Shadbolt writes: "John Korner is specific, persistent, and alert to the widest implications of our social experience; he has had the advantage of growing up in Europe in a highly civilized cultural climate. Living in Vancouver for the past 15 years, he has broken from the old world cocoon into our Canadian reality . . . he is symptomatic of a new kind of artist in Canada, alive to a complexity arising out of our present interpretive demands as a world-minded nation . . . On any objective count, he is a superbly subtle colourist. If he has a weakness, it is a certain tentativeness. But he works small, in several media, both liquid and opaque, in pure line or graded tone, in fact, in no predictable way. He is seismic. He records tremors. Such tremors sometimes are prophetic."

To "understand" the art of our time one must first acquire an awareness of the changes in the world around us. Because the artist is endowed with an acute sensitivity, if not always with the limiting point of view of common sense, he is likely to absorb (even subconsciously to anticipate) new occurrences faster than most of his contemporaries. He distinctly realizes the spirit of our time and builds his plastic forms within it. His product is an expression of an individual experience related to the world around us.

The culture of our time is becoming increasingly unified, perhaps not through a set of philosophical and religious concepts but rather through our common experience of the bewildering tempo of change. New forms are needed to express our reaction to a world of rapid development in science and techniques, for which its creator, man himself, is not yet either physically or psychologically equipped. While the most radical changes have taken place only within the last hundred years, the parallel process of human adjustment may take many thousands of years.

It is obviously futile to expect the artist of today to use the art forms of yesterday. (They can only serve as a basis for his search for new forms and new meaning.) How can his concern with reality in the traditional sense persist when reality itself has become more and more questionable?

Twenty-three centuries ago the Greek philosopher Democritus wrote: "Sweet and bitter, cold and warm, as well as all the colours, all these things exist but in opinion and not in

reality. What really exists are unchangeable particles and their motions in empty space." Only a decade ago it looked as if the findings of modern science had brought us back over the centuries to accept the philosophy of Democritus again. But even his "unchangeable particles" are now no longer real. The particles themselves have been dissolved by the latest

JOHN KORNER. *Fogbound. Casein*

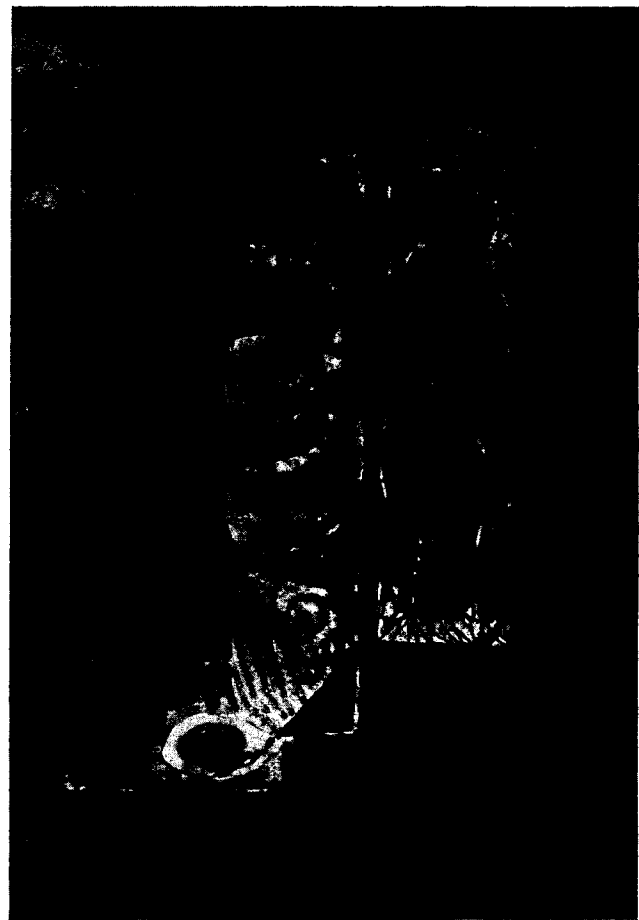


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JOHN KORNER
Sleep of Rock II
Ink

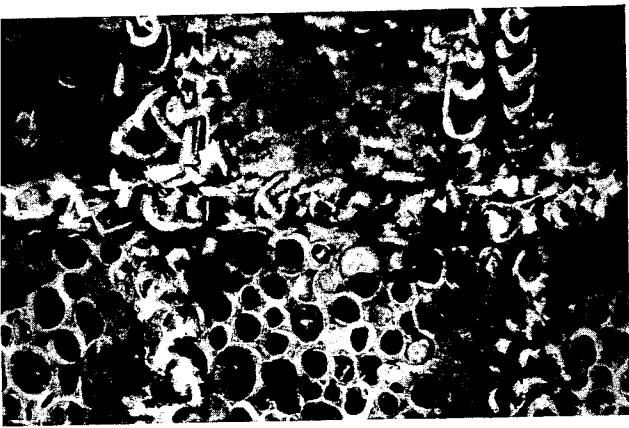


discoveries of the scientists and we are left for the time being with a physical world which, to sum up presently accepted theories, is completely in flux.

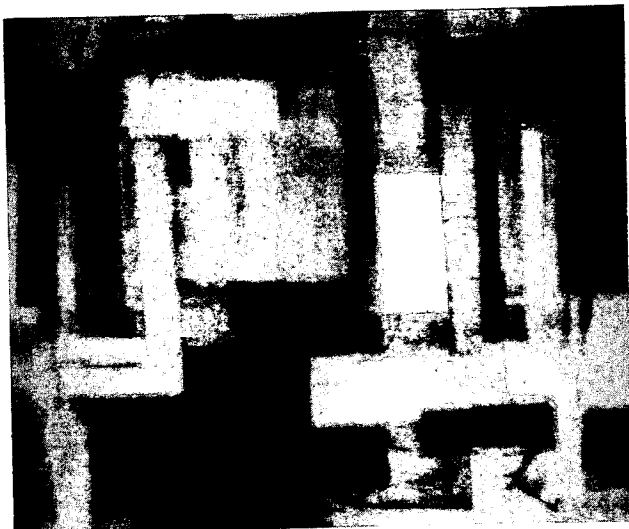
Hence it has not been surprising that science, unable to describe reality in the metaphors of classical physics, should have moved from mechanical explanation towards mathematical abstraction. Pure mathematics can claim to be the most original creation of the human spirit. Through it, connections between things are exhibited which are extremely unobvious to perception through our senses. The parallel in contemporary art seems obvious when one considers its retreat from literal rendering of "reality" into the realm of symbolism and abstraction. Although the artist's aim is not the presentation of ideas, still he tries to communicate his emotional reaction to ideas. In this way the artist expresses, by plastic means,

his concept of life in the world around him, be it an experience of heart or mind or both.

But, the world around us, including Man, seems to be the product of both evolution and retrogression, development and extinction, which, if planned, shows no comprehensible reason. It seems void of meaning and without detectable purpose. Within the deadly expanses of our solar system all labour, all aspirations, seem destined to the same annihilation. Ever since Man first appeared in the universe, he has been faced with the powerless wonder we still feel today. The certainty of death is still common to him as to other creatures, yet during his brief years he is free to acquire knowledge, to criticize, to imagine, to create. This freedom is only his, and in it lies his superiority to that blind nature he is forever subject to. In the world of ideas, in the will to form and to create, he is free,—free from

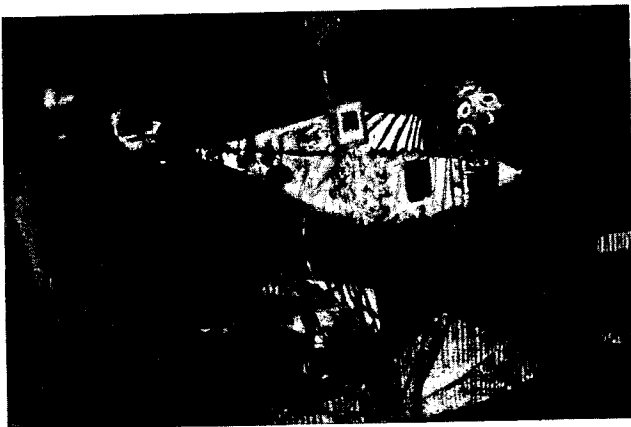


TAKAO TANABE. *Fragment 35*



LIONEL THOMAS. *The Dictator*

J. L. SHADBOLT. *Sea Floor. Ink and gouache*



his fellow men, free from *terra firma* on which all human bodies crawl.

This freedom also contains the choice: to respect and to submit to the powers of nature in slavish submission, or to gather the determination to recognize only the God created by our own love of the good, constantly to defy a hostile universe, and to reject the evil of blind force, which is unworthy of our worship.

Through this exercise of his freedom, he is able to transform the unconscious universe through his own imagination into a new image.

This approach could be called "creative realism," and seems to be the most "realistic" way in which mind can assert mastery over the inchoate flux of the natural universe. Here is then the foundation on which the art of today can be firmly based.

As it did in all periods of the past, our art will show traces of our time's inner mood, its restlessness, its conflicts, and also in some instances a personal vision of a more stoic kind. It will necessarily rely less on material values than, for example, the art of the Renaissance with its emphasis on the heroic stature of man. It will have to translate the state of our world into new forms, and these will lead to further enlargement of human experiences. These new experiences which are evoked through the creation of the artist himself will in turn lead to new meanings.

That is why the artist of today must be preoccupied with the two basic problems: Form and Meaning. Form can stand alone, as an abstract limit to space or as a boundary between surfaces. That is its external meaning. But it also has its internal significance. In this sense every form is the outward expression of an inner meaning the artist has to convey. The freer the abstract form (or semi-abstract form), the purer and more primeval will be its impact.

Note: The three paintings reproduced on this page demonstrate how some other Vancouver artists are likewise concerned, to quote Korner's phrase, "with a new consciousness of form today." These three works were among a selection of Canadian paintings shown recently in the Canadian exhibit at the II Biennial of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and later in Caracas, Venezuela, in the exhibition of contemporary art held during the Tenth Inter-American Conference there this spring.

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Of the infinite aspects of form, there is still much to be explored, flexibility, direction in the picture, the relative weight of the more abstract or the more concrete and their combination, the grouping, the static and the rhythmical, the geometric and the organic and so on. Certainly we are dealing with a new consciousness of form today.

Familiarity with the language of pure form will eventually be acquired by more and more of those who now are still baffled by it.

Now as to meaning. When we ask what constitutes meaning, we are not asking what is the meaning of this or that gesture or word or picture or sound. Each of these may call up an idea of something else. When this happens, what is now perceived may be called a "symbol" and the "idea" which it calls up may be called its meaning. So, an egg-shaped line gives us the meaning of "egg".

Just as it is necessary to acquaint ourselves with visual symbols, so it is useful to realize the sort of thing a symbol may mean. When

we are clear as to what a symbol is, in its physical aspect, and as to what sort of thing it can mean, then we are in a better position to discover the relation of the two, which is meaning.

It is of course absurd to ask what an artist "really" means by his work. He himself would find different meanings in it at different times and at different stages of his own development. Familiar symbols produce commonplace forms. On the other hand the creation of new arrangements of form and meaning will appear "meaningless" as long as they remain unfamiliar.

That is why contemporary art is harder to grasp. A definite grasp of it by the spectator requires greater familiarity with the language the artist is using. The impulse, which drove him to create in a new idiom, will, with time, become a more commonly known experience, but only as mankind adjusts itself to the changing universe and begins to comprehend the as yet inarticulate spirit of our time.

New Stamps for Old

LAURENCE HYDE

WHEN Sir Sandford Fleming, a Toronto architect, designed Canada's first postage stamp in 1851 the task of engraving the printing plates was entrusted to Messrs. Rawdon, Wright, Hatch & Edson, a New York firm of bank note engravers who were later merged with the American Bank Note Company. A subsidiary, the Canadian Bank Note Company, still engraves and prints the majority of Canadian postage stamps.

In 1851 line engraving on steel was at a peak of popularity that may never be reached again. A hand process undertaken by only the most skilled craftsman, line engraving was at that time unchallenged as a method of reproducing all forms of "security" printing by world governments. Today photo-mechanical methods of plate making are rapidly replacing the steel engraver in many countries including craft-conscious Britain where photogravure is used for all stamps of common denomination. The United States Bureau of Engraving and Printing, a one-time stronghold of line

engraving, if ever there was one, has just placed an order for a trial stamp to be printed in several colours by photogravure. Because Canada has long felt uneasy regarding her stamp designs and because printing and reproductive methods are important factors in determining their final appearance, the backwash from this wave of controversy is just now being felt here. Whether or not our few remaining steel engravers will vanish in the undertow remains to be seen.

Outside the ever narrowing field of government printing needs, steel engraving has become something of a lost art. Thus, a decline similar to that of wood engraving in the late nineteenth century is not likely to be arrested by a group of talented amateurs aware of the medium's inherent worth, as was luckily the case with wood engraving. Other than the few "professional" engravers employed by bank note companies, or federal agencies, the art has few practitioners. Reasons are not hard to find, the main one, of course, being eco-