

Toronto Painting '84

David BURNETT

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1984

96 pp., 32 colour, 31 b/w illus., \$18.00

David Burnett's well-researched catalogue essay for the exhibition, *Toronto Painting '84*, is a helpful survey of various historical and contemporary factors affecting the changing cultural contexts which have generated the current painting practices in Toronto. Burnett, former Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario and organizer of this exhibition,¹ is concerned that the paintings in the exhibition be seen in relation to the specific history of art in Toronto since the 1950's. He reminds the reader that these works must be understood in terms "of the general conditions of western art."² Throughout his clearly-written text, Burnett employs useful quotations and arguments from individuals such as Daniel Bell, Hugh MacLennan, Greg Curnoe, and John Bentley Mays which clarify the impact of European and American influences on Canadian art. Moreover, these writers are used to provide evidence of the "existence of a history that was not simply a reflection of histories from elsewhere, but are manifestly Canadian."³ Appropriately, Burnett mentions the evolution of abstract painting in the fifties and sixties in Toronto; the ascendancy of such alternative modes of artistic practice as conceptual art, video, and performance in the sixties and seventies and the popular re-emergence of representational painting and the critical resistance to it from the late seventies to the present. The reader gains a sense of the complexity of the pluralistic options available to contemporary practitioners. Burnett is careful to point out that much painting in Toronto today must be approached in light of the various practices and techniques that arose in the work of

that generation of artists in the 1970's who worked "in video, performance, and mixed media." From this point of view, although painting cannot be assumed to be the privileged medium of the time, the presence of numerous current practitioners requires that it be assessed.

The diversity of the selected artists and their works seems to be a strategy on Burnett's part to avoid authorizing "a particular direction or the exclusivity of the artists shown."⁴ As valuable as Burnett's brief analysis is toward gaining a better understanding of the general artistic climate in Toronto, his essay pays little attention to the specific visual facts and aesthetic experiences of the paintings that he mentions. The actual works of art simply become interchangeable symptoms of broader sociological, political, and economic movements. Questions of quality, visual perception, and individual choice and achievement are avoided. This emphasis on the social context of the work and the attendant critical theories at the expense of the specifics of each actual work has become increasingly common in recent art history and criticism. The writings of Harvard professor T. J. Clark have been particularly influential in art historical circles in emphasizing the social and political context of the art practice. Critics Craig Owens, Benjamin Buchloh, and Serge Guilbaut, apparently with absolute confidence, have sought to advance a notion of art that is essentially historically and materially determined. Despite Burnett's stated admiration for these persuasive critics, he also maintains an essential respect for individual commitment and warns us against "the instant historicism that at once absorbs and forgets the activity."⁵ In light of the last statement, I am disappointed that he was not able to extend the catalogue text to a discussion, however brief, of the careers of the selected in-

dividual artists and an analysis of the specific paintings that were included in the exhibition.

I would not for a moment suggest that socio-economic, political, and cultural factors do not play important roles in the practice of art. However, I do assert that other factors must be considered, not the least of which is the nature of the visual experience of the work which is, in part, a product of its formal characteristics and structure. As Burnett notes, painting is only one of the many media available to artists today. Since the modernist impulse did much to investigate the capacities of specific disciplines and media, it is interesting to note that many of the artists included seem to have little regard for such rigorous attitudes. Many of the works in the exhibition seem to take aspects of physical and visual facts for granted, and consequently, rather than being necessarily paintings, are only incidentally paintings.

Given Burnett's exceptional knowledge, affection for art, and balanced judgment, it is unfortunate that he did not discuss his specific criteria for the selection of individual artists and their paintings.

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Notes

¹ Provisional itinerary: Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Sept. 7-Oct. 28, 1984; Glenbow Museum, Calgary, June 7-July 21, 1985; Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, Aug. 15-Sept. 15, 1985; Rodman Hall Arts Centre, St. Catharines, Oct. 4-27, 1985; Art Gallery of Windsor, Nov. 15-Dec. 15, 1985; The Gallery/Stratford, Jan. 17-Feb. 23, 1986; The Edmonton Art Gallery, May 2-June 8, 1986; The Winnipeg Art Gallery, July 6-Aug. 10, 1986.

² David BURNETT, *Toronto Painting '84* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1984), p. 16.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*