

Detail from a work by Regan Morris: delicate imprints of fragile paper cutouts on a blotched, rugged surface like elephant hide.

Curator traces four good reasons to renew love affair with art

ART REVIEW / A memorable courtyard party launches a summer showing of paintings, sculptures and photo-works at five galleries in the Morrow Avenue compound in Toronto's west end. Particularly thought provoking is a group show in which the curator explores the concept of trace — 'the haunt of event or experience.'

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JUST because somebody writes about art for a living, as I have for the past 16 years, doesn't necessarily mean he likes the stuff.

In fact, given all the sludge and puffery that gets published under the rubric *art criticism*, one might think that nobody nowadays loves art much. And you know what? I have my own doubts about it from time to time. Such thoughts are especially prone to come during the first week of holidays, just before I've bored myself to death in the big annual attempt to have fun.

But after those first few days, darned if I don't catch myself lurking in art museums or — as happened while on holidays this time around — turning up for the July courtyard party on Morrow Avenue in Toronto's west end.

It was the usual festive mobbing, under a beautifully hot, clear evening sky, of almost everybody who is anybody on the Toronto art scene. The chat was nice — etc., etc. But what really made the drop-by memorable was, as per usual, the art scattered throughout the five galleries in the Morrow compound.

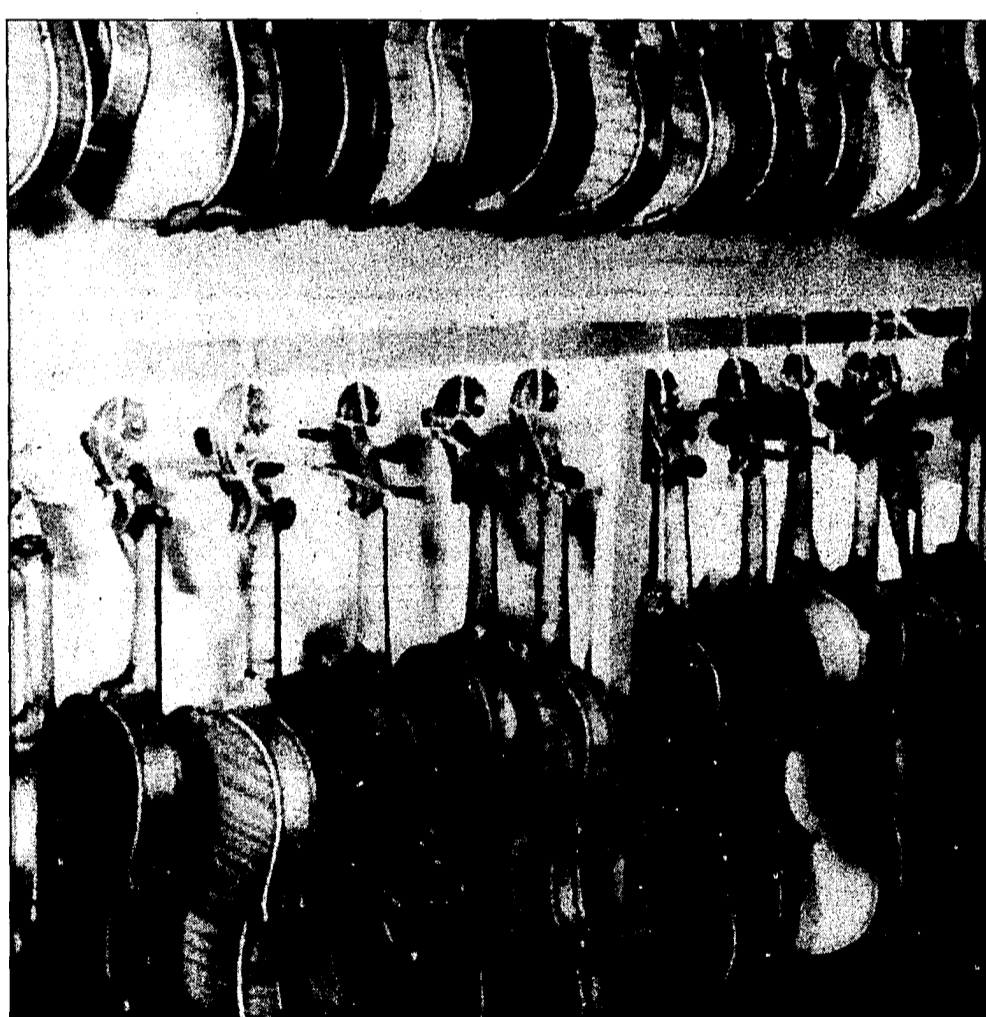
IT wasn't merely another party, after all, but the opening of several month-long exhibitions. Not that the party animals could get close enough to the gallery walls that night to get a proper gander. But some of the paintings, sculptures and photo-works visible between shoulders and over coifs were definitely interesting enough to make me decide that a return trip, on a quieter day, would be a good idea.

Which it turned out to be. You have until mid-August to see all the shows I saw at the party (along with the couple I went back to take a close look at this week) to tell me if I'm wrong.

One exhibition not to miss before its close on Aug. 17 is the group display, at Olga Korper, of Toronto painters John Brown and Regan Morris, Montreal photo/installation artist Barbara Steinman and Mario Reis, who does something beautiful, although it is hard to know just what to call the result.

This thoughtful show is the handiwork of Claire Christie, associate director of Olga Korper, who has taken over her boss's gallery to explore the idea of *trace* running through the work of four very different artists. In the art of each, Christie finds a persistent interest in "evidence or residue . . . concealment and dissipation," the clues left behind after forgetting's done.

What you see in the art of Regan Morris, for example, are delicate imprints of fragile paper cutouts on a blotched, rugged surface like elephant hide — a symbolic summing up of the layering of the temporary and the durable that Christie's show is getting at. German artist Mario Reis, for his part, displays the traces left by river water allowed to run over submerged canvases and deposit some of its load of dissolved mineral pigments — a muted red from Montana in one piece, a lovely taupe-



Detail from Barbara Steinman's *Atlantis Improv*, depicting musical instruments confiscated by the Nazis.

green from British Columbia in another.

While Reis's water-works are memories of unconscious natural forces, Barbara Steinman's photographs recall the consciously destructive forces we humans tend to unleash too often on each other — a hand beckoning out of darkness, tattooed human flesh, musical instruments confiscated by the Nazis a half-century ago.

One quibble regarding Steinman: Her thought about exile and loss has always been most effectively displayed in full-dress installation works. The stand-alone photographs here seem incomplete — orphaned somehow — without the video gear that should go with them to expand their meanings. Toronto gallery-goers will get a better chance to see what Steinman does next spring, when she mounts her solo debut at Olga Korper.

I have no quibbles — just admiration — when it comes to John Brown's paintings, selected from his recent *Autopsy* series. In this project, Brown hacks and scrapes, pushes and masses oil paint with his usual, rough virtuosity, while nudging closer than ever to the construction of completely abstract metaphors for human loss, suffering and conflict.

"Traces are indicative of what re-

mains, the haunt of event or experience," writes Claire Christie of her show in general, although the words describe no work here more forcefully than that of John Brown.

Across the courtyard, Christopher Cutts is celebrating (until Aug. 31) his move to a larger space within the Morrow complex with an anthology of works old and new by gallery artists.

VETERAN Toronto abstractionist Richard Gorman weighs in with a large 1979 oil — a flow of sulphurous yellow slathered with a bucket of black, and energetically scraped and abraded until the whole work starts to flex, like an earthquake about to happen. Murray Favro's lovingly sculpted *Guitar # 1*, from 1993, is another close study of something familiar by this remarkable London artist — while Ed Zelenak gives us something strange, and no less beautiful, in his composition of large gleaming, battered metal hemispheres pushed deep below a paper surface.

The real showstoppers in the Cutts array are, without doubt, the three tight little paintings by Ron Martin. For the past 30 years, Martin has been driving his abstract painting as far as it could go — to the point where you think he has exhausted all the possibilities — only to do a back-

flip into a whole new range of painterly possibilities.

The new canvases here have been covered in three industrial-strength oil colours — chemical-spill green, toxic yellow and an odd red that looks downright contagious — each combed down to a furrowed skin of paint. Low down on each of these small oblongs, Martin has drawn a rounded target-form by squeezing paint right out of the tube, like toothpaste squiggles. A dab of paint pudged on with his fingers at the bottom of the canvas completes the composition.

While it would be possible to make heavy weather out of these paintings — which are richer in references to cultural theory and the history of art than they look — let's just say that they represent an engaging turn in Martin's remorseless push of abstract painting to the limit — and over.

As I found out the night of the courtyard party, Martin's art may not be the only reason to stop trying to relax and waste time staring at the petunias — or whatever people are supposed to do on holiday — but it's one of the better reasons on view in the Morrow Avenue galleries.

Morrow Avenue runs north off Dundas Street West, three blocks west of Lansdowne Avenue.