

# The Texture of a Collection

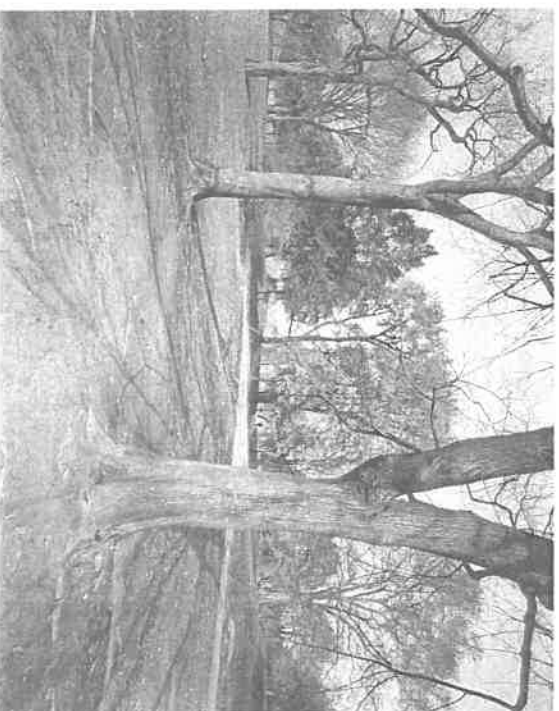
Selections from the Permanent Collection

CENTENNIAL GALLERY

October 17 to December 6, 1998

Curated by Kay Woods

When I was given the opportunity to mount an exhibition from Oakville Galleries' permanent collection, I found it difficult to select one single theme. I felt that doing so would restrict my choices too narrowly, since this collection of contemporary art embraces so many innovative works in so many media. Individual visions of nature and the human figure, abstract and figurative paintings, three-dimensional objects, photography and video, are all ongoing concerns in the growth of the collection.



Thus I chose to reflect precisely that variety, and *The Texture of a Collection* encompasses many concepts. The artists represented are investigative and their concerns expanded upon that which is considered the norm; by going beyond the usual visual representations they present us with individually meaningful images.

One of the artists is Attila Richard Lukacs, represented by two works: *Untitled Portrait #10* (1988) and his monumental canvas *Four Monkeys* (1988). The latter is from a limited series that are sparsely painted and built up of stains, smears and passages of drawing on an open field of raw canvas. Lukacs has stated “the right ground is the key for any painting. Sometimes it’s fat, sometimes white gesso, sometimes white enamel. In some ways it’s the biggest decision I make.”<sup>1</sup>

In *Four Monkeys* all three ingredients are used. Roofing tar is thinned with varathane and painted over in parts with white enamel over a partially gessoed surface. According to his former teacher at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Robin Mayor, the monkey symbolizes freedom, foolishness, the combination of the two things, which is very persuasive, and that thoughtful mystery we tend to anthropomorphize into the monkey mind because we can’t read it the way we think we can read each other.<sup>2</sup> Lukacs has often said that he is the monkey.

To represent another form of textural experiment altogether, I have chosen three of Ron Martin’s one-colour works in order to demonstrate his various methods of painting. In the earliest, *Bright Red #20* (1972), there is no particular mystique to his technique of applying the unmixed red pigment with sweeping gestures over the white gessoed ground. Like the action paintings of the Abstract Expressionists, the incidents on the surface are the result of the spontaneous physical process of creation. Evolving from the bright red

paintings of 1972 comes a long series of black canvases completed between 1974 and 1980. In *Use #12* (1974), Martin used from ten to fifteen gallons of black acrylic paint. The surface is built up with thick swaths that catch and reflect the light, adding an external element that enlivens it. The intensity of the colour black throughout is incidental to the materiality of the paint itself. Through Martin’s conscious manipulation, the viscous, semi-fluid nature of the acrylic paint forms the ridges and hollows that are the substance of this work.

Again, an entirely different process is seen in his *Untitled #10* (1980) — a newer series called “Whole Paintings.” Thinned black acrylic has been rubbed or sponged over white canvas with numerous greyed-out areas that open the surface to light. Dense black paint is brushed onto this ground in a random fashion, over which short straight lines are incised, creating an infinite variety of visual effects. The many incidents on the surface have been described as resembling paint-stained fabric.

In a different approach to a similar preoccupation with surface is the work of Guido Molinari — the least literary of painters — who, as one of the Plasticiens, has been a major player in the history of Canadian art for over thirty years. One of his primary concerns is the formal analysis of the function and structure of colour. His austere format of vertical bands of two closely related colours, as in *Untitled* (1989), at first glance belies the dynamism established within the work. By this pictorial device an interplay of colours takes place, setting up a visual rhythm as light changes them and the relationship between them. One colour of acrylic paint has been applied evenly over a white gessoed ground, using rollers or spraying to achieve a smooth surface without visual texture. The space in this ordered work is then punctuated at regular intervals by

straight-edged vertical bands of a colour chromatically close to that of the ground — red in this case. These vertical bands are securely placed on the flat plane of the surface so as not to disrupt its two-dimensional quality, and therefore ensure the optical flatness of the entire painting. Molinari’s vertical strategy excluded all notion of depth.

I have chosen three paintings by John Brown. One, the profile of a face, is *A Delicate Family* (12 Attempts to Paint a Human Face #1) (1990). Like Lukacs’s *Untitled Portrait #10*, it is a tortured portrait. This painting in oil and dry pigment on wood is from a series of human heads painted by Brown, who has acknowledged his debt to the late British painter Francis Bacon. The title of the piece speaks eloquently, since it appears as though it did indeed take twelve attempts to paint this human face. The subtle image within is incidental to the many rough layers of vivid pigment, lumped and scraped, forming a thick crust of paint that dominates and almost obliterates the image.

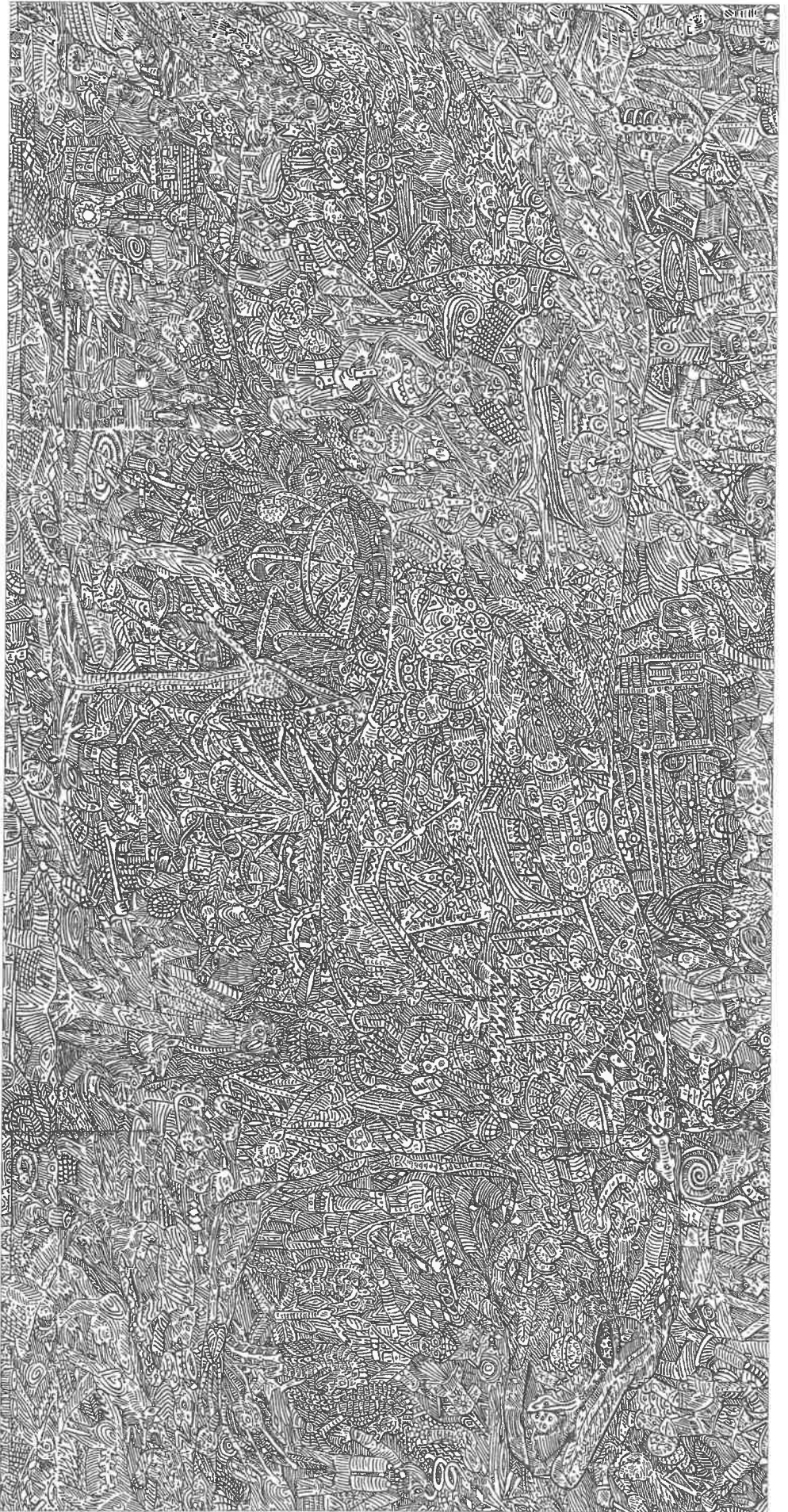
In striking contrast with the portraits by Lukacs and Brown is Toru Takemitsu (1984) by Joanne Tod, who has been well known as a painter of contemporary celebrities since the early 1980s. Her realistic depictions of her subjects are adapted from photographs. Toru Takemitsu was an eminent Japanese composer who made a major contribution to the cultural community across Canada as a teacher and adjudicator in the field of music. Tod’s manner of painting in flat, textureless strokes is seen in this straight-on image of a serious, unsmiling, gentle man, dressed in comfortable drab clothing, against a neutral blue-grey background. The rendition of an unpretentious genius — stark, with no embellishments, it is clearly painted with an interest in revealing, rather than obscuring, the nature and character of her subject.

The other artist in this grouping of portraits is Toronto-based Louise Noguchi,

with *Compilation Portrait #25* (1996). Noguchi is primarily a sculptor fashioning images of the body in complex interrelated constructs as she questions identity, concepts of origin and the nature of representation. *Compilation Portrait #25* is made up of two photographs sliced into strips and interwoven. Noguchi has used photographs of murderers along with photographs of her own face and the resulting image is not of one individual but a composite of many. Unlike Tod’s direct approach, this distortion of an image to make a whole as queried by Noguchi is a compelling and very personal tactic in the matter of creating a credible entity.

In showing the work of Judith Schwarz, I have included a sculpture, *Shadow Plate* (1986), as well as a mixed media work on paper, *Untitled (Leaf)* (1989), to demonstrate the relationship between these two aspects of her work. *Shadow Plate* is a wall-mounted silhouette cut from steel plate that has been chemically altered to a matte black — the ostensible colour of all shadows. This form resembles the fusion of a headless human figure and a vase, and we can recognize in her drawing an adaptation of this same image. In Schwarz’s works on paper, the spiral, or disc, is often present, as are leaf-like structures with veins, as well as the body/vessel configuration. We see in all her work a concern for the interplay and uniting of the organic and the material. She herself describes the *Shadow Plates* as “fading images”, and Christopher Dewdney speaks of her work as “rigorous ambiguity, never allowing any form to coalesce into any associative relationship.”<sup>3</sup>

The extraordinary drawings in India ink on paper by the London, Ontario artist Kim Moodie were exhibited at Oakville Galleries in 1991. *Leopard* (1991) is representative of his work, dense with images culled from his imagination, informed by his knowledge of historic and current events, legends and



**Kim Moodie**  
*Leopard* (detail), 1992  
India ink on paper  
121 cm x 187 cm  
photo: Isaac Applebaum  
gift of the artist

fables, toys, television and film — reflecting the chaos of the contemporary world. This large work contains the central image of a leopard overlapped and intertwined within the tangle of other images and events scrambled together on a flat plane, completely filling the surface. The sheer density of these drawings and the strangeness of Moodie's invented world makes a pertinent comment on contemporary life and its overload of visual data.

Spring Hurlbut's *Tree Columns* (1988) was made after seeing Bramante's *Column of Loggia* in Milan, Italy. She has stated "the ideal proportions of Bramante's renaissance column are subtly altered with the addition of knots that were carved on the marble shaft to resemble a tree. I have attempted to extend this historical development of "the tree column" by literally using a poplar tree to make each column's shaft, and using spun steel to articulate a classical Doric capital and base."<sup>4</sup> This major wall sculpture consists of five columns of parts of trees that were slowly kiln-dried, capped and firmly attached to four pedestals. A fascination with trees has given rise to constant images in the history of art. This close-up view of tree columns set within the capital and base, as if framed for our inspection, gives us an opportunity to study the diversity of form and the texture of the surface with reference to an art historical context and to nature itself.

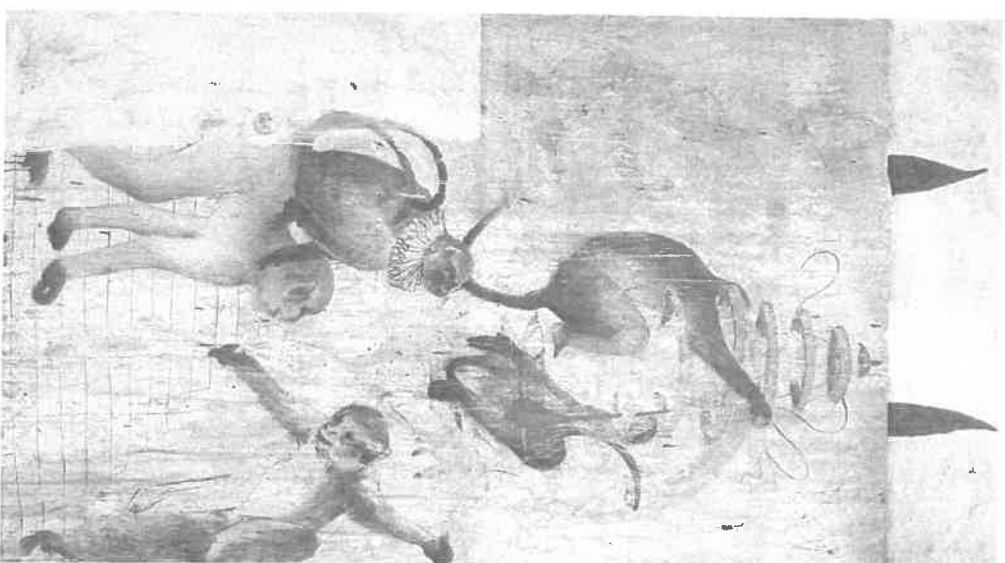
The experience of nature we encounter in the two photographs by Rodney Graham, *Untitled (Oak Trees, Red Bluff)* (1993–94), is perplexing. In these photos the inverted image of a tree changes the status of trees as simply objects in nature. The image is ambiguous — it can be amusing or tragic. We can reflect on its beauty or ponder on its future existence. The concept for these somewhat bizarre photographs of upended trees derives from images made by a "camera

obscura." In a shed near Vancouver, Graham set up this Renaissance device in which light passes through a pinhole to project an inverted image on the wall of a darkened room. Graham is a conceptual artist whose work includes photography, sculpture, installations, books and film. A respect for nature is a constant theme, and there are many images of individual trees. They are most often seen inverted, both a reflection on the optical process of human vision and an acknowledgement of photographic recording devices. Photography provides, as Graham has pointed out, "intermittent illuminations of nature."<sup>5</sup>

The carefully composed images projected by Geoffrey James's photographs are of engineered public parks designed by the American urban landscape planner Frederick Law Olmsted. *The East Meadow, Central Park* (1991) and other photos in the collection are memorials to Olmsted's sites, and we are given a sense of being physically there. James uses a 1920's Kodak panoramic camera that exposes the film in a 120 degree arc as the lens sweeps from left to right. As he puts it, the camera lens moves across the field of vision "like the sweep of the head" and is, for that reason, better able to describe complex spaces — imitating more closely the way we actually sense space.<sup>6</sup> James's viewpoint, with its cropping of images, subtleties of light and shade and his perception of scale, shows us much more than the naked eye can see.

This survey of some of the important Canadian artists, and their works that have been acquired over the last several years, is only a sampling of the gems contained in Oakville Galleries' permanent collection. But, for me, this exhibition is a celebration of Oakville Galleries itself — small in size but huge in vision.

— Kay Woods, 1997



**Artlia Richard Lukacs**  
*Four Monkeys (detail)*, 1988  
 272.3 x 156.5 cm  
 oil, tar and enamel on canvas  
 photo: Isaac Applebaum  
 gift of Allison and  
 Alan Schwartz

1 Gerald Hamon, "At Home with Artlia", *Canadian Art*, (Summer, 1997): p.50

2 Nancy Toussley, "East Forward", *Canadian Art*, (Fall, 1990): p.34

3 Christopher Dewdney, "Bilingual Emblematic", *Canadian Art*, (Winter, 1989): p.68

4 Spring Hurlbut, "Sans Demarcation", *Visual Arts Ontario*, (1987): unpaginated text

5 Peggy Gale, "The Sleeper Rodney Graham in Venice", *Canadian Art*, (Summer, 1997): p.58

6 Douglas Chambers, "Paradise Lost", *Canadian Art*, (Summer, 1985): p.60

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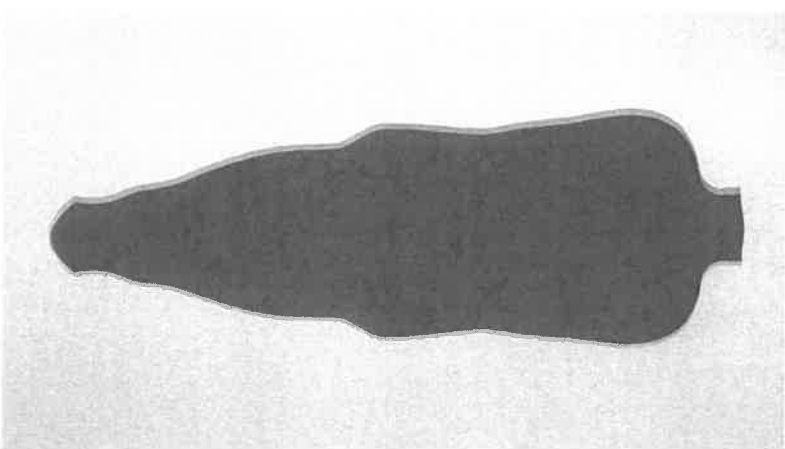
#### Guest Curator

Kay Woods is the former Chair of the Acquisition Committee of Oakville Galleries. Most of the works in this exhibition have come into the permanent collection during her tenure. Prior to her commitment to Oakville Galleries she was the Curator and Head of the Acquisitions Committee at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery. Kay has written criticism for periodicals such as *artsCanada* and *Arts West* and has presented numerous lectures on Canadian art history.

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Oakville Galleries' Centennial Gallery

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**Judith Schwarz**  
Shadow Plate, 1986  
3/8 inch steel construction  
193 cm x 50 cm  
photo: Isaac Applebaum  
gift of Alison and  
Alan Schwartz

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(front cover image)  
**Geoffrey James**  
1991  
The East Meadow, Central Park,  
silver gelatin print  
71.1 cm x 88.9 cm  
gift of Geoffrey James  
and Jessica Bradley