

FIGURE

R.S.

the Gallery/Stratford



MAY 30 - SEPT. 4, 1988

F O R C E

FOREWORD

FIGURATIVE FORCE shows a segment of art dealing directly with the human condition. The twelve artists represented use the figure to make a statement; a social, political, psychological or personal comment.

It is not an easy show to view. Powerful and unsettling, it demands interpretation; Communicating feelings by the artist that are either shared or rejected by you, the viewer.

These artists are not trying to create images that are pretty or beautiful, but images that provoke and stimulate thought. As the viewer, you need to take time to look and reflect about what you see in this exhibition; to identify with some of the images, react to the impact and respond to the reaching out.

R. FREEMAN
DIRECTOR/CURATOR

ESSAY BY PENNY-LYNN GROSMAN

FIGURATIVE FORCE is an exhibition of the works of twelve Canadian contemporary artists concerned with Humanism. The subject of Humanist art is human nature, experience and behavior often explored within a context of confusion, pain and crisis. It is an art of the dramatic - tension filled and provocative. It demands that the viewer become involved with images and experiences which may not be pleasant or beautiful. It requires that we reconsider values and ideals fundamental to human dignity and life itself.



Why should artists bother about the fate of humanity? Certainly, it is much easier to find acceptance in art that affirms and does not criticize society. But Humanist artists from the ancient Greek to the Renaissance to our own time have persisted in responding to the impact of profound change. They have evaluated and judged and tried to find ways to deal with disparate experiences at times when all values were in flux and being questioned.

In the Age of Enlightenment, it was believed that science would solve all future human problems. It didn't happen and Humanism lost its idealistic element. The Romantics, decrying the loss of human individuality, vainly tried to restore Nature as a force in the world. It didn't work. From the time that early man made images on the cave walls art has helped us to understand our environment. Man can survive without art but to be without art is to be dehumanized. Now Nature is collected and experienced only symbolically. We remain tied to beliefs in 'progress', rationalism and technology whatever the cost. The cost in terms of the curtailment of human understanding has been heavy.

The Renaissance artists were the first to communicate their subjective experience of life and the ideal of human action and feeling. This search for new meanings led to new ways of seeing and to formal innovations that have continued in our own time. The artists of FIGURATIVE FORCE have made a commitment to communicate the realities of contemporary life as they see it. No single style or medium unites them. What they share is an expressive, aesthetic approach which emphasizes the priority of human relationships and the necessity for change. Critical of technology and desiring an art that is spiritually regenerating in contrast to daily experiences of alienation, the artists of FIGURATIVE FORCE look to themes of the relationship between beauty and terror, eros and death.



In Marc de Guerre's *Continent, Truth*, in the guise of a classical figure of death from an ancient Greek drama, starkly raises her arms in a gesture of beseechment to plead for Humanity. She is framed by the here/now, there/then of a photo montage. The images are as staccato, as segmented as the multiple, simultaneous images of our daily lives from newspapers, billboards, magazines and television. In a world increasingly defined by photographic images, all borders become arbitrary. As continental maps are redrawn, boundaries moved, countries changed by

war's victors followed by the camera's relentless eye, nothing is sacred. Human and social reality is reduced to infinite numbers of small fragments. Connections and continuity dissolve and like the passing scene become undifferentiated and unseen. In the confusion, the humanist makes a poignant plea to revive lost and unfulfilled ideals.

As with *Continent*, the title of *Exhibition* is more than a name, it is an interpretation. Who mourns in this exhibition of grief? Is it the victor or Narcissus mourning his own death? Our victories are seriously commemorated, reminding us of the tragedy of all conflict. But in our wreaths and flowers, the display of grief is in danger of becoming theatre, a parody in a culture that has institutionalized mourning. De Guerre's is a dark vision, life as an endless cycle of endeavour and betrayal. Modern man is betrayed not by others but by what he himself has become.



The loss of innocence began with Genesis. The first and ultimate Fall was the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Eve being tempted by the serpent, ate the forbidden fruit and gave it to Adam. "And the eyes of both were opened and they saw that they were naked." In de Guerre's *From One to the Other Eve*, on her knees in terror and remorse, covers her eyes foreseeing future pain. Adam crouches, poised for action, one arm outstretched to meet the future, and like David's *Oath of the Horatii* reacts to the Lord's decree that, henceforth, he shall earn his bread by the sweat of his brow. And He declared to Adam "...dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."



In Wendy Coad's work, as with Marc de Guerre, we find painting as a vehicle for metaphysical and political ideas. In *Ultraist* we experience the double impact of a woman looking directly out at the viewer and behind her a bound, muscular, nude young man. Nothing distracts from the intensity of her gaze. Irrelevant details are suppressed. Background is reduced to a symbolic minimum. Her compassionate and experienced eyes engage and hold us. She has seen it all (is she Wisdom, Justice, Mercy?) but she retains a sense of expectation and mystery. Is she the Ultraist, the extremist, the zealot? Or is the Ultraist the beautiful martyr behind her whose body recalls the expressive power of Michelangelo's tragic figures and conveys a passive acceptance of mortal bondage. Is he Christ or St. Sebastian? We see no wounds of flagellation, no arrow punctures. Is she Mary or the woman who dressed St. Sebastian's wounds? We seek an interpretation in psychological and spiritual terms. We are left, disturbed, with the impact and the enigma.

In *Placebo*, Coad cruises the urban scene. Using a triptych format, a traditional vehicle for communicating spiritual values, she juxtaposes classical and contemporary imagery. In the inner sanctum of a museum, a gold urn rests on a pedestal uniting the splendours of an ancient Classical past with the greed of contemporary acquisition. Classical sculptures line the gallery space. But the figures are distorted,



ugly, a subtle perversion of idealized Classical beauty indicative of the collapse of utopian idealism. To the left, the fit, muscular figure of a white man turns slowly on gym rings. Like the ancient Greeks, he believes the body is something to be proud of, but unlike the Greeks he fears the external and cultural world. He is oblivious to the black man and the viewer. It is the black man who dominates the work. He looks out at us but there is no contact. His eyes are in shadow. His brooding, sensual presence transfixes us. He is commanding but unreachable. He is the black Apollo. Like the gladiator of the Roman Coliseum he only enters the preserve of white man's culture on white man's terms.



In the confined rarity of the museum he is the museum guard, silent unless spoken to. On the streets, he is alive at Harlem's Apollo, no Uncle Tom but a dark presence that instills fear in the heart of the white man and shatters the myth of 'brotherhood', integration and equal opportunity.

Our unease turns to horror when confronted with Sheila Butler's *Story* which explores existential themes of psychological and physical violence. A man in a trenchcoat accosts a woman who has risen from a bench. Her face is detailed but her body has started to dissolve in fear communicated by Butler's loose painterly brushstrokes. Her hands drop, her shoulders hunch forward, she becomes exposed, vulnerable. Is he leaving or attacking her? What is the *Story* between them? To the left, a sniper crouches with his rifle - featureless, skull-like, a contemporary mindless grim reaper. He is coiled, ready to spring. Is he looking out at us because we have surprised him or is he acknowledging our complicity? Her figure to the right has become blurred, blood red, a leg made pathetic by one dangling black pump. His footprint in the earth remains the final clue for the police report. Her arm flails backwards in the futile gesture of the victim. The misery of one becoming universal tragedy.

In Butler's *Vanishing Man* drawing, the brutality is more refined. The man leaves home once again. His superimposed body indicates he has left many times before. His wife sits at the table, defensive, remote. The coffee is untouched. The light from the fixture illuminates the dark recesses of their lives with harsh reality. In the bedroom behind her, the sheets are tight, the cupboard doors shut. Between the couple lingers the specter of the 'other woman' and cruel betrayal.

The *Vanishing Man* painting reveals the breakdown of the nuclear family. The departing man leaves behind his wife on the phone and a child huddled physically close to its mother, arms held high, negative and insecure. The mother/wife's contact with the outside world is increasingly by telephone and television. The soaps that she devours on TV endlessly play out their dramatic dream fantasies becoming more real to her than her own life. The *Vanishing Man* walks out and into the arms of the Real World - adventure, excitement, mobility. Hers is the situation of ever diminishing returns.

Beyond the alienation resulting from the disintegration of human relationships lies an emotional torment communicated by a deep and dramatic pathos. In Robert Creighton's intense, intro-

spective drawings internal grief is turned inside out revealing profound emotion through a few simple strokes. *Salvation in the Night* reveals an emaciated, headless corpse hanging defenceless with such screaming weight, such strain in the arms that we must look away before being reluctantly drawn back to the dreadful crucifixion scene. In a frieze below the body, three headless torsos run with heroic energy, freedom, purpose and a humanity shared only in death.

The acute rush of pain that causes us to double over in anguish is conveyed by Creighton's *All the Tears* where movement becomes a distorted, blurred image. We empathize with such abject sorrow. Time itself seems to stop and all we know is an overwhelming feeling of devastation. And when the grief we feel during our worst spiritual crises leaves us exhausted, torn apart, feeling emotionally and physically fragmented, we see in *the Valley of Tears* the body reduced to sculptural simplicity. The image moves beyond macabre, beyond Picasso's *Guernica*, the dismembered arm and hand stretch out in a mute, final agony.



Co-existing with the intensity of such profound desolation is another type of inner emotional torment, that of resignation; a disillusionment and depression that is so debilitating and dark that the victim is crippled by neurosis. In George Hawken's *Dwight behind Trees* the figure is withdrawn and isolated. Although free to develop, he is incapable of breaking the bonds of his own self-imposed limitations. The figure is closed down, all potential lost. Tucking his head into his armpit, his toes pressing into the back of his foot, curved in the fetal position, he prefers not to deal with what is 'out there'. Hawken's *Dwight* is the expression of everyman's lonely search for himself, oppressed, afraid, aware of his meaningless fate and unable to cope with the pressures of modern society.

In *Back from Venezuela (a thought)* - the content is just that - a daydream, a midday reverie of a figure who floats before a big picture window not quite sitting on a stuffed armchair, in space but not of it, lending ambiguity to the form/space relationship. The colours are hot: the lush turquoise, blue, green, fuschia and yellow of the tropics. The solitary figure, featureless, his slouched, languid body communicating excess, being sated, sunburned, loose, exudes an escapist desire for a trip that never was and never will be.

Even when the outsider does join the crowd for some human contact to fill the void, it is soon apparent that all is sham and ultimately futile. In *Seawall*, four figures are caught momentarily in the reflected blue blaze of sky and sea. Male bodies are on sexual display - flexing, suggestive, their gestures relaxed but wary. Their tight buttocks, strings, muscular legs and languid poses are an invitation to lust. Our attention is drawn to another figure whose flaccid, sagging body with protruding stomach and hanging balls exudes decay, impotence and the degradation of old age. Only this figure has a face. His features are indefinite, the



skull-tight. His one foot aggressively thrusts into the viewers' space reminding us of our own mortality. The other leg is turned back, leaning against the seawall, in a defensive, bolstering gesture, to steady himself, his spirit bound to his body and its deficiencies, in a vain attempt to stave off the inevitable. Hawken's scribbles in the lower left hand corner, like graffiti through the ages, echo the faint scratches of the individual's bleak claim: "I was here."

In David Pelletier's *White Lies*, the falsehoods are those common to all social gatherings. In the enforced joviality of the graduation, the stag, the business dinner, the reunion, the participants gather together for the group photograph. Beneath the tuxes and the smiles, the individuals are exposed, alone, entities only unto themselves, caught in the white glare of the camera flash, in their variety of moods and personalities - suddenly static, frozen forever in Pelletier's astonishing sculptures. The glad-handing, the jokes, the exaggerations are suddenly stilled revealing the mute evasions, inner tension and spiritual discontent lying below the surface.



Pelletier's husband of *Two Figures* seldom goes out with the boys. He is an at home guy, the man about the house. But the aridity of their relationship is apparent. The couple stand on their television table, anaesthetized, filling their meaningless, sterile lives with whatever is on the sitcoms. Together, but forever apart, they pass through life, becoming increasingly indifferent to adventure beyond the tube, never growing, leading lonely, unfulfilled, mundane lives.

In John Brown's *Portrait of Two People. One Resigned. One Anticipating*, portrait painting moves beyond the past's faithful rendering of individual character to a philosophical interest in creating universal prototypes. As photography has appropriated the painter's task of providing realistic images, Brown's portraits are about mood and inner thought revealed by gesture, colour and form. The subjects are transcended by painting in ways unavailable to a photograph.

In the centre panel, the arms of the Resigned figure hang loosely by his sides. Everything is loose - jacket, hands, slumping shoulders, open shirt collar, the face without expression. He stands next to a figure who turns away from him towards the viewer. He is tight and hostile. His clenched hands over his crotch, his buttoned suit and suspicious eye convey his critical attitude.

The right panel indicates that beneath the suit, stands a fearful man. His distortion is symbolic of his inner feelings. This is not a confident nude. This is a vulnerable, naked body. In the left panel, the Resigned figure is not what it seems to be. His hostility and aggressiveness are revealed by the clenched fist and the symbol of rejection, the downward pointing index finger. His eyes are asymmetrical; he sees things quite differently than we originally perceived.

In David Moore's sculpture *Twins* the artist reinforces the fact that although we may appear alike we are engaged in a highwire act for power



and control. Even in the construction of relationships there is a shift of power that destroys friendship if one is not willing to be submissive to the other's dominance. In the strongest relationships there is a saw-off in the power struggle, a give and take that results in balance.



In his carved, wooden sculptures, Moore borrows from primitive sources to produce works of character and faith in humanity. The colourfully painted *Unifier of Opposites* suggests the blue painted bodies of early forest warriors and the mediator who must always be strong in order to bring peace. In the rough-hewn but serene *Boatman* is the ultimate balancing act we all live with.

Like birds, we balance precariously on one leg in ever changing situations, standing on structures that balance, in turn, on others in circumstances often beyond our control.

In an attempt to understand the forces that shape our lives, Cynthia Short's figures intensely search by supernatural or intuitive insight for explanations to the unknown. In her sculpture, *Diviners*, a woman appears to be looking for something. On her knees, a position of humility and searching, she presents her body frontally to her child, the extension of herself. She holds two cups behind her back rather than offering her breasts indicating that sustenance is not always where we expect to find it. Her child, the future, oblivious, bends over, hands on ankles, withdrawn, self-absorbed in Buddha-like serenity. The unity in their enigmatic visual and contextual relationship is achieved by their convex/concave forms.



The Teeth of the Spirit is about the struggle within us. In these life-size drawings, Cynthia Short takes the Biblical story of The Dream of Jacob. Jacob and the angel wrestle all night and in spite of being injured, Jacob holds on until daybreak when he releases the angel in return for his blessing. Jacob believes that he has seen God face to face and although scarred, his life has been spared. Short's version is her own dream, a conflict between a woman and an octopus, symbolic of the struggle within each of us against the Other, those forces of the unconscious which drive our lives. The marks left on our bodies, whether by internal struggle or by cultural initiatory rites, indicate moments of truth, times of risk, confrontation and transformation. To risk means being vulnerable. Short chooses to explore the deep and by bringing the octopus to the surface breaks through the impenetrable fear of the unknown.



The surprise of Deborah Samuel's photographs is not only her challenge to traditional photography but her provocative approach to our basic human needs for attraction and acceptance. *Ruminant of Herself* is a visual 'chewing of the cud', a protest at the conventional notion of beauty. It is looking in the mirror and hating what you see; the wish to slash the lipstick across the mouth, to sprout foliage like Daphne. It is interior bile made visible; the desire not to be or look as others expect, the desire to stick out your tongue and break away in defiance of society's expectations. The beauty's

intense, challenging eyes are a cruel reminder that all ideals are corruptible.

The Wedding is still every little girl's big day. The social role playing, the ritual, the ceremonial pageant have made the BIG wedding once again de rigeur. Woman is expected to take her defined role: demure bride, loyal wife, devoted mother. Samuel wings the role to the absurd. Kewpie dolls are stuck everywhere. What is the bride but a live kewpie doll? Beautiful and naked, their rigid little plastic bodies contrast sharply with the sensuous, fleshy putti that danced around Renaissance beauties. As symbols of abandon, the putti's childish bodies were forgotten in the rush of liberated animal exuberance. The kewpie dolls static bodies have big eyes but curiously lack mouths. The bride's lips are closed and pale. The inference is don't speak, don't have opinions, don't threaten... be desirable.



Samuel focuses on the universal preoccupation with treatment of the hair in *The Kiss*. Tough, spiky, gelled, punk hair is juxtaposed with sensuous, long hair in a play on symbolic meanings and cultural patterns. The anticipation of *The Kiss* is the moment of ecstasy when the will is surrendered, the body possessed by desire exuding availability and the hype of the magical powers of the latest shampoo product.

In *Delirium Tremors* the woman confronts us with her strong green eyes. But they are vacant without spirit or sparkle. Her expression is sullen. As the chick breaks out of its shell into a world determined by intuition, her face is a social mask representing her assigned reality. Is she encased in the masks and cotton balls of beauty treatments, playing out society's expectations to the point of derangement, needing the fix to face the world and stave off the shakes of withdrawal? We are disturbed by the work of Samuel because she turns around our exploitation of beauty and individuals in the name of fashion and consumerism to explore intellectually themes usually determined purely by emotion.



We return to a world of emotion in Carol Marino's contemplative photographs of love, desire and sensuality. Whereas the ideal models of antiquity eliminated imperfections, Marino's nudes show their

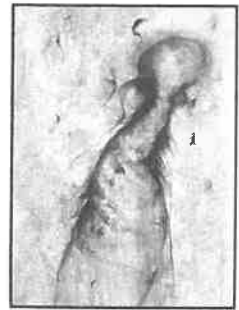
wrinkles, their scars and imperfections. For what is more beautiful than the imperfect body of the beloved?

In the *Rêve d'Elissa #5* the inviting curve of the buttocks is reflected on a shiny surface that undulates against the baseline. Tenderness is achieved by the rhythmic relationship of line and shadow. Whether the body is male or female is ambiguous but what is certain is the fundamental desire to be at one with another human body. It is a return to basics, to know pure pleasure, and to know that in the chaos there is a safe harbour.



In the *Rêve de Gérard #6*, a man leans back on his arms. His sensuality is conveyed in the muscle, the stretch of skin over bone, the hair on his body, the strength of his hands. It is a desirable torso, for there is no area more compelling than the torso which relates to our most vivid experiences. In Marino's pas-

sionate, detailed treatment of this body, we, in turn, share a sensuous identity with forms which are wonderfully erotic but remain refined and classic. The familiar becomes mysterious, a secret, keeping alive precious moments.



As remote as the magic of man's first cave paintings, the undulating outlines of Sylvia Saffie's *Goreme 17* and *19* communicate pulsating, lifelike qualities. Forms resembling roots or bulbs appear to have mysteriously emanated from the earth. Pale, defenceless, they seem to have risen slowly out of the darkness of an undefined past. Yet their ill-defined featureless forms are strangely comforting. We recognize a relationship between man and environment, an optimistic realization that out of the darkness life that has been protected, even if oppressed, will continue to grow. What we conclude is the importance of keeping open the channel to the soul, that we must have a means to reach that deepest part of ourselves, the part of us aware of a higher consciousness. With *Eidola 10* we are left contemplating on organic shape that stirs strange, subconscious remembrances of the beginnings of life. In an uncertain future, our never ending struggle for human completeness continues to be played out against the parchment of time.

Penny-Lynn Grosman has degrees from McGill University, the University of Saskatchewan and an M.A. in Art History from the University of Toronto. She was formerly Head of Extension Services at the Art Gallery of Ontario and has worked extensively in television, film and advertising. Since 1983, she has had her own business as an art consultant in Toronto and is a contributor to art journals and newspapers.

JOHN BROWN

- 1953 Born in Sarnia, Ontario.
- 1977- Received his A.O.C.A. at the Ontario College of Art, Toronto, Ontario.
- 1981
- 1979- Received his B.A. at the University of Guelph.
- 1982

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

SOLO

- 1986 Laurentian University Museum and Art Centre, Sudbury
- 1985 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto
- 1984 Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto
- 1981 Gallery 76, Toronto

GROUP

- 1988 PREMIER'S OFFICE – NORTHERN ARTISTS, Queen's Park, Toronto, Ontario
- 1987 WRITTEN IMAGES, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
Glendon Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
Laurentian Museum & Art Centre, Sudbury, Ontario
Oakville Gallery, Oakville, Ontario
- 1986 TWO-PERSON EXHIBITION, Art Gallery of Northumberland, Cobourg, Ontario
- 1985- ECRANS POLITIQUES, Musee d'Art Contemporain, Montreal
- 1986
- 1985 TORONTO NOW, Sarnia Public Library and Art Gallery, Sarnia, Ontario
- 1984- Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto
- 1985
- 1984 CONTENT – CONTEXT, Mercer Union, Toronto; Open Space Gallery, Victoria, British Columbia; Galerie Aufbau-Abbau, Berlin, Germany
EXPRON, (Sponsored by Lavalin Inc., Montreal) Centre des Arts Contemporains du Quebec a Montreal, Montreal; Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto
TORONTO PAINTING, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario; Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta; Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, New Brunswick; Rodman Hall Arts Centre, St. Catharines, Ontario; Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario; Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta; Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba; the Gallery/Stratford, Stratford, Ontario

John Brown is represented by the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto.

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