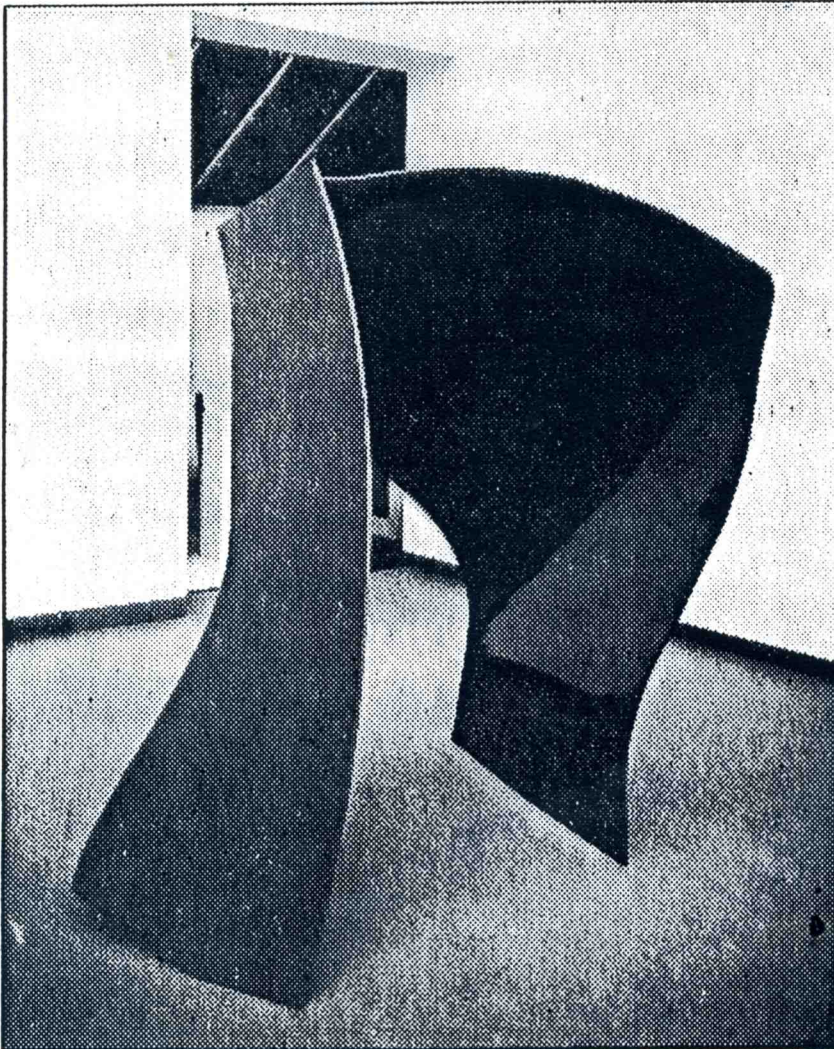


Forum 76

Georges Bogardi

SIX YEARS have passed since the last Survey show organized by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts — much too long a time to be without a comprehensive review of new art produced in a country where creative artists are not concentrated in one center but scattered across

an area so vast that only the most peripatetic lover of art can claim to have even an approximate picture of the latest trends and developments. Of course, we have had the Canadian Canvas survey and Olympic extravaganzas like Spectrum and Mosaicart in the meantime, but these panoramas were all handicapped in some way: The first by a timid, middle-of-the-road selection of paintings only, the latter two by a



Togiak 1974 by Robert Murray

palpable lack of artistic purpose — they existed, finally, because the money was available.

The MMFA's FORUM 76 is frustrating in much the same way. Deputy director Leo Rosshandler (who resigned this week) and curator Germain Lefebvre assembled 149 works by 110 Canadian artists but seem to have made little effort to shape the exhibition to the particular needs of the Montreal public. An example: Torontonians David Craven, who is possibly the most interesting young painter in the country, is represented by one work, the same number he had in Canadian Canvas and Mosaicart. He has never had a one-man show in this city. Meanwhile, there are two Hurlbut canvases in FORUM 76 and of course it's nice to see them, but this Montreal artist can hardly be said to suffer from under-exposure in his hometown. An opportunity to inform Montrealers (the show will not travel) has thus been lost.

Even in terms of a shallow, panoramic survey, the exhibition has major gaps. Only 14 of the 110 participants work outside Quebec and Ontario: The vigorous Prairies scene has been all but ignored. And no survey that excludes seminal figures like Molinari, Gaucher, McEwen, Gagnon plus artists like Goodwin, Poulin, Dean, Mongrain, Noel and Whittome, to mention only Montrealers, can be said to be comprehensive or even competent.

To accentuate the positive, FORUM 76 does have a certain freshness and a capacity to surprise, something that previous surveys have lacked. The show's organizers have done a formidable amount of work: They sent out invitations to 5,000 artists, went through 1,200 replies, visited studios across the country and reportedly did their best to persuade Montreal artists to participate.

That this last effort was in vain in so many cases is a symptom of the alienation that has come to exist between the MMFA and a significant sector of the Montreal art community. One of the most urgent problems the new director will have to address himself to is this pervasive mistrust. (As one artist put it recently: "They don't just hang paintings in the Museum — They lynch them.")

As it so often happens with Canadian exhibitions not organized by the National Gallery, the catalogue is the weakest component of FORUM 76. Its introduction is confined to a narcissistic retelling of how the show was organized and, amid the implied self-congratulation, forgets about the art. Astonishing-

ly, the illustrations show some of the artists in their studios and not one picture of the work on exhibit.

The catalogue's introduction disassembles: "In choosing the format of FORUM 76," Lefebvre writes, "we have tried to avoid leading the public along well-defined paths; we are merely raising a few problems that may provoke curiosity and lead to future research. The relevance of our choices and the problems they present are for the public to decide."

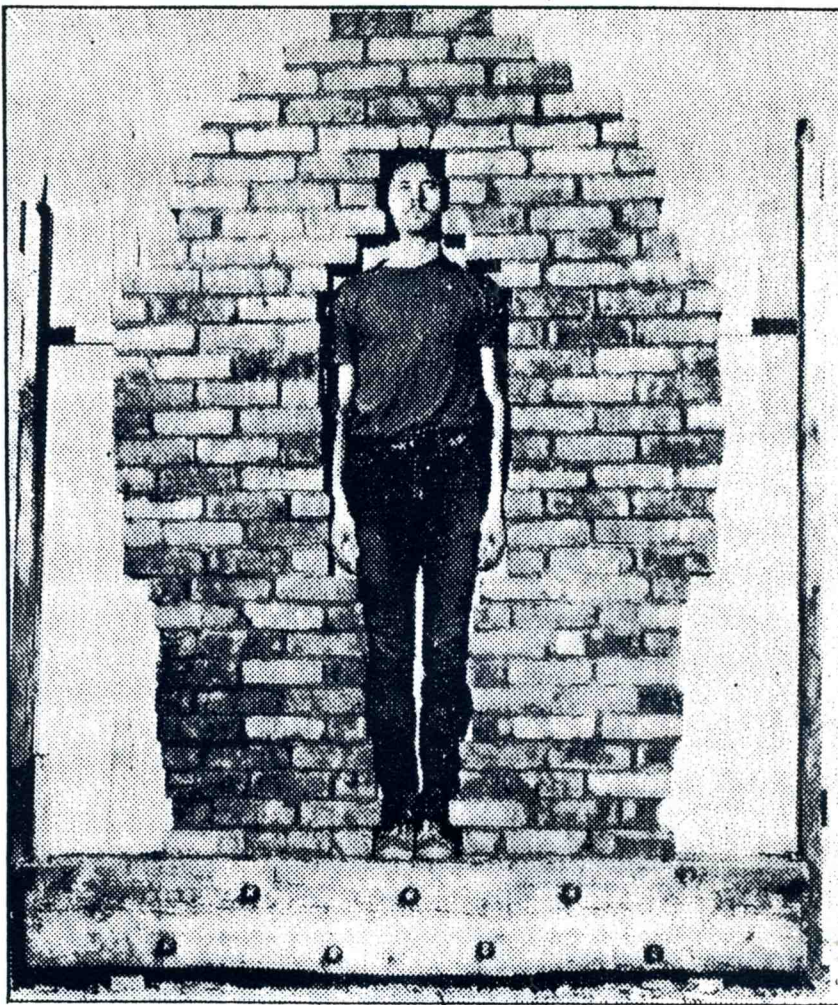
But what problems are being raised? Why is the public being asked to perform a task that is normally assumed to be that of the organizers? The Socratic method is useful in philosophy but in art it only leads to exhibitions without content.

One is left with the feeling that the show's creators merely tried to make the best of the unwieldy and probably impractical panoramic format. Lefebvre himself admits that "the only efficient way to develop public awareness of contemporary art would be to provide the artists with more opportunities of exhibiting their works in one-man shows." This makes sense and one looks forward to the day when the MMFA begins to act accordingly.

Meanwhile we have FORUM 76 which is not so much an exhibition as loose collection of mixed pleasures, what Leo Rosshandler terms "an art fair," and the best way to enjoy it is to simply wander about and sample the goods — and the bads.

The space at the top of the grand staircase contains a number of curiosities, among them Bill Vazan's teepee of birch trees, stones, leaves and other ecological software and Michael Berman's Oceans of Blood, a queasy depiction of whale hunting of no esthetic interest but plenty of indignation value. Another conversation piece is a giant satin pillow by Monique and Yvon Cosic, who list their medium as haute couture. Cosic's work has lately attained such disarming heights of sappiness and the couple obviously have so much fun making these things that to criticize their work would be pointless and downright misanthropical.

The tone becomes considerably more elevated around the stairwell, with a number of remarkable paintings by Miljenko Horvat, Richard Mill and Jacques Palumbo, artists whose works are familiar to Montreal gallery-goers. There is also a stunning sculpture by Colette Whiten complete with photos that explain how this artist "moulds" her subjects in brick so they become models, victims and — through absence



Colette Whiten's *Untitled (February)* 1975.

— compelling presences. This is tough, kinky, feminist art of considerable power.

On into the small "conceptual" room with its wan photo-sequences, polite pornography and Pierre Granche's photo, wood and grass project which took three years to make and 15 pedantic words to title, suggesting an elaborate hobby rather than an urgent need to create something. There is some exciting conceptual work being done in Canada but none found its way into FORUM 76.

The next two rooms contain solid paintings and sculpture by Montreal's John Heward and Eva Brandl and Claude Tousignant's surprising departure from his usual op-art tondos. His *Quinté* appears to be a backward look to 60s minimalism. The stretched-canvas panels in monochrome black, white, grey and green are paintings insofar as they hang on the wall, but their seriality and the fact that their bottom edges touch the floor hark back to the min-

imalists' notion of "objecthood."

The selection of Toronto art, rarely seen in this city, is the special strength of FORUM 76. Jack Bush's *Symphonic Poem* is overwhelming in its freshness and lyrical drive and Robert Murray's sculpture *Togiak* is equally impressive. We also get to sample one work each by painters Ron Martin, David Craven and Patterson Ewen as well as sculpture by David and Royden Rabinowitch: If FORUM 76 accomplishes nothing more than to point out the necessity of seeing one-man shows of these major artist in Montreal, it will have accomplished a great deal.

The show comes to a screeching halt with an eerily-lit room crammed with a hodge-podge of figurative paintings — an experience recommended only to the insatiable and to those who enjoy wax museums. Beginning October 5 there will also be a program of video, experimental films and concerts of new music. Details are to be found in the catalogue.