

Passionate paintwork: A brief love affair

Toronto's infatuation with the new painting began in the fall of 1981. But the ardour cooled within two years, especially among critics. Now, 20 years later, it's time to fan the flame

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

In 1983, the Toronto artists' group Chromazone locked the doors of its walk-up gallery on Spadina Avenue for the last

time.

It certainly wasn't because the collective's two years of showing new canvases on the tattered edge

of Kensington Market had collapsed in failure.

Toward the end of its experiment, in fact, the group was suffering from a bad case of success. With pyrotechnic displays of passionate

new paintwork going off in New York and across Europe during the

early 1980s — baffling dealers, exciting collectors, engaging some art

critics while delighting others — Toronto gallery goers wanted to

know about the emerging local variant.

The gallery saw good traffic and enjoyed good press. Wild-child

painters fresh out of art school were crowding up the narrow stairs, demanding attention and shows from

Chromazone officials. "We were turning into art administrators, just

looking at slides, and not getting in- to the studios," a member of the collective said at the time. "And just how much good stuff is there?"

Asked that question in early 1981, two years before Chromazone

New York that I realized the resurgence of painting was neither just

about punk nor peculiar to New York. Nor was it something I could

airily dismiss.

The stuff was suddenly everywhere — in the art magazines, in

the galleries, in vociferous art-world conversation. And, once I let

down my guard, I, along with many other observers, found it acutely in-

teresting.

There was so much to discover. In those days, we were learning the

names of Italians and what they were doing — Sandro Chia's

brusky, muscular portrayals of men and women in emotional turmoil,

Francisco Clemente's lyrically decadent eroticism, Enzo Cucchi's in-

terventions from the Italian earth.

We were learning about German painters rediscovering roots in their country's haunted traditions

— Anselm Kiefer, Markus Lupetz, and

ple doing things with brushes and

ing was dead. There were still peo-

agendas. Anyway, I thought paint-

painting with pugnaous political

steamly tropics of heavy-breathing

me for this abrupt dunk into the

media in the 1970s — had prepared

lands of conceptualism, and new

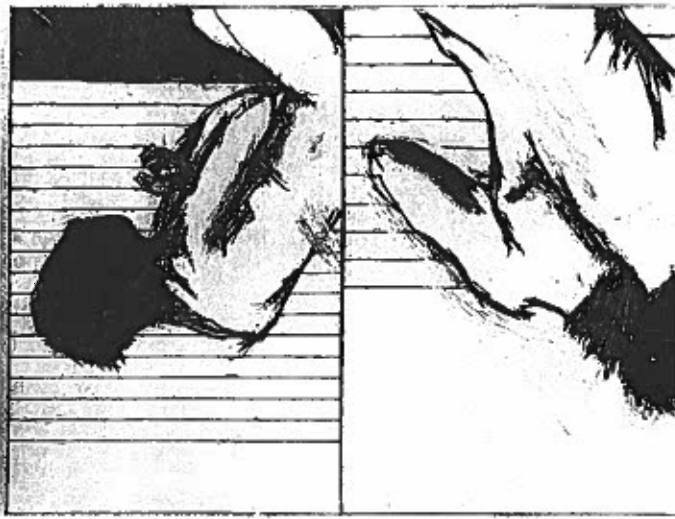
place on the dry, cool, cerebral up-

mation as an art critic — which took

about, or seeing. Nothing in my for-

I did not know what I was talking

and art-school paintings."



No one could ignore Toronto's new paintings after the opening of a 1982 show that included John Brown's work (Human Head #7, next page, and Portrait of Two Thoroughly Researched People, left).



Georg Baselitz, Rainer Fetting, Salome. Few of the Europeans were as young as the punks of New York or the emerging generation of figurative painters in Toronto. Most of them had been working on canvas for years before 1980. But with a sudden jerk of the mass-communications tap, we were deluged in information about whole worlds of creativity that North Americans, by and large, knew little about.

Then, in the autumn of 1981, the new painting hit Toronto. Chromazone opened its Spadina space with a show that argued brashly for the urgency and vitality of painting's communicative and myth-making powers. While some of these artists had come up through the punk music and club scenes, by the time of their debut they had become brooding, inward, psychologically shadowed.

In his depiction of a nude man stunned by the paralyzing Medusa, Andy Fabo declared his status as outsider and the object of vast, destroying powers. In her canvas *Anima Animus*, Rae Johnson engaged in a romantic reverie about the sexuality of women, while Sharon Cook's mural-sized racetrack spoke of the dread the artist felt even in a place so public, entertaining, vibrant.

This was painting about being young and menaced in the city, but also about belonging to an urban tribe. Among the memorable paintings in this inaugural show was Chromazone member Oliver Girling's *Portrait of Berenice*, the painter's tribute to an excellent Toronto performance artist, his friend and comrade in the struggle to be heard over the din of consumerism and the rush hour of luxury.

The climax of this extraordinary activity, for me anyway, arrived at the end of 1982, when Carmen Lamanna — hitherto Toronto's most

stringent, discerning dealer in conceptual and minimal art — embraced four artists who had ridden to attention on the current insurgency of expressive painting. They were Johnson, John Brown, Marc de Guerre and Brian Boigor. With the opening of a group show by these artists at Lamanna's gallery in December, 1982, nobody who thought about art could any longer ignore Toronto's new painting.

But by early 1983, when Chromazone closed down on Spadina Avenue, the interest in this activity, at home and on the international stage, was already marked by a certain reserve, at least among the critics, which soon shaded off into hostility.

The most visible leader of the charge in Canada and internationally was Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. In 1981, Buchloh, then a teacher at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, published an instantly famous attack in October, a New York journal of visual culture, on the new German and Italian painting. The phenomenon, in Buchloh's gloomy view, was very dangerous indeed — evidence of proto-fascist nationalism at the very least, an abandonment of the presumably sacrosanct values of left-leaning European political culture, and a resurgence of old Romantic ideas of the artist as entertainer and helpless victim.

Buchloh's rear-mongering and caricature set the tone for the general critical backlash that, by the mid-1980s, had largely buried the new art.

The death of painting in or about 1970 was recertified by art-world coroners. Contrary to an opinion making the rounds, there had been no resurrection circa 1980. The good news for photographers and new-media artists was that their march, begun in the 1970s, into the museums, universities and collections would be allowed to continue unimpeded by painters in dirty sneakers.

There was to be a general return to order — so the consensus decreed — with taste-making authority taken back from dealers and collectors of the new painting and set back in the hands of politically reliable professors, critics and curators, who had been, or had felt, briefly discomfited by the fluorescence of painting. It was to be as though nothing had happened.

On the whole, to my disappointment — because so much of the European, American and Canadian painting of the early 1980s had been so durably enjoyable and thought-provoking — everything came to pass as the regrouped com-

missars of art-world opinion wanted.

Galleries such as the one run by Chromazone closed, or changed direction. A few Toronto painters survived and continued. One thinks of Brown, Johnson and Joanne Tod, along with Chromazone veterans Sybil Goldstein and Stephen Andrews, who have exhibitions now on view in Toronto galleries. Many other artists who came of age in the early 1980s simply stopped making art. The Europeans slipped back into invisibility in North America.

Two decades after the *rappel à l'ordre*, the expressive painting that sprang to public attention so vividly about 1980, and that has endured, remains marginal to the doings of the art world — tolerated but uncelebrated, recognized only grudgingly. I find it astonishing that no museum has given Brown — to name only the most excellent painter of his Canadian generation — the serious critical look his accomplishment deserves. It is clearly time to think about Brown again, and about his contemporaries, with a generous spirit toward what was created in that incandescent moment two decades ago.

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