

Works by Brown and Lukacs share intense focus on gender, sexuality and power

Male body supplants feminist concerns in art of the '90s

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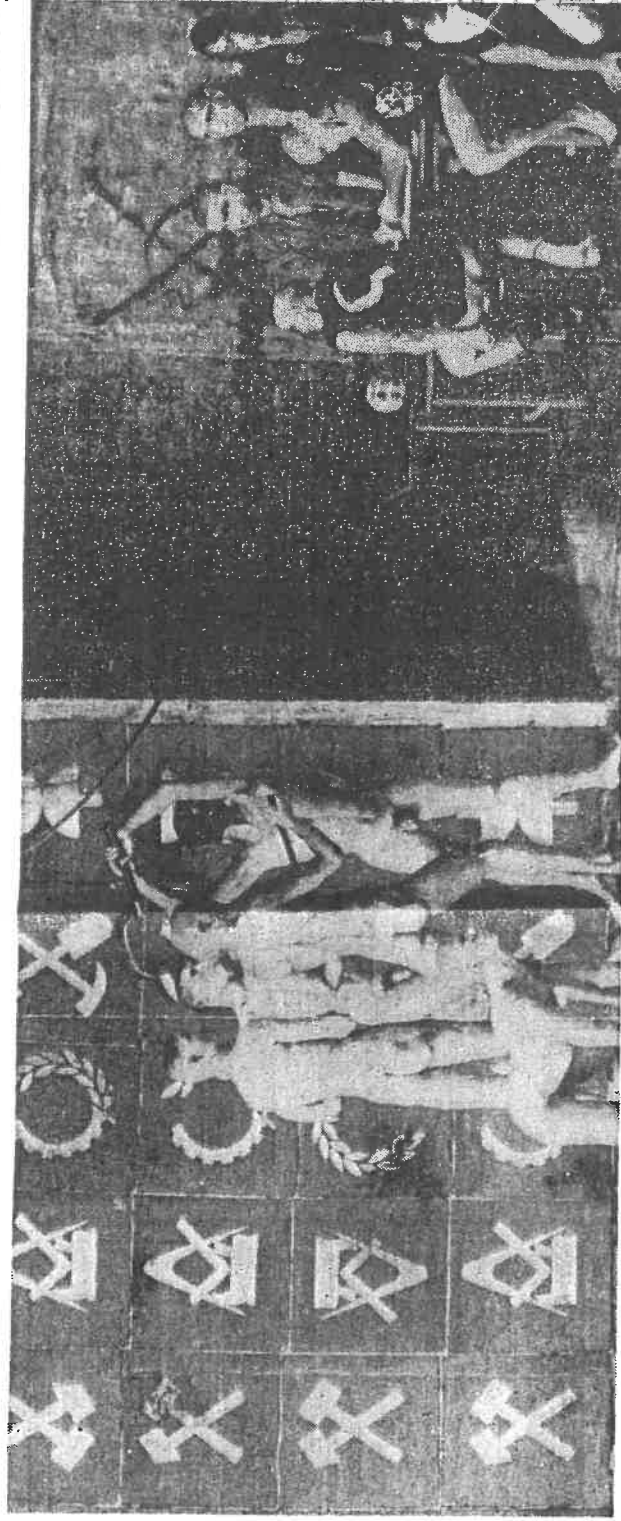
AFTER enjoying a remarkable vogue in the museums and art galleries during the 1980s, feminist art now appears to be headed for retirement. The current decline seems less a retreat before superior forces — the art world seems to be enamoured of sixties-style leftisms as it ever was — than a slow slide into obscurity, as artists, critics and curators quietly lose interest in propaganda art, no matter how politically correct. But if feminist art is going away, the critical fascination with sexuality's codes and conventions that it popularized (but did not invent) seems all set for a new career in the art of the 1990s — only, as it turns out, in the art of males.

Examples of this can be found in two exhibitions currently on view in southern Ontario. One is the show of extraordinary new drawings by John Brown, at the Carleton Lamanna Gallery in Toronto. The other is a special display of Attila Richard Lukacs' 1988 painting *Boys to Fight*, at the London Regional Art Gallery.

John Brown's pictures of naked or semi-clad males at Carmen Lamanna are probably the most sensitively beautiful drawings this gifted Toronto artist has ever exhibited. His topic here is the male body; his aim is to examine masculinity, as a powerful idea that uses the male body to impose itself on the world.

In these intriguing works, Brown has turned on the bodies of other men the same searching gaze other heterosexual male artists routinely turn on the bodies of female models, recording the difficult experience of this taboo encounter.

The idea here is to get past standard representations of masculine ideal male body. But that's not all. Each of these ten pictures is paired with another one, mostly of hazing equipment — things like bucking billygoats and so forth, useful for embarrassing initiates of fraternities. The sum of the two pictures is a slightly painful smile at male folly, and a critical look at the crucial, ancient role of humil-



The Young Spartans Challenge the Boys to Fight, by Canadian painter Attila Richard Lukacs, is on view at the London Regional Art Gallery; a vast hymn to masculinity.

ologies and interests women artists have been promoting for the last dozen years.

The Young Spartans Challenge the Boys to Fight was painted by Lukacs, a young Canadian painter living in Berlin, in 1988, and exhibited at the 49th Parallel in New York and Toronto's Power Plant before being acquired last year by the London Regional Art Gallery.

Everywhere it has been shown, it has elicited a peculiarly ambivalent response from curators and critics alike. It has impressed virtually everyone, and little wonder. Magnificently executed, this picture is radiant with knowledge of painterly technique and strategy far beyond the artist's 26 years.

But the obvious subject-matter has been a worry to its admirers, prompting them to uncommonly ingenious interpretations. The Power Plant, for instance, even dug up ironies and sophisticated humor in the Young Spartans, presumably as a way to defuse this picture's insult to everything right-thinking curators believe nowadays.

I find no such ironies. Two groups of young men confront each other. The brightly lit nude

group on the left stands before what appears to be a wall of large red ceramic tiles, dirty with age, decorated with semi-abstract headdress symbols of labor — crossed hammers, gears combined with laurel wreaths, and so on. These standing nudes, who wield spades, hammers and sickles, menace a second group of men, partially clothed and seated at a table or standing nearby in the small, shadowy room.

The confrontation is taking place, clearly, in one of those erotic, underground Elsewheres far from ordinary experience — a space heavy with the musk of men bonded into groups, and ordered by codes of masculinity not unlike those that prevail in tree-house and hockey team, but here extreme, and naked of any concern except power. Two of the men in the right-hand group wear jockstraps over their faces, like ritual masks — as though trying to transform their whole bodies magically into phallicuses.

The models for the figures in both groups were the street toughs who've fascinated Lukacs since his move to Berlin some five years ago. In Lukacs' portrayal of them, there is surely no fretting over

with masculinity than with the problem of the painter's calling.

Both the historical pictures utilized here were done by young, ambitious artists, and each depicts the issuing of a challenge — to the sports of youth, in Young Spartans; to God's service, in The Calling of St. Matthew. Here are two artists, then, at the same point in their careers as Lukacs was in 1988, depicting events that are easily read as allegories for art's call to both play and devotion. Is it so surprising that Lukacs should have been enchanted by these paintings?

But as Lukacs well knows, both painters led troubled lives — Degas, as the victim of his misanthropy, and as a neglected old man abandoned by the artistic fashions of the day; Caravaggio, as the prisoner of a violent disposition and many insecurities. To rise to the challenge of art, Lukacs' painting seems to say, is to launch, onto an unknown sea, which can easily turn out to be a sea of troubles. Faced with that prospect, the painter can do only what Lukacs has done here: paint defiantly and beautifully in the teeth of adversity, and against the trendy ideas of his time.

masculinity, neither do we find idle idealizing. His representations are unapologetic pictures of muscular, young and quite believable male bodies — which are also devoid of any "crisis of male identity."

If Lukacs gives short shrift to the feminist ideal of sensitive, self-deprecating men, he pointedly snubs the feminist call for a questioning of "patriarchal" art and art history, by explicitly arranging his figures in homage to compositions by Degas (the left-hand group) and by Caravaggio (on the right). The role of Degas' Young Spartans (c. 1868) and Caravaggio's Calling of St. Matthew (c. 1597-98) in Lukacs' iconic scheme is more sophisticated than it first appears to be — but such matters need not detain us here.

More important is the message about the artist himself which their use sends to the art-world observer.

The macho *mise en scene* in Spartan Boys is saturated with swagger and bravado. But inquiring into the artistic sources of Lukacs' tableaux — the Degas, the Caravaggio — we glimpse a second message, having to do less