

Doug Robinson at arm's length

by Dylan Cree

Doug Robinson's imagery represents a playful merger between classical painting and photo realism. His scenes intentionally undermine the institutionalized seriousness common to conceptual art-based critiques. Instead, they veer toward producing an awkward laughter. The Vancouver artist's visual jokes are not the wink and smirk variety; rather, the laughter generates from playing out an 'impossibility' in the form of a perverse, self-defeating deconstruction of the mystique or lore that surrounds image-making. Robinson's highly skilled reappropriation of outdated techniques, combined with an acute literal-mindedness, puts him out of step with most of Vancouver's artists. Bluntly stated, Robinson says his "style is a deliberate attempt to get past painterly art."

To this end, and consistent with his play of meanings, Robinson's fusing of classical portrait geometry with digitized camera optic renderings is circumscribed not so much by conceptualism as with conceptual violence. Rather than disrupting narratives through the insertion of seemingly disparate elements, Robinson's practice (which maintains the semblance of past and intelligible narratives) pressurizes the construction of the frame. He deploys various

mathematical precepts in competing fashion to generate an asymmetrical outcome (see diagram). In his work there is no overriding architectural lexicon that subjugates certain components in the composition's structure. Thus, a kind of struggle amongst conflicting geometries occurs on the canvas.

Exhibited at Artropolis 2001, Robinson's Cowheeler Supreme is a wryly conceived portrait of a young woman smoking in a launderette amidst big steel machines. Pictorially it is reminiscent of Edward Hopper's scene of existential alienation in New York Movie (1939). The woman's gaze, while markedly contemplative, is textured with both sadness and a sense of being dislocated. Through her somber demeanor, Robinson effectively infects the picture with a sense of gloom and depression. Closer reading discloses that his composition is not so unified, and not so serious-toned; rather, the portrait is a cheeky staging of melancholy.

The strong geometrical units of the shiny metal dryers both frame the subject and *are* a subject. They occupy a separate mathematical spectrum on the canvas. In opposition to the spiral that engenders the pose of the female subject, they are governed by the



Cowheeler Supreme, acrylic on linen, 48 x 78 inches, Doug Robinson, 2000

proportional construct known as the Golden Section. Superficially, by standing as metaphor for an oppressive apparatus, the dryers underscore the young woman's mood. However, by the force of their size and gloss, they compete with the human subject and register as another foreground. Robinson's trick is to make the so-called fore and aft elements appear integrated even though, relatively, they are detached from one another.

A further de-structuring of the portrait takes place in mirrored irony. To the right of the woman, in the glass window of the upright dryer unit, is the muted reflection of the painter who, in this selfrendering, bears a striking resemblance to Sigmund Freud. The sight of this mischievous figure also breaks the mood we have previously attributed to the woman. She apparently is not alone or lonely in her despair. The scene is a folly; Robinson's composition announces itself as contrived.

Fat Guy and Van Art Gal reveal similar strokes of humor. Fat Guy (1999) is a brightly coloured painting displaying a sinister and eerie aura akin to the dark psychological mise en scène of the filmmaker David Lynch. Empathizing with the fat guy, or even fearing the fat guy, we read his outcast shame against

the seemingly derisive and dismissive looks etched on the faces of the foregrounded female figures. We have the suspicion that something perverse has happened or at least is about to happen between the obese carnival operator and the two casually-dressed women. But, similar to Cowheeler Supreme, Robinson frustrates our experiencing of the sentiments shown on the subjects' faces.

The layout of Fat Guy is part of the frustration. The canvas is a relentless grouping of ellipses, both overlapping and separate. What's at work is the repetitive play or performing of the around and around character of geometrics particular to carnivalscapes; Ferris wheels, rollercoasters, loop-the-loops, and other similar machines. Consistent with his penchant for creating separate worlds within a single setting, Robinson has designed the work so that the women exist in an entirely different orbit from the fat guy. We can't help but ask, is the painting actually a scene or is the fat guy connected to the women only by virtue of occupying the same canvas?

Even if there is a story-line that connects the characters, by sneakily inscribing "sin" at the bottom right hand corner of the frame Robinson succeeds in



'at Guy, acrylic on cotton, 27.50 x 44.25 inches, Doug Robinson, 1999



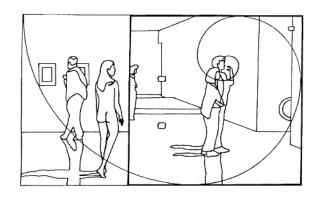
Van Art Gal, acrylic on linen, 27.50 x 44.25 inches, Doug Robinson, 1999

turning the brooding tone set by the fat guy into cheap mockery. Here, as in Cowheeler Supreme, the artist's deftness in making the viewer feel at home within the realism of the scene(s) turns back on itself, disrupting both the sentiment and the psychology of the picture.

Van Art Gal (1999), which brings to mind the gratuitous nudity of Manet's Picnic on the Grass, seamlessly integrates a nude female into the midst of other viewers in an art gallery. Here trickery takes on a higher level of sophistication. Van Art Gal is not just a smartly executed representation with a cheeky title (one that plays out a fashionable commodification critique likening the Vancouver Art Gallery to an airbrush-painted van or travelling road show). Within the staging of the gallery's own framing, Robinson de-mystifies the nude by giving her the role of but another viewer. The foregrounded couple, who are the painting's principal focal point, are in competition with the nude. Curiously, we are without clues as to what these subjects are viewing; clearly, it's not the naked woman. Adrift between inattention and focus, we lock into the separate geometries of the scene's foregrounded and backgrounded characters and soon lose interest in whether or not the figures are clothed.

Robinson's portraits emerge out of an interest in geometric form rather than from a concern about

human forms and feelings. Strategically, he has imbued each element of his paintings with its own prominence. Dominant focal points buckle against the strength of each subject's own space which, in turn, are often measured within the public sphere. In effect, his work is a systematic production of estranged relations; a kind of structured distancing that puts the viewer at arm's length.



Dylan Cree is a Vancouver writer and filmmaker. His writings have been published in parallax, and his short films have been screened at a variety of film festivals in Canada.