**Wonderland: Doug Robinson's Topsy-Turvy World**
**Written by Lynn Ruscheinsky, PhD**

*Our English word wonder, from the Old English wunder, might be cognate with the German wunde or wound. It would thus suggest a breach in the membrane of awareness, a sudden opening in a man's system of established and expected meanings, a blow as if one were struck or stunned. To be wonderstruck is to be wounded by the sword of the strange event, to be stabbed awake by the striking (cf. Parsons, 85).*

*The common type of wonder, the one indicated in the usual English dictionary meaning, is 1) a feeling of startle or surprise and 2) an incipient, inquisitive interest in the object of wonder [the wonderful] (ibid.)*

**the wonderful**
If wonder is an excitation of interest by unique qualities or forms of things then in principle those perceptions, activities and meanings that evoke surprise and curiosity must contrast with "ordinary" experience with its regular, accustomed, predictable character (ibid.) Doug Robinson's recent works aim at putting into meaningful form the relative ordinariness of everyday occurrence in such a way as to make it an object of inquisitive curiosity; an object of wonder.

In works like "*Millie at English Bay*" Robinson has skillfully created a balance and tension between the incipiently perceptual and active space-time of the city and those fleeting moments of quietude, introspection and disengagement from sensory experience with which we are all familiar. Millie sits in a kind of suspended animation, the sense of future, the perception of signs and the anticipation of desire, memory, hope and promise—all these seem to have been transcended suggesting a state of pure ecstasy (Parsons, 95). For Millie there appears to be nothing left to wonder at, all distinctions of sense and thought are dissolved. However, for us the vagueness of the possibility-sense remains—the sense of what might be, of future and cathected occurrences is summoned in the free play of our imagination. What attracts and holds our wondering is the mystery silently waiting too be unraveled. It is the lure of the unknown, this temptation of imaginatively exploring the hidden motives for Millie's contemplation that gives the work its peculiar fascination. Robinson's unequivocal acceptance of the objective world—his realism—along with the life-size scale of the image, and the familiarity of view across the bay persuade us to engage with the scene in a visceral, sensuous manner. Millie's nakedness serves to heighten our experience of the world of sight, sound, and touch. We share with her in the enjoyment of the setting sun reflected from the pink clouds and glowing windows of the buildings across the bay, the hypnotic rhythm of the waves along the shore, the slight breeze off the ocean, the warmth of the late afternoon and the cool of the shaded verandah. Our physical and emotional response is spontaneous and direct. Yet as our senses become clarified in thought our curiosity retains an element of detachment or psychic distance that permits at least in some small degree the vagueness of imagination, memory and dream producing in us a continued sense of wonder (ibid. 87).

**the fairground**

Indeed in a Kantian sense, it is the free play between our imagination and understanding that produces pleasure in our judgment of Doug Robinson's "fairground" paintings. The elusive meanings of his compositions not only pique our curiosity but also dramatically challenge us to uncover their silent secrets. Typical of Robinson's oeuvre is his work entitled *Duck Pond*. Here he has represented a young woman employed as a fairground huckster engaged in the everyday activity of drinking. Background figures appear incidental. This scene in and of its self is so commonplace as to be unexceptional yet it engages our inquisitiveness. What is it about Robinson's portrayal of this everyday event that evokes a curiosity or wonder in the receptive spectator? Perhaps it is just that, the ordinariness of the scene that seems to signify nothing in particular that induces an imaginative engagement, a desire in the onlooker to create meaning. Robinson's paintings are thus emotionally charged narratives. The words are missing. We stare, concentrate, and try to imagine those missing words.

Robinson's amusement park subject matter encourages us to seek satisfaction in the resolution of meaning through the nostalgic recollection of a childhood filled with the sights and sounds of wonder. Wonder of this type is thus a kind of suspended animation—a balance and tension between a moment of passive introspection and anticipation of future events that may turn the world upside-down. There is a sense of possibilities in the frozen moment of the canvas: possibilities that are called forth by previous and similar moments extracted and extrapolated from those memories of childhood and from them anticipations of what Robinson's painting might mean. The young woman's self-absorption in her drink is not extraordinary yet by stark contrast our re-creation from memory of the sudden squeals of delight and exclamations of surprise that accompany the awarding of prizes—the stuffed-toys that Robinson has artfully included in his image—elicits an emotional response in us akin to wonder. Thus Robinson's *Duck Pond* has transformed past and present experience into the symbolic expression of art—and so far as it retains and renews the excitement and curiosity of wonder it perpetuates the experience of wonder itself (Parsons, 89).

**the carnivalesque**

Childhood memory is not by any means the only force at work in our aesthetic engagement with Robinson's fairground works. The carnivalesque spirit implicit in works like *Fat Guy, Tilt A Whirl, Pork & Rabbit, and PNE* speak to our longing for an interruption of the workaday world, a time of play when normally dominant constraints and hierarchies are temporarily lifted.

The term carnival came to have particular prominence for cultural criticism after the 1965 publication of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*. Bakhtin gives an especially benign account of carnival rituals, in which the anti-authoritarian and subversive aspects of carnival are stressed – authority figures are mocked, the joyless routines of everyday life are abrogated, the differences between people are flattened as their shared humanity, the body, becomes subject of crude humor (Dentith). According to Bahktin,

> "The carnival atmosphere holds the lower strata of life most important, as opposed to higher functions (thought, speech, soul) which were usually held dear in the signifying order. At carnival time, the unique sense of time and space causes individuals to feel they are a part of the collectivity, at which point they cease to be themselves" (21).

The most notorious yet long-lived carnival tradition was that of the "reversal," the world upside-down, in which status, age, wealth, and most prominently gender get turned on their heads (Tokofsky, 299). While Robinson's subject matter calls on the popularization of carnival of which gender roles are such a significant element, his representation of that topsy-turvy world features little explicit gender inversion or transgression. In particular, his *Fat Guy* emphasizes the behavioral and spatial dimensions of the "real" ways in which mores governing sex roles and how these cultural norms influence behaviors are enacted by men and women in everyday life. The moment of intimacy and friendship—perhaps exhilaration after their Ferris wheel ride—shared by the women in the foreground of the image is dramatically contrasted with the psychological alienation and malevolence of the "fat guy" that leers at his unwitting subjects. Robinson's carnival is not a celebration of "low" humor which venerates the temporary "crossing of boundaries" where the town fool is crowned, the higher classes are mocked but, has instead exposed the circus of the everyday where the various psychological needs and drives that underpin crude remarks and sexist behaviors prevail.

The childlike thrill, naivety, and promise of a world turned upside-down by a carefree ride on a Tilt-a-whirl or Ferris wheel are thwarted by the sexually-charged world of adulthood. There is no sense of the loss of time and space in Robinson's topsy-turvy world. We do not feel safe in our belonging to a community. Instead we are left with a sense of foreboding, an intuition of coming evil leaving us wondering at our inability to even momentarily fulfill the utopian ideals of our youth.

**anticipation and foreboding**

The role of anticipation and foreboding is an important feature in Robinson's work that is closely connected not only with his rational and realistic style but also with his art of characterization. It bears, too, on the structural soundness of his composition, since the peculiar function of anticipation and foreboding often consists in establishing subtle correspondences between the event portrayed and the binding together of the oft-alienated figures of the scene that makes a consideration of this particular feature in his work so interesting.

The role played by foreboding displays Robinson's ability to engage the viewer in a singular manner. For instance, in *Pork & Rabbit* the way in which the young girl leans against the "skate" boy for support suggests a familiarity and trust that gives the spectator clues as to their individual character. Robinson has contrasted the physically close and thus emotionally intimate relationship of the youths with the detachment or introversion of the huckster. In Robinson's highly rational composition where every object is carefully placed to assure the validity of the objective world, the portrayal of people with faces hidden or preventing eye contact serve to create an atmosphere of mystery, foreboding,

and angst. There is something equally ominous in the realistic depiction of the paint can—in the recognition of an everyday object out of place—the precarious footing of the young girl upon it intensifies our uneasiness; disturbs us while it demands our attention. We are provoked to watch. Keep on watching. For the moment the viewer looks away, something untoward will happen.

**conclusion**

I have argued that "wonderful art" is that which evokes emotion for the spectator's benefit, a function that it fulfills through its representational character (see Dow, 328). In a very logical manner, therefore, Doug Robinson has communicated his experience of the "real" world as understood or imagined, thus the communication of insights about that world. As such, his work has a haunting validity that not only commands our interest but also is almost hypnotic in the power of its impact. By this very means his art focuses emotions so that they are directed in a practical way as effective agents for the benefit of inquiry or insight for the viewer. To the sensuous appeal of realism itself, Robinson adds the element of wonder that make ordinary things extraordinary by enabling them to transcend the bounds of the specific and gain the monumentality that speaks to our humanity (ibid.). His ability to see the universal in its particular, and the whole through the part instills his work with an enduring harmony intimately bound up with a sense of destiny filled with happen-stance occurrences malevolent in nature. It is in just this manner that Robinson's subjects seem to offer a prophetic warning to return to the simpler values of life; to be wonder-struck by the pleasures of the everyday before it is too late.

**Works cited:**

Bakhtin, Mikhail
*Rabelais and his World* (1965; translated by Helene Iswolsky. Indiana University Press, 1984).

Clemen, Wolfgang H. "Anticipation and Foreboding in Shakespeare's Early Histories." Shakespeare Survey Volume 6: The Histories. Ed. Allardyce Nicoll. Cambridge University Press, 1953. Cambridge Collections Online. Cambridge University Press. [DOI:10.1017/CCOL0521064198.003]

Dentith, Simon. "Carnival, Carnivalesque, Carnivalisation". The Literary Encyclopedia. 18 July 2001. [http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=160]

Dow, Helen J.
"The Magic Realism of Alex Colville." Art Journal, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Summer, 1965), pp. 318-329: College Art Association
[http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.langara.bc.ca:2048/stable/774807]

Kant, Immanuel
The Critique of Judgement, 1790, translated by James Creed Meredith
[http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/critique-of-judgment.txt]

Parsons, Howard L.
"A Philosophy of Wonder." Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Sep., 1969), pp. 84-101

Tokofsky, Peter
"Masking Gender: A German Carnival Custom in Its Social Context." Western Folklore, Vol. 58, No. 3/4, Studies of Carnival in Memory of Daniel J. Crowley (Summer-Autumn, 1999), pp. 299-318