

Penticton Art Gallery (formerly AGSO)

William (Bill) Featherston: New World Order

Main Gallery

1/18/2008 - 3/9/2008

At 80 years of age, William (Bill) Featherston remains something of a mythical figure in the Vancouver art scene. Moving to the west coast in 1971 he turned his back on abstraction in favor of creating large scale figurative paintings which document the social concerns of the working-class heroes and characters that populate his community. As an educator Bill taught for ten years at the Vancouver School of Art where he inspired a whole generation of artists. Never one to hold back, his straightforward criticism pushed his students to stretch themselves beyond their comfort level to make a statement with their work and challenge social conventions. During a time when conceptual and abstract art ruled the day Bill provided an oasis, attracting and inspiring a generation of painters including Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Laurie Papou, Attila Richard Lukacs, Derek Root, Angela Grossmann and Graham Gillmore to name a few. As a testament to his influence as a teacher he remains friends with many of the students he inspired and encouraged.

The first part of this exhibition introduces the viewer to the artist through an introspective examination of the self, illustrated through a series of self-portraits, which document the passage of time in a direct and honest fashion. These works represent the nature of the artist's creative process, illustrating the concern he has for process, art history, composition, colour, material and accessibility. These works are frank depictions of the self which are neither beautiful nor ugly but honestly display the a sense of vulnerability both physically and politically to the world in which we live. Living in a society where the level of anxiety, fear and paranoia belies a general state of resigned indifference, these works could represent anyone of us. Fear, it seems, is the new opiate of the masses.

The second part of the exhibit combines all of the social and political concerns which have deeply affected the artist over the past 20 years. At the conclusion of World War II, Bill was an uneducated war veteran having dropped out of school at 16 to join the navy. Veterans Affairs paid for Bill to return to school where he eventually received a teaching certificate. A short stint teaching at a reform school gave Bill a social conscience which was further fueled after a job at the Ontario Collage of Art. In England and Wales Bill became very active in the peace movement and further engaged himself in political activism. This innate social concern began to work itself into his work and upon his return to Canada he gave up abstraction in favor of social realism creating heroic paintings documenting the everyday working class hero.

Drawing the basis of their composition from art historical references Bill pays homage to artists whose work and vision he admires. These works are also about process, materials, composition, mark making and theater which combined create a richly complex and layered surface and set where the messages both direct and indirect play out before you. Using political satire Bill questions the ongoing conflicts propagated by imperialist and corporate forces, addressing the

issues of torture and social / political injustice. The paintings serve a cautionary warning, illustrating the artist's own fears and suspicions caused by the rise of neo-conservatism and the political interference propagated by the military-industrial complex.

The earliest work pays tribute to Harvey Milk, an American politician and gay rights activist who was assassinated in 1978 by Dan White, a troubled anti-gay conservative. In another painting entitled *Adultery is a Sin*, Bill pays homage to Jean-Auguste Ingres, *La Grand Odalisque* replacing the main figure with a nude depiction of Condoleezza Rice reclining on a chaise lounge with her two administrative cohorts looking on from the balcony. Like Edouard Manet's quasi erotic painting *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, the men are fully clothed begging the question of what is the real relationship between these people. These works are meant to push and challenge the viewer and evoke a strong emotional response. While they deal with harsh and brutal subjects, they also utilize satire and humor to ease the discomfort and provide some welcome relief.

This exhibition is intended to provide food for thought and asks us all to question the state of the world in which we live. Bill Featherston doesn't pull punches and this body of work while not pretty and beautiful, offers one perspective to consider and begs the viewer to question their thoughts on what we are led to believe and understand from the political spin provided by the government and the media.