

An exhibition of paintings on canvas and mural by

BILL FEATHERSTON

April 20 to June 3, 1979

Organized and presented at the Vancouver Art Gallery

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Cover: *Mad Meg in Victoria*, 1978, oil on panel, 549 x 610 cm, courtesy British Columbia Buildings Corporation, Victoria, B.C.

Introduction

Bill Featherston lives and maintains a studio in Squamish, BC, a mill and logging town forty-five miles north of Vancouver on Howe Sound, behind that spectacular jut of Coast Range that backdrops the city picture postcards. Since postcards take care of the landscape tolerably well, Bill paints people.

He's in Vancouver several days a week, teaching at the College of Arts or threatening the decorum of an otherwise generally-urbane (if-emergent) art community. He specializes in shaking up the esthetically tentative or pretentious and in keeping Anglo-Saxon a living language.

Featherston is a veteran of the lean, rough-and-tumble post-war, pre-Canada Council art scene that took him from Toronto to England and back to San Francisco and British Columbia (where he's assumed residence as a kind of senior provocateur).

Not much has changed in the rendering of social art since Coubet except subject. In this exhibition, Featherston's pictures are perfectly straightforward, although in Mad Meg in Victoria (cover), he has painted and drawn a mixture of historic, contemporary and imaginary people in a more surrealist grouping around Victoria's city hall.

Bill said whatever I chose to call his art, not to call it "social realism," so I won't, at any point. We didn't go into what he thought social realism was -whether the term represented to him the depiction of people living out oppressed-but-he-

roic lives, the use of non-esthetic subject matter (such as dumptrucks or demolition derby wrecks), or simply that it has been discredited as a style.

I'm not enthusiastic about the term either, because it covers such a disparate spectrum. We can agree that his paintings are social, because they involve people, almost without exception, who are doing something other than sitting for a portrait or life study. And they involve a high degree of realism (don't they, Bill?): and here we are, engaging in semantic blather.

Even more than semantic blather about art, I've decided that what Bill hates most of all is one reality that he is powerless to do anything about: it is the knowledge that most of life, for most people, most of the time is conditioned by compromise of the most insidious, chronic variety. We live in a society which, if anything, is built on that condition. As a result, there are few heroes and few absolute villains. Roughly half the paintings in this exhibition are about what British Columbians do for a living; the other half are about what they do for fun. You will also note that most of these people are men and that Squamish appears to be a very male-dominant community. Bill isn't making commentary on that fact, but it happens to be true.

I wouldn't call any of the people in these pictures oppressed, in the classic or Third World sense. They are generally competent and healthy individuals doing a vocation or avocation expertly and well, something that Bill admires.

By wage-price-spiral standards, they're doing all right, although admittedly, some of this work is damned dangerous. They are, like most of us, frequently compromised by education, economics and social demographics white beyond their control. Social Behaviour is in itself compromise. The appeal of what they do for fun (which, interestingly might be characterized as "anti-social behavior'...) whether as spectators or participants, is that it is virtually without compromise. Hockey, as most Canadians would have it, is not a sport. Sport is fair play; and fair play is compromise; and compromise is not what fans want more or: they want mayhem. It is bone and gristle and blood being rearranged over something as insignificant as a hard rubber puck. Played "well," it cannot be faked or compromised, and for all it's pointless trauma, it is real to people whose lives are grudgingly concessioned and predictably routine.

The demolition derby, another exclusively North American exercise in pure aggression (utilising that love-object of the typical North American psyche, the automobile) again fills the need for reality of a kind that cannot be delivered through artifice such as television situation comedy or top-40 recordings.

Whether engaging in these sports or identifying with the players, there is a sense of fulfillment with the players, there is a sense of fulfillment in hockey, logging sports and demolition derbies that run parallel to "art: on another plane. Such sports are frequently the ritualization of expressed and behaviours which have no other outlet or vehicle.

We see Featherston's own compromise in the commissions he has done in the last year for large corporations or the mural commissioned by the Provincial Government. The uses of corporate art are all too obvious, but it is important to realize that in agreeing to immortalize some aspect of industrial dynamism, Featherston can be pointed in about any direction and come up with a consistently Featherstonian statement, without descending into outright commercial art on the one hand, or socialist tracts on the other.

Like Highland games, logging sports involve the preservation of skills which are no longer used in the woods. The only thing, for instance, that would bring back the cross-cut saw is an oil embargo. But is it significant that Featherston has twice painted Ron Hartell (winner of countless logging sports events), to celebrate the fact that communities can invent games of skill to establish believable heroes in the face of faltering media credibility.

One thing that fascinates me about putting this exhibition together was trying to establish what Bill really thinks about these people. He is quick to point out what the exploitative industries are doing to this province, but what about the working-men who take part in ripping out the trees and even the mountains? (The fact is, there isn't one of us in BC that doesn't profit from this devastation, in terms of economic fall-out.) He sees them more as victims of circumstance, boredom, inflexibility than as co-conspirators. Sometimes they share blinding prejudices (as in local attitudes towards East Indians, a topic he still wants to

tackle), but he insists on seeing their positive qualities: their inventiveness, expressiveness (as in the paint jobs on those demo-derby cars) and their laudable directness.

The Seventies, if economically a bit tighter, have at least permitted people to dare to be just about anybody they think they are, and this adds immeasurably to the capacity to endure.

The bikers he portrays are not worthless layabouts. A working community the size of Squamish cannot afford or tolerate idle renegades. They are mistily mill-workers who choose to express their independence fraternally, astride machines on which they lavish everything. They are living social realism, living commentary on a culture that produced them and failed to substantially bend them to the level of regimentation considered dæge for bourgeois society. Their chosen form of psycho-drama, however, is only a slight variation on the more popular sports of a working-class community.

Mad Meg in Victoria is based on Bruegel's Dulle Griet, a wicked female personification of avarice out of Flemish folklore, painted in 1652. Featherston has picked this demented figure to dominate, Guilliver-fashion, the seat of government in what appears to be a speculation-ridden, boom-or-bust frontier society. He has mixed, historically and stylistically, the politicians and lawyers, the robber

barons and camp-followers, the builders, merchants, artists and poets (including a self-portrait), all oblivious of one another, in this dream world of "progress" or what passes for it in British Columbia. It also satirizes Victoria's pell-mell renovation of its downtown area to attract tourists while more serious problems (such as Canada's highest hepatitis rate, linked to an antiquated or non-existent sewerage system) lagged behind.

It is very important to Bill that he take his place as an artist and craftsman in his own community, on his own terms –something that is easier in Europe, where there is a natural respect for artists. This explains his commitment to re-ordering the activities of his friends and neighbours.

I would agree with him that old fashioned "social realism" is really dead or co-opted by political movements that turn it into rhetoric; or what it is perhaps better left to film or video. But I also believe that in his attempt to paint all of the salient features of life in a small community, he is telling a great deal more than he realizes, because he is so closely involved.

It is a question of not seeing the wood for the trees.

Ted Lindberg
Associate Curator VAG