

work as a critique of society on the brink of destruction, then Koop must establish a visible and direct controlling relationship with the paint itself, for how else are we to understand that we must take hold of our circumstances in order to prevent the unthinkable? In these canvasses, Koop seems to be watching her paint dry just as we observe the Europeans shouting. On the other hand, if randomness -chaos- is the point, the work can only be seen as a comment on the futility of denying the inevitable, with Koop as the most cynical of creators, and the viewer, is a helpless actor in a melodrama. Striking as they are, the tarps don't really work except in the most superficial -strategy- terms.

It is from the small framed acrylics that we actually get to learn about the tarpaulins. The same, and other images, are used here to altogether better effect. Coming from the tarpaulins, the condensation intensifies the images and makes these actually banal forms more mysterious than ever. These paintings assume dream/fantasy qualities as the forms appear to swell in relation to their cosmic environment (a hayroll occupies as much space in one picture as a factory in another), and the peculiarities of the lighting enhance the accompanying sensations. An erotic dimension is asserted by the simple, geometric forms - arch, goal, shaft, pole, wreath - which are placed on firm ground in deep space, and stands for a reminder of the life we stand to lose in the face of the becalmed disaster confronting us in the pictures. The unpretentious paintings, simply but thoughtfully made, express our plight with greater urgency and directness than the large-scale vagueness of the tarpaulins, and provide us with the best reason for not allowing the worst to happen; surely this is more in line with what Koop intends.

#### GOLDIE RANS

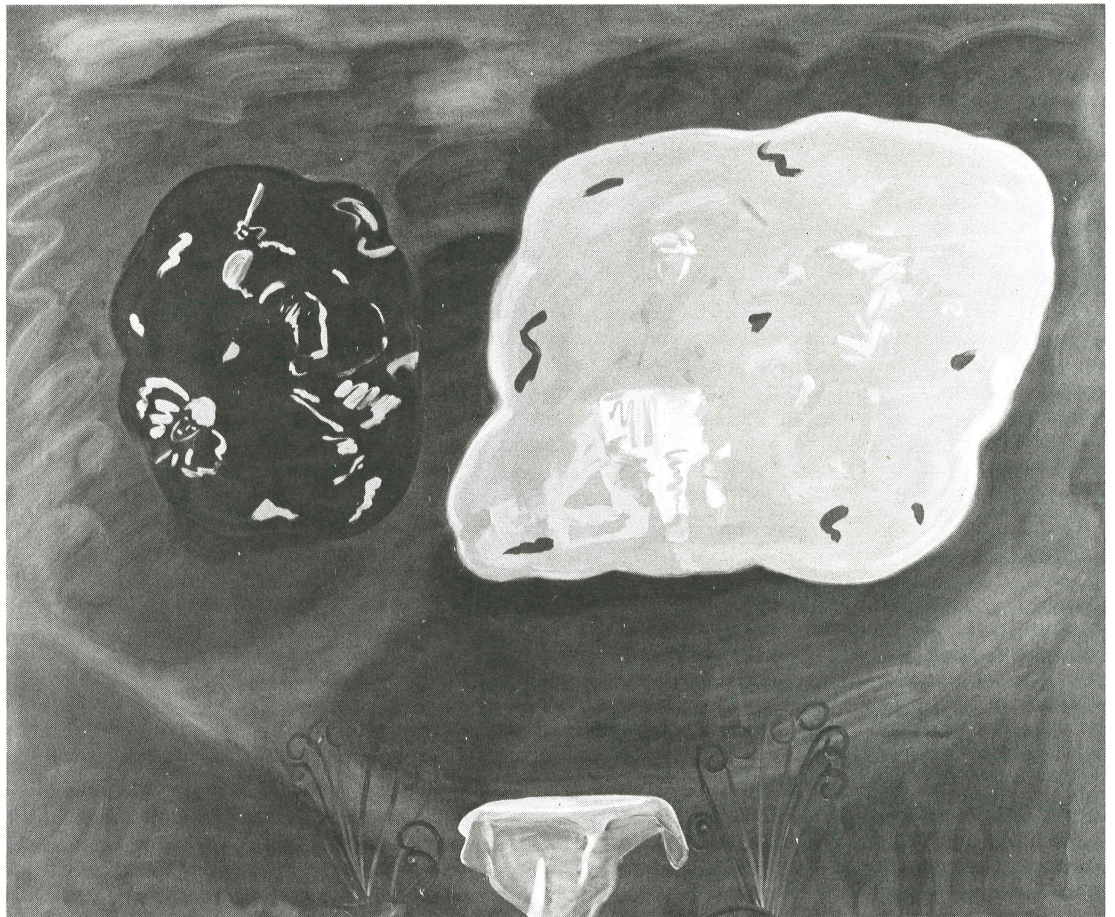
### FICTION

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto  
April 2 — May 30

After two decades of an "art of the real," and a century of the critique of representation, fiction carries an uncertain status. This is not as true for literature where fiction, naturally, is its legitimate category. Although fiction has been reduced to a textual play there, language's representational capacity is the ground of its construction. Fiction's status in an art that has been predominately material, formal and structural is a more recent aspiration, its entry into the space of art seems to have been prompted by the language orientation of conceptual art and the narrational structure and biographical references of performance art.

*Fiction* is the title, but not a classification, for the works in a travelling exhibition originating at the Art Gallery of Ontario, organized by Elke Town. The works by Ian Carr-Harris, General Idea, Mary Janitch and Shirley Wiitasalo are as divergent as their paths to their particular 'fictional' spaces of presentation. In the accompanying catalogue, Town does not define the term 'fiction' except generally within its literary connotations. A title, however, is a space of presentation and, hence, a representation. This lack of specificity within the domain of art and the failure to theorize the problematics of fiction (for instance, 'fiction' and 'representation' are not interchangeable terms; whereas a fiction does not need a referent, a representation does) only add to the fragmentary look of this exhibition. It is left to the viewer to gauge the nature of 'fiction' in each of the artists' works and to decide whether, truly fiction is the most important perspective. It is on the nature of each of the individual works then rather than on their fictional status, that consequently the exhibition stands or falls.

The objects and situation of Ian Carr-Harris' construction, *...across town...* (1981), maintain traces of the historical debate on literality, duration and theatricalization surrounding conceptual art. These sculptural and theoretical sources show the difficulty in arriving at a consensus



Shirley Wiitasalo, *Beautiful Garden*, 1981, oil on canvas, 152 x 183 cm photo courtesy: Carmen Lamanna Gallery

about 'fictional' works that arrive from different origins and derive from diverse strategies. In this instance, the sculptural and the fictional are brought together as a literal 'theatre' in which a play of desire is enacted. The separately joused, sequential system of lights, tape recorder and speakers that surround a bare platform standing for a segment of floor all together construct an apparatus for representing an absence. Through the flux of light and voices *across* the work's various elements, desire is represented and displaced moment by moment. Insubstantial light is that 'object' of past desire recalled by a woman's voice in the third audio segment and represented at the same time as a sweep of light across the empty stage. Voices and light circle that absence, that empty centre of representation.

The tape voices substitute for absent speakers, but they make something present through an act of speech. They do not simply circulate around this void: they are directed to an audience that activates, and in a sense operates, the piece. Whithin that situation and durational event - emphasized by the sequence of lights and separation of the voices in different speakers - the fiction, or rather Carr-Harris' piece, presents something beyond itself.

Fiction maintains limits, whereas representation complicates these confines through reference and thus implicates the viewer. Fiction presents itself in its most privileged instance within the frame of a painting and in turn, within the boundary of the museum. General Idea has chosen painting, and in particular the fictitious archaeological fragment, as the next stage of their collective enterprise. The painted fragment, posing as a museum restoration, is called *The Unveiling of the Cornucopia: A mural fragment from the room with the unknown function in the Villa dei Mistiri of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* (1982). But they have chosen 'painting' in terms of its contemporary signifier, and have emptied its 'content' and used the format for their own purposes. Those purposes, however, have more to do with a maintenance of General Idea's strategies within a changing art world than with the Pavillion itself. The fragment is 'placed

within' the Pavillion, but its function within that fictional 'system' is ambiguous and tenuous. (Obviously the Pavillion is no solid thing or pre-ordained and rigid strategy.) Calling it 'the room with the unknown function' only displays its formality as well as its use as material for a self-referential system, which makes the enterprise a balancing act caught in a mirror stage. By matching the ziggurat columns of this fake poodle-Pompeian style wall fresco (with reference to all the ziggurat configurations of the Pavillion) to the grid of restoration implies that any of their new work is always already inscribed within its own system. The Pavillion has become a trap. Of course, it is not a closed system since it is infinitely expandable. For the work to come to meaning, a supplement is necessary — in this case their catalogue contribution more than the pavillion as a 'whole' to date. This iconography by fiat — the spilled cocktail glasses, etc. — does not accept the constraints of viewing within the gallery which a fictional work seems to demand. (Within strict terms, the fictional work is not conceptual or constative.) Apart from its 'se-miotic' apparatus, presented as painting, and within those limits, the work does not succeed. It is good painting — merely the shell of painting. Those are the terms with which it has to be judged within its presentation here: hung on the wall of a public gallery without intervention of history or text.

For Mary Janitch, 'fiction' seems to indicate the indeterminate locale of an anticipated moment, with art acting as a means and place to call it forth rather than record it. In this work and incomplete, white latticed gazebo is flanked by a diorama of three large panels of overlaid sheets of watercolour blooms laced by streaks of pastel lines and handwritten words. Called *Psalm, three songs toward a summer sky* (1981), the 'toward' of the little implies that future orientation rather than the watercolour overlays indexing different memories or moments. The watercolours aspire to the mood and melodies of music (but in a clumsy way), with the process of their making showing the flux of a present, as much as a future, state. The gazebo, incomplete rather than in ruin, reinforces anticipation over memory. But it is uneasy in the space of the gallery, and



as a place of observation and anticipation, it is awkward in regards to the wall panels.

Shirley Wiitasalo's contribution to the exhibition is five paintings, although only four are listed in the catalogue. And it is that fifth, already shown in 1981, that disturbs the consistency of portrayal that makes the notion of fiction more applicable to her work than any other in the exhibition. For Wiitasalo does not present one work that is a constructed ensemble or that is conceptually or figuratively (i.e., metaphorically) referential. These are separate paintings, each with a simple, but distinct, focal image. That fifth — a canvas-size photo-emulsion image of the Reagan assassination attempt intruding into a private living-room — ties itself too closely to a discourse on media/ideological imposition. The rest of the paintings, presumed originally to stand together, are more sly and subtly shifting than analytical in their ideological suggestions; not pointed as a semiotic, but seductive in their simplicity as oil paintings. A nebulous seductiveness, in a sense, is the subject of these 'house and garden' paintings where subjectivity and irony mingle in projections, reflections and distortions. Within each of these paintings, figures float like clouds, non-verbal balloons or 'thought-forms'. In *Untitled* (1982), a pink house floats in the middle of a bifurcated yellow and turquoise field reflecting its status trappings as an imitation manor or estate house complete with quivering price in the black pool of its imaginary. In *Beautiful Garden* (1981), the dream turns sour: in the 'balloon' above one filigree garden chair we can make out through highlights one figure beating another, while similarly above the facing chair, a man servilely kneels behind a passing officer. The gouaches that accompany these images in the catalogue show Wiitasalo's pursuit of these moments of inner (and domestic) distortions of the imaginary, whether moments lingering in fantasy or disturbed in the sudden violence of paranoia. Her sophisticated means display the naive fictions within, not the critique of representations outside.

PHILIP MONK

## SHELAGH ALEXANDER

YYZ, Toronto  
May 10 — 29

A single photograph indexes the present within the formal limits of its frame. It presents that (formal) moment as a static, wordless mirror, heedless of duration or decay, of affect or statement. Sometimes that presence is diverted or delayed by language, as in a caption beneath a newspaper photograph, for instance, but words hardly ever encroach upon the image except in the slick images of advertising or its exact counterpart, semiotic critique. And if the photograph lends itself to narrative, it is through the moving image of film, or sequentially as the pages of a photo-book, never as a still image.

In the first part of Shelagh Alexander's *Hero*, a narrative, or more properly, a fable, is the means to move the viewer through the compilation and conflagration of imagery. Alexander calls this three part series of fourteen 30" x 40" panels "compilation photographs". In this process, selected images from different negatives are systematically printed on the photographic paper through a registration system that uses as many as twenty rubilith stencils per print. Text and drawing are treated to the same photographic production. Making their own space, and giving each of the three parts its own character, the images overlap, passing from panel to panel and composing horizontal sequences in the first two parts and a vertical progression in the third.

The impression of visual jumble in Part One is dispersed by the narrative which cues action to general figures of photographic reference and by an overall figurative composition — the drawn outline of the head of the "Beast". This part opens in an urban hell, specific to the viewer's own urban context, but apocalyptic. "Caught in the head-



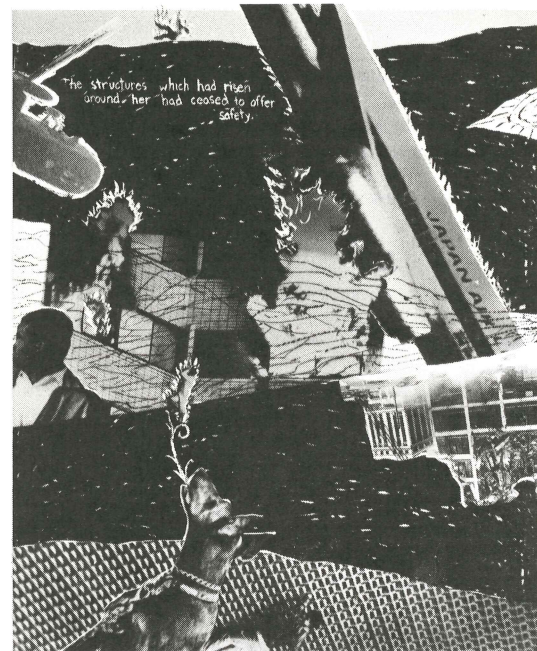
Shelagh Alexander, *Hero — Part 1*, 1982, compilation photographs, 5 panels 76 x 102 cm (second and third panels)

lights of a swiftly approaching car", the female protagonist is also destined for the mouth of the Beast as it is coincident with the triangular beam thrown by the headlights of the car. The mouth of the Beast is that consuming city: into the tenement and apartment-toothed mouth of the Beast, flaming bodies, crashing airplanes, crazed horses and burning dogs tumble.

From a common reality that has already been made figurative, in Part Two we are transported to a fabulous realm signalled by the "exotic" desert and classical ruins — a *mélange* of primitive religion and Dionysiac madness (spiral-dazed eyes of rearing horses) and Disneyland castles "built on the back of misery and death". Having seen the Beast for the first time and out of disgust for all those affected by it, she raises a kingdom "from the dust of destruction, built by those infected by the beast and kept in darkness beneath a palace." And so the horizontal orders these panels — the palace above the workers, and pyramids above a tunnel — with subterranean madness and slavery signifying the seeds of a class war.

By the end of this part, the series has become a narrative of the quest for individual wisdom, based on the allegory of the archetypal hero's quest and trial, as the "King", her father, casts his daughter into the "deepest hole" to learn wisdom for her human abuses. Here, in the ascending final panels, the princess is instructed by the Beast: "The mirror is the key, look into it and you will discover that it is merely a shallow grave. Look beyond it, and you will find a broad road which shall carry you far further than you have ever gone before." She discovers that road that sets her free as a sympathy and solidarity with the workers who built it beneath her palace.

This is not the happy end and simple narrative wish-fulfillment, for the headlights she discovers on this road return her to those in Part One. Part One now functions as the fourth part of the series, changing the interpretation of that narrative and offering a bifurcated ethical choice. This return is a hinge: having seen the Beast for the first time she chooses either its ways as the narrative at first implied in building her palace on the back of misery and death or she combats it ("I refuse to turn away again"). This complex return and bifurcation "saves" this fable from its naivety. The work operates as a multilevel narrative space with its context and temporal shifts from the commonplace to the fantastic/heroic and back again, returning the allegorical to action in everyday life: the circular structure returns us to the urban reality we know. The work can be divided into story and discourse levels in terms of both its narrative and photographic construction. The story level is of the order of the fable and of the found



or taken "to order" photographs which do not illustrate the text as much as create a ground for its interpretation. The discourse level is the structure of the narrative and the unique creation of photographic space specific to the techniques of compilation. Finally, the content finds its photographic expression which is a critique at the same time. The shallow grave of the mirror is formal photography; the road, photography's narrative path. What at first appeared a charming tale, in the risk of naivety, ends in being a complex expression and courageous statement.

PHILIP MONK

## AGIT-PROP

International Performance Art Series 1982  
Mercer Union, Toronto  
July 19 — August 9

It was unfortunate to give the performances in this international series the name (or the pretence of the name) *Agit-Prop* because now we must call the bluff of art and consider it primarily in those terms. Simply stated, the works are not and cannot be agitational propaganda under the formal conditions of presentation that the performances accept. *Agit-Prop* historically was a means to propagate the Bolshevik revolution among the proletariat and an illiterate peasantry after the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. For a short period, artists abandoned their studios and their work took form for the masses in theatre, street demonstration, film, posters, and the rolling billboards of agit-trains and ships. The social conditions of revolutionary Russia and failed pre-revolutionary Germany (pre-1933) that urgently pressed these forms and leftist artists into service, however, do not exist today in a period of victorious capitalism. If the revolutionary Russian poet and agit-propagandist Vladimir Maiakovsky could say that "The revolution of substance — Socialism, Anarchism — is unthinkable without the revolution of form — Futurism", today, the reverse — formal innovation — does not lead to politics or revolution. For today, if we had to find the formal equivalents to a pervasive capitalism (what capitalism allows and what legitimates it), we could only name semiotics and the "critical" art work that bases itself on this analysis.

The title of this series directs attention to politics. Without this title, we could not say that these performances were