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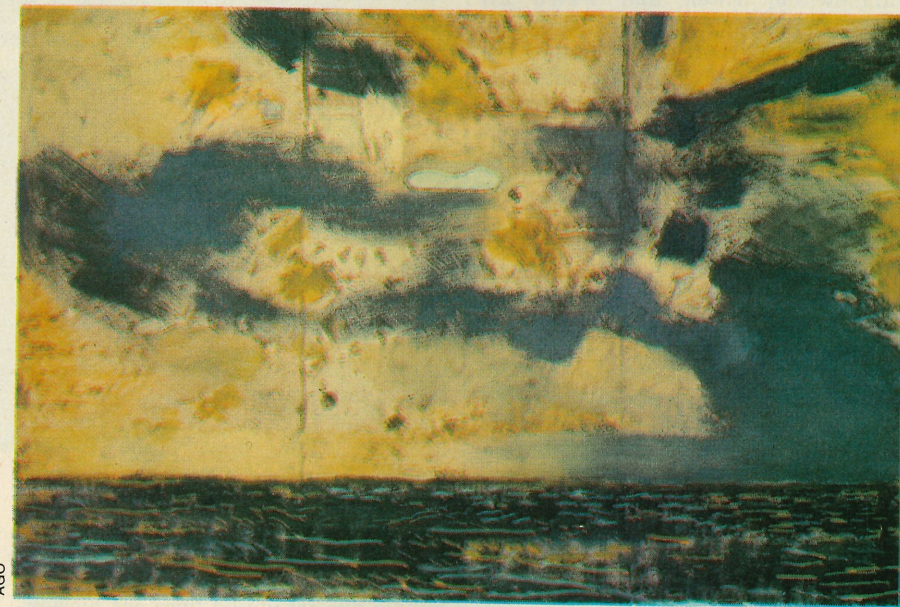
**Art**

# A '70s selection for export only

By Philip Monk

In art, Canada's balance of trade is in deficit: in the shadow of the United States' propaganda machine and Europe's awesome heritage, Canadian art is a faceless stranger. To redress this imbalance, to define what is Canadian in Canadian art, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) has assembled *10 Canadian Artists in the 1970s*, an exhibition of contemporary art headed for a nine-month European tour. With only a brief stop in Toronto before visiting Denmark, West Germany and Luxembourg, the art obviously is not for domestic consumption: "for export only," its packaging reads. It is another flank in Canada's overseas campaign, following a successful video-art presentation at the Venice Biennale this summer and a large contingent of young artists sent to the Paris Biennale this month. But just what Europeans will learn from this misleading exhibition is hard to say. Unfortunately, the AGO's sad mixture of the accomplished and the redundant will not help this new wave; its conservative lag hardly represents what is new on the home front.

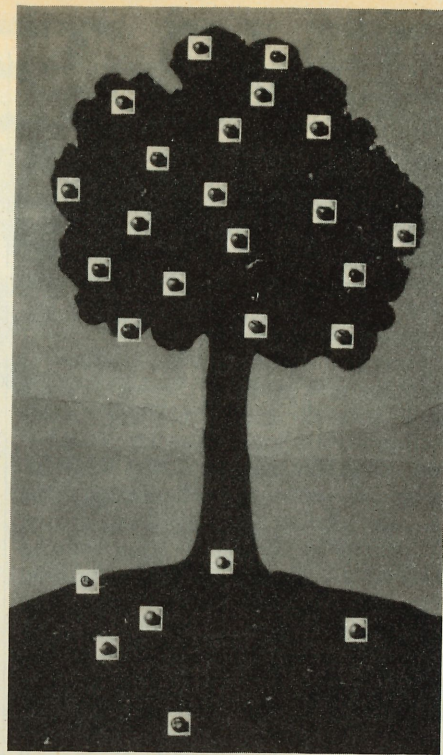
Claimed to be the art of the '70s and an up-to-date report on some of Canada's major artists, the show could more correctly be titled *10 Canadian Artists Favored by Roald Nasgaard*. Now chief curator of the AGO, Nasgaard has a taste for painting and sculpture that creates a dialogue between art and viewer in the "space and time of interacting." That space and time for most gallery-goers may be, however, a walk away from the art. In the past, AGO viewers have wondered why the frames had no canvases or have strained at surfaces with no images. Once again, in



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this inventory, the work is so minimal it is often overlooked.

But the emperor does have clothes. With painting and sculpture that seems to verge on the invisible, never has the expression "use your eyes" meant so much; in fact, it is *the* meaning. The paintings of Guido Molinari, the sole Quebecer, come into vision like a camera comes to focus. Initially, these sombre pieces melt black holes in the wall where they hang. But in time, and with patience, their unyielding surfaces divide into two or three vertical bands of nuanced tones, and a space emerges in front of the viewer. Molinari displaces traditional attention from an image and space in the painting to the movement of the viewer in front of it and the light on its surface. So does Ron Martin, whose paintings with their thick, lava-like black acrylic surfaces



'Van Gogh's Room' by Favro (top left); Baxter's 'An Apple Tree' (top right); Ewen's 'Cloud Over Water': sad mixture

emit a gloaming light in a life of their own. The viewers must give this art, and themselves, a chance.

Similarly, the sculptors in the exhibition throw the ball to the viewers, asking them to move around the heavy, geometric masses by David Rabinowitch or the aerodynamic shapes by his brother, Royden Rabinowitch. Both sculptors organize the elements of their elegant low-lying steel forms in a way that the viewers must move back and forth, checking clues and following sight lines, to reconstruct the sculpture—complex spatial puzzles.

Less austere than these ambitious pieces, beautiful in their own way, are the innovative landscapes of Paterson



# Angst in the pants

Ewen. Ewen makes his unorthodox "canvases" of huge sheets of plywood, which he scores and gouges with a router, adorns with pieces of metal and roughly paints. They have all the grandeur of elemental forces—the grooves transformed into impressionist crests of waves or windblown trails of sunlit clouds. It is as if Tom Thomson's *West Wind* was rerouted through the cosmic scale of Turner.

Murray Favro gives traditional painting new scale in the form of his walk-in mock-up of Van Gogh's Arles bedroom. Fun-house curiosity is not the concern of this inventor-artist-tinkerer; he exactly constructs the exaggerated into the sloping bed and tilting chairs. So precise is his construction that he projects a reproduction of the painting onto the tableau, further confounding the gap between the two and three dimensions of painting and sculpture, and playfully reversing the tendency to turn an object into flat image.

Curiously, Martin, Royden and David Rabinowitch, Ewen and Favro all worked in London, Ont., in the early '70s, and also are all represented by the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto. Lamanna is such a pivotal figure in the development of new Canadian art that his gallery has become as important as any public institution. In fact, curators must avoid the temptation of composing an exhibition solely of Lamanna artists. Lamanna himself confesses that the show is "confused and misleading"—and he is right. Iain Baxter's silly ideas and sloppy technique are simply embarrassing. Compared to Favro's mixing of media, the Vancouver artist's collaging Polaroids and painting might pass in an art school, but not on the international circuit. Gary Kennedy's echoing humor from Halifax is also wearing thin. Exhibiting the crates in which the art will be packaged is too much an inside joke with a malicious edge. The major-name artists in the exhibition are represented by tired pieces. Michael Snow, who had a large show in Europe last year, is rebounding with his most recent and poorest work: in his return to painting, the master's hand shakes. And Jack Bush, the one artist the Europeans demanded, is the odd man out with his muddy color-field paintings, and is not well served by the selection of his weaker later work.

Perhaps it is lucky that a number of European museums refused the exhibition. Half the choices resonate quality, but to halt conservatively at a point somewhere in the '70s and to choose work past its prime timidly eclipses all the new achievements and vitality of the Canadian scene. It is too bad an exhibition that satisfies few at home will represent Canadian art overseas. ☼



MIDDLE AGE CRAZY  
Directed by John Trent

Dern: in the cocktail hour of his life

**W**e meet Bobby Lee (Bruce Dern) just as he's hurtling over the big hump of 40. His wife, Sue Ann (Ann-Margret), is tickled pink he's able to provide her with five "bingos" every night; she's so consumed with sex that she fails to notice his mid-life crisis. At Bobby Lee's birthday party his whole family—his wife, his son, his parents—talk to him via his present, a Betamax, each eagerly pushing the sore point of his age. Feeling trapped, Bobby Lee begins to daydream (of owning a Porsche, of having an affair with a Dallas Cowboy cheerleader, of saying goodbye to building taco stands for a living). When his father dies, Bobby Lee goes middle-age crazy and lives out his fantasies, but returns to the straight and narrow—having strayed. The moral: stand by your man (woman, child, mother, dog, taco stand).

The first thing to note about this Canadian-made movie is that it is a comedy. Inspired by the Jerry Lee Lewis song, *Middle Age Crazy* is an idea given the nod, but never really fleshed out. It has conviction, but not enough to suggest that Bobby Lee's malaise is anything more serious than the spectacle of a man with angst in his pants. In attempting to show the crassness surrounding him, the movie resorts to crass means: there's so much foul language and sexual innuendo it becomes tiresome, enough to make you feel prudish. The satire of both Texas and California lifestyles uses buckshot where a BB gun would have sufficed: the tone of

the movie seems to be, "May I have a gold star for noticing these things?" Dern and Ann-Margret are fine, personable actors, they make their scenes together work and are even moving at times. Unhappily, they're trapped in something that wants to gorge itself on cake and say how awful it tastes at the same time.

Lawrence O'Toole

## Sweating out the small stuff

THE KIDNAPPING OF THE PRESIDENT  
Directed by George Mendeluk

**I**f people are forsaking movies for TV, it's because they can find as good (or better) entertainment as *The Kidnapping of the President* (or any number of current movies) on the small screen. This Canadian-made adaptation of Charles Templeton's novel is mildly engrossing, competently done. U.S. President Hal Holbrook is nabbed in Toronto by Third World terrorist Miguel Fernandes wearing a bomb, and then stored in a booby-trapped security van. The terrorists make their demand for \$100 million; stolid secret service man William Shatner tries to get him out; Vice-President Van Johnson and wife Ava Gardner argue about what to do; the rest of the immediate world swears. However, there is no need for anybody to bring an extra bottle of Ban roll-on.

L.O.T.