Split-Level Paradise

Simon Glass | Ed Pien | Thelma Rosner

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Curated by Carol Podedworny

art gallery

The exhibition Split-Level Paradise, featuring the work of contemporary Canadian artists Simon Glass, Ed Pien and Thelma Rosner, marks a significant moment in the history of the University of Waterloo Art Gallery. Curated by Carol Podedworny, the exhibition is the culmination of her tenure as Director/Curator of the UWAG, a tenure that came to a close with her recent appointment as Director of the McMaster Museum of Art in Hamilton, Ontario. Under her directorship (from 1999-2005) the UWAG made significant professional progress, expanding its resources and its reputation as a centre of critical thought. In addition, with the renovation of a 4000 square foot exhibition space in East Campus Hall, the gallery physically grew, developing the capabilities to stage major exhibitions of contemporary art in a variety of media. Split-Level Paradise, with its combination of drawing, painting, photography and installation work brought together within a considered curatorial framework, is therefore, a highly appropriate summation of Carol's program at UWAG.

As the newly appointed Director/Curator of UWAG, I am very pleased to be able to begin the exhibition and publishing program under my watch with this project. Each of the artists in this exhibition have consistently produced significant bodies of work and the curatorial thematic that has brought them together in *Split-Level Paradise* is both enriching and challenging. It is an important contribution to the culture of innovation, research and scholarship that distinguishes the University of Waterloo and will continue to define the UWAG program.

I would like to thank Simon Glass, Ed Pien and Thelma Rosner for their contributions to this exhibition. It has been a pleasure to have the opportunity to work with them in support of Carol and to present their work to the University of Waterloo community. I am grateful to Carol Podedworny for her commitment to this project with its solid curatorial and written contributions. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank her for doing such a wonderful job during her tenure at UWAG. She has set a high standard and developed an organization that can continue to progress, challenge and change. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the significant support of the Ontario Arts Council to this exhibition and publication.

Andrew Hunter UWAG Director/Curator

Split-Level Paradise:

Simon Glass, Ed Pien, Thelma Rosner

Carol Podedworny,
Director and Curator, McMaster Museum of Art,
Guest Curator, Summer 2006

History and social context bolster the readings we are able to bring to the work of art: our own as well as that of the cultural milieu within which we thrive. Yet, what is the value of the work of art in this sociopolitical framework? Does it have a tangible significance, something that affects the day-to-day? Since the early 1980s, it has been argued that art and the museum cannot deny the political significance of their roles in society. In Canada, the very public events surrounding exhibitions such as the Royal Ontario Museum's "Out of Africa" and the Glenbow Museum's "The Spirit Sings," are profound examples of the actively social and political place of art in society. Controversy surrounding each exhibition resulted in very real alterations to museums and their interactions with communities worldwide. But what of a work of art? Can a work of art change the world? Can it effect social change? Is it the function of the work of art to comment on the world? Can art influence the direction of culture? Can it do this without being pendantic, moralistic

or prescriptive? In 2004/2005, Carnegie International Curator, Laura Hoptman pointed out that:

The aim of elucidating some sort of meaning from our world retains the musty odor of the Enlightenment and particularly of a kind of 19th-century essentialism, which in Europe and the United States took forms ranging from a smug Social Darwinism to an idealistic pragmatism. Such anachronistic notions as "universal values" quite rightly cause skepticism today when applied to a cultural topography that now encompasses the entire planet. However, the idea that this understanding precludes the admissibility of more profound investigations is equally of a moment – which has past.1

Hoptman does not hesitate to conclude her wellresearched artistic musings with the prescriptive that the works she has gathered from around the globe for the 54th Carnegie International exhibition "investigate the "ultimates" of what it is to be a human being on this earth right now."² The missives from which her thematic foci develop, and by which she has grouped the prolific and impressive work she has gathered together, include: empirical observation, scientific deduction, ideological framing, faith, metaphysical speculation and, mythmaking.³ These are themes she saw globally and whose prevalence beckoned examination.

Split-Level Paradise gives "faith" a more thorough read. The project is not to reflect upon that which is instituted, that is, in the sense of formalized religions. Rather, the task is to ponder a notion of "faith" in the present period, that is in terms of locating that which drives the human spirit to struggle to live, create and reflect upon that which matters. Certainly, it seems that the concept of "faith" in the 21st-century has expanded. No longer the sole purview of organized religion, faith encompasses a tumbler full of musings among which fall knowledge, hope, loss and doubt. What cultural shifts have sparked such themes?

Kingwell describes the close of the 20th-century and the beginning of the 21st as marked by catastrophe. He notes that, "Almost every century since the 1100s, at least in the West, [has] brought increased anxiety, expressed as both dread and desire, at its close." There is plenty of evidence to support the view that the world is coming to an end at the dawn of the 21st-century: as Kingwell notes, "crumbling traditions, social hostility, environmental collapse. Cynicism, lawlessness, disorder. Natural disasters like floods, earthquakes and hurricanes." As well as, "generally accepted signs of apoca-

lypse: bad rulers, civil discord, war, drought, famine, plague, comets, sudden deaths of prominent persons and an increase in general sinfulness."6 All we need to do is turn to any contemporary media forum to know how true Kingwell's observations are. Global terrorism, the threat of WW III, new and heartier diseases, amongst numerous other "warning signs," regularly let us know that the current moment is fraught with unease. Kingwell's Dreams of Millennium, (1995), while identifying the zeitgeist of the closing and opening era's mindset, also remarks on human kinds subsequent search for order, calm and rationale amidst the disarray. In and around the year 2000, the tendency has been to search for answers in new age philosophies, at paranormal conferences and in UFO's. In previous eras, among other answers, people often turned to organized religion.

In her recent work, *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience*, (2001), Queen's University art History Professor Lynda Jessup, identifies activities in the European art world at the turn from the 19th to the 20th-centuries. Her research on the social and political influences on artistic production of this period suggest that artists such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, Monet, Eudel, Nordstrom, and others were searching for something to explain and balance their view of a world in turmoil. Jessup describes their activity as "antimodern," defining that term as, "the recoil from an "overcivilized" modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual existence." She explains:

The term antimodernism is used to refer to the pervasive sense of loss that often co-existed in

the decades around the turn of the century along with an enthusiasm for modernization and material progress. ... It describes what was in effect a critique of the modern, a perceived lack in the present manifesting itself not only in the sense of alienation, but also in a longing for the types of physical or spiritual experience embodied in utopian futures and imagined pasts.⁸

Jessup's observations about activity in the late 19th-century European art world, support Kingwell's thesis that in "the end times," people will turn to religion and other sources of perceived "faith" to explain the era: whether as Armageddon or Utopia. In our own millennial era, art and cultural practice also tend to confirm Kingwell's research.

For instance, with her selections for the 54th Annual Carnegie International exhibition, Hoptman notes a general global tendency in recent art practice to consider answers to "burning questions," or "ultimates." Hoptman describes "the ulitmates," as "a series of interrelated subjects considered unknowable, including the nature of free will, immortality, the existence of God, and the extent of the universe, to name a few."9 Hoptman notes that though these questions have been on the minds of the public and the press, they have not played a significant role in the cultural discourse of the past 30 years. Hoptman muses,

As Terry Eagleton has recently observed, cultural theory "has been shamefaced about love, biology, religion and revolution, largely silent about evil, reticent about death and suffering, dogmatic about

essences, universals and foundations, and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness." In art, grappling with such grand ideas as God, free will, immortality and ethics was a stock in trade throughout history. During the past 20 years, however, an abiding interest in the most prosaic aspects of daily life has served as a strategy for making art relevant to a broader, less elite audience. 10

While Hoptman acknowledges our present, "undeniable taste for the banal," she states that her observations have proven that this nevertheless, doesn't quash our need for art that wrestles with life's fundamental mysteries." What do these mysteries look like? How do contemporary artists develop processes and practices to define, in thematic and formal ways, the musings that might reflect millennial ponderings?

Brandon Taylor, in defining the "taste" of millennial art in his book, Contemporary Art Since 1970, (2005), confirms Kingwell's, Jessup's and Hoptman's observations about the context within which such work arises. He notes that the transitional year, 2000, brings millennial angst with it, thanks to: Western capitalism, Post colonialism, the rapid expansion of electronic information networks, the spread of global capital, the rise of Asia, and an Eastern European Renaissance. 12 Taylor sees these upheavels revealed in art work through the use of new technologies - moving image, multi-screen projections, multi-channel installations with spatial complexity, auditory and visual data and thematically, with chaos theory - as well as by a sense of disorder, startling randomness, absurdity, alienation, dada-like: chaos combined with a sense of the historical and social world.

Glass, Pien and Rosner are not of the new technology, chaotic and random arm of current practice, rather their intentions reflect a milieu of "dada-like chaos combined with a sense of the historical and social world." ¹³

The works of art in Split-Level Paradise: Glass's silver prints; Pien's installation; and Rosner's paintings, were all created in and around the year 2001. They each seem to speak to the interests of Kingwell, Hoptman, Jessup and Taylor in that they mark an end-time with objects of intense, even "spiritual," beauty that nevertheless record that which might be terrifying and devastating. That there is something decidedly "religious" about all of the work: God, the Garden and the Spanish Inquisition, is undeniable and appears to echo the observations that Hoptman makes about work that speaks to the current moment; Taylor has made about art since 1994; and Jessup has recorded from the work produced in the late 19th-century. Yet, the intentions of Glass, Pien and Rosner seem not to be about religion at all, but rather about something more fundamental than that: about the relations of wo/men and cultures, of the foundations of culture and society, about the kind of thinking and action that would - like the idea of religion - present a record of origins, a path with choices, the notion of free-will, and so on. In this sense, Glass, Pien and Rosner seem to echo an anti-modern tendency with thoughts of - not so much critiquing modernity (but rather in their time, post-modernity and its overtheorizing) - as addressing anti-modernism's concern with, and expression of, "a longing for the types of physical and spiritual experience embodied in utopian futures and imagined pasts."14

Simon Glass' work in the exhibition is a series of silver prints entitled The Thirteen Attributes of God, (2001). The photographs in the series "picture" the thirteen attributes of God. These are found, written in Hebrew script, at the bottom of each image (for a listing of the 13 attributes, see page nine, the "List of Works"). The images are mostly details of various parts of the body that imply sensory experience: for instance, mouths, eyes, ears, noses, and so on. They are alternatively, images of dead birds, and as such are representations of mortality. These breath-taking images are juxtaposed with Hebrew script that spells out the attributes: some of which are the "unutterable" names of God; and in other instances, kindness, generosity, mercifulness, and so on. The attributes are invoked on Yom Kippur the Jewish Day of Atonement - and express a fervent bid for forgiveness. In Glass' photographs, the ironic positioning of text and image, leaves us with a very tangible sense of human loss, of the passing of belief and the ascension of doubt. The revelation here is not about over-coming something but rather of transcending it. As Glass remarks, "experiencing the real world as a source of healing."15

In Ed Pein's installation, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, (2001), the artist references a famous painting of the same name by 16th-century artist, Heironymous Bosch. Pien's work is a large, human-scale environment or stage-set into which the viewer can enter and engage. Created out of hand-made paper, the garden is extravagant with washes of vibrant colour and alive with images of creatures and people and amalgams of both, all drawn in Pien's dynamic, gestural line. Beginning with a bird creature that recalls Bosch's *Garden*, Pien

extends the narrative in his contemporary garden with figures that exhibit a "joyful romp, free play and the spontaneity of the human spirit." ¹⁶ Unlike Bosch's image of warning, Pien "eschews morality to explore ways of liberating ourselves." ¹⁷ Pien's bodies are politicized, torn between desire and repulsion. They celebrate sexuality, pleasure, sensuality and desire. As a result, Pien's *Garden* is a place to "undermine existing dogmas and liberate [us from] boundaries and limitations." ¹⁸ This approach to what, in Bosch's day was a moralistic tome, mixes Christian and Eastern influences, and changes the message from one of struggle to that of empowerment.

Andalusia and Testimony reference each other, providing the "before" and "after" of a traumatic period in human history. In Andalusia, Rosner presents seven canvases, the top and bottom of which are lined with extensive ornate and colourful patterning. Each "banner" area is labeled with the word for the foodstuff featured in the centre of the canvas. The labeling may be in Arabic or Hebrew. Andalusia recalls a period in medieval Spanish history when Jews, Muslims and Christians lived in relative peace. The period (c. 700-1400 AD) was marked by fruitful exchange and by a flowering of cultural and artistic production. The food - fruits and vegetables - pictured in each canvas refer to the cultural significance of food: what is eaten, how it is prepared and when it is eaten along with the memories associated with these meals and events. Rosner's paintings recall the finesse of Spanish Baroque still-life painters of the 17th-century, such as Cotan and Zurbaran. With this lineage in mind, Andalusia references a history of images that intentionally comment on the passage of time in a life, and like Pien's Bosch, offer moralistic direction to their viewers. Yet, like Pien, Rosner's art historical reference is meant neither didiactically nor moralistically but rather has been turned on its head, combining both the facts and senses of faith, resulting in an articulation of the significance of culture and cultural continuance rather than religious adherence.

Testimony is a series of nine mirror images, again of various foods. It is the "Conflict" chapter of Andalusia's "Peace." One mirror image leans against the wall, the other lies on the floor. In these works of oil and wax, the colour of Anadalusia has been drained from the paper. What we are left with is barren and dry, shards of clay, possibly from broken plates and serving dishes, scattered about the images of food. Testimony refers to the 15th-century, to the Spanish Inquisition and to the demise of the peaceable relations between religions in Andalusia. People of all religious persuasions were given the option of leaving or converting to Catholicism. Those who did not become conversos or converts - had to leave or suffer the consequences. Testimony implies the fate of Jewish families who chose to stay, to be "Catholic Christians" in public, and Jewish in private. The food images refer to eating habits that subsequently revealed to one's neighbours, the religious persuasion of their participants and resulted in persecution. Andalusia and Testimony reveal the cultural and social history of food, and stand as descriptive stilllives. Yet, they are not used solely in a traditional sense - as evidence of death and decay - but are also used as "imagery that confronts the idea of violence and death with representations that are pre-occupied with desire to retain what is living."19

In Dreams of Millennium, Kingwell remarked, "each age must produce for its own consumption, a vision of what the future will hold."20 Glass, Pien and Rosner possess their own reasons for creating the narratives they have. The Attributes, the Garden, two moments in history; are personal, social, cultural and most profoundly perhaps, subjective. The processes of production rely on precedents as well as innovation. The implications are paradigmatic and speak of history and remembrance, hope and doubt, mortality and renewal. "Faith" was perhaps not the artists' concern, or certainly not their principle concern, when the works were initiated. In the context of the present moment, with the example of their work in hand, their practice nonetheless warrants discussion within a millennial frame wherein, as Taylor notes, "the

new global order is in reality nothing but disorder."21

If we come to the work of art thinking about that activity as fundamentally social, we enable the viewer – regardless of who they are – to come to, and go away from – the work of art with something new in hand. What is "new" may be academic, social, political or cultural. Whatever it might be, it is in many ways a contribution to their experience of the world they live in. In examining the notion of "faith" – or something akin to it, but perhaps indefinable as such – in the work of Glass, Pien and Rosner, *Split-Level Paradise* ponders art's current social calling and relevance. It brings to mind responsibility and the shaping of culture, and compels one to wonder, as did Kingwell in 2000, "How do we create the world we want, rather than a world that just happens to us?"²²

Notes

- 1. Hoptman, Laura. "Curatorial Statement," 54th Annual Carnegie International Exhibition, Web-Based. Pittsburg, Pennsylvania: Carnegie Museum, 2004/2005.
- 2. I.b.i.d., 2004.
- 3. I.b.i.d., 2004.
- 4. Kingwell, Mark. *Dreams of Millennium:* Report from a Culture on the Brink. Toronto: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1995, p. 9.
- 5. I.b.i.d., 1995, p. 10.
- 6. I.b.i.d., 1995.
- 7. Jessup, Lynda. *Antimodernism & Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001, p. 3.

- 8. I.b.i.d., 2001.
- 9. Hoptman, I.b.i.d., 2004.
- 10. I.b.i.d., 2004.
- 11. I.b.i.d., 2004.
- 12. Taylor, Brandon. *Contemporary Art:* Art Since 1970. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005.
- 13. I.b.i.d., 2005, pp. 215-216.
- 14. Jessup, 2001, p. 3.
- 15. Interview with the Artist, May 2006.
- 16. Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art. *Gathering Shades: Catherine Heard & Ed Pien*. Catalogue to accompany an exhibition with essay by Corinna Ghaznavi. Toronto, ON: MOCCA, 2002.

- 17. I.b.i.d., 2002.
- 18. I.b.i.d., 2002.
- 19. McIntosh Gallery. Seen & Unseen: Drysdale, Rosner, Vaandering. Catalogue to accompany an exhibition. London, ON: MacIntosh Gallery, UWO, 2003.
- 20. Kingwell, 1995, p. 3.
- 21. Taylor, 2005, p. 224.
- 22. Kingwell, Mark. *The World We Want: Virtue, Vice & Good Citizen*. Toronto: Penguin Books Canada Limited, 2000, p. 206–207.

Simon Glass

The Thirteen Attributes of God, 2001 silver prints 20 x 24 inches each

The Thirteen Attributes, individually titled: Lord ... Lord ... God ... merciful ... and gracious ... slow to anger ... and filled with kindness ... and truthful ... extends kindness to the 1000th generation ... forgives iniquity ... and transgressions ... and sin ... and cleanses ...

Ed Pien

The Garden of Earthly Delights, 2001 (small version) drawing on glassine, installation circular piece, 20 feet in diameter, 12 feet high

Thelma Rosner

Andalusia, 2001–2002 Oil on canvas (seven canvases in total) 6 x 15 feet

Testimony, 2000–2002
Oil, handmade paper, cold wax, clay & acrylic
(nine pairs on handmade paper with clay fragments)
23 x 96 x 36 inches in total





SIMON GLASS The Thirteen Attributes of God: God ...



SIMON GLASS The Thirteen Attributes of God: and cleanses ...



SIMON GLASS The Thirteen Attributes of God: and sin ...





ED PIEN The Garden of Earthly Delights detail





ED PIEN The Garden of Earthly Delights detail









SIMON GLASS is a visual artist living and working in Toronto. He trained as a photographer and visual artist at the Ontario College of Art and graduated in 1983. He completed an M.A. in Media and Communications at the European Graduate School in 2005.

Throughout the 1990s Glass' work addressed themes of the Holocaust of WWII, loss, belief, doubt and anthropomorphic ideas of God – all through the lens of Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah. In these works photographic imagery, both archival and original, was combined with biblical and liturgical Hebrew. More recent work has examined biblical Hebrew in the context of the philosophy of language and translation theory.

Glass' work has been exhibited widely in group and solo exhibitions throughout Canada and internationally. He is the recipient of numerous awards from the Toronto Arts Council, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts. Glass teaches photography at the Ontario College of Art and Design and in the Art and Art History Program of the University of Toronto at Mississauga/Sheridan College.

ED PIEN emigrated from Taiwan to Canada with his family in 1969. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Western Ontario in 1982 and his Master of Fine Arts degree from York University in 1984.

Pien has exhibited in venues that include SPACE Gallery. London: Rodman Hall, St. Catharines: Centre A, Vancouver (2006); the Museum of Contemporary Art. Monterrey, Mexico; Robert McLaughlin Art Centre, Oshawa; Robert Birch Gallery, Toronto; Cambridge Galleries; Pierre-François Art Contemporain, Montreal (2005); School of Esmerald, Centro Nacional de las Artes, Mexico City; Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston; Room, Rotterdam; Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT: Pinacoteca. Provinciale di Potenza, Italy; Musée des Beaux Arts, Montreal; Galerie Maurits van de Laar, Den Haag; Ex-Convento del Carman, Guadalajara, Mexico; (2004); Goethe Institute, Berlin; Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge; Gallery Alexander Ochs, Berlin (2003); Biennale de Montreal, Montreal; Middlesbrough Art

Gallery, the UK; Bishop's University Art Gallery, Lennoxville; Aspace, Toronto (2002): The Canadian Culture Centre, Paris; MOCCA, Toronto: Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery: Kamloops Art Gallery: L'oeil de Poisson, Quebec; Gallery 101, Ottawa (2001); Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver; The Drawing Centre, New York City (2000); W139, Amsterdam; Oboro, Montreal; The Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver; (1998); The New Paradise, Taipei (1997); YYZ, Toronto; Langage Plus, Alma (1996); The Art Gallery of Hamilton (1991): Justina M. Barnike Gallery, Toronto (1989); The Embassy Cultural House, London (1988); Oakville Galleries (1987); Mercer Union, Toronto (1985).

The artist has participated in residencies that include the Canada Council Paris Studio, Paris; Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff; Koerner Visiting Artist Program, Queens University, Kingston; Bizart, Shanghai; and the Canada Council London Studio, London.

He is an Associate Professor of Visual Studies at the University of Toronto. THELMA ROSNER is an artist living in London Ontario. She received an undergraduate degree in Honours Philosophy and English, from the University of Toronto. Some years later she enrolled as a student in the Visual Arts Department at the University of Western Ontario, where Paterson Ewen was her teacher and mentor. Her education also includes thematic and self-directed residencies at the Banff Center for the Arts.

Thelma Rosner's early work was related to her own response to Feminist issues. More recently, her work has dealt with her Jewish identity, and more generally, the relationships of Jews to other religious groups, particularly Muslims. Her works entitled 'Andalusia' refer to the period in mediaeval Spain, which is described as a 'golden age' for all three major religions. Her recent digital prints deal with connections and differences between contemporary Israelis and Palestinians.

This year, Rosner's work has been seen in solo exhibitions in Toronto and London Ontario, and in Denver Colorado. She has exhibited in Canada, the USA and England. Her work is in the collection of the Canada Council Art Bank, the University of Western Ontario, and John Labatt Ltd., among others.

At various stages in her career, Thelma Rosner has received generous support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. She is very grateful for grants recently received from both. CAROL PODEDWORNY Guest Curator, holds Masters Degrees in Museum Studies (University of Toronto) and Art History (York University). She is presently the Director/Curator of the McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton. From 1999 through 2006, Podedworny was the Director/Curator of the University of Waterloo Art Gallery. Podedworny's curatorial interests focus on contemporary Canadian art and curatorial and museum practice. Podedworny lives in Kitchener and works in Hamilton, Ontario.

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September 15 – October 19, 2006 University of Waterloo Art Gallery

UWAG Director/Curator:

Andrew Hunter

GUEST CURATOR:

Carol Podedworny

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