



ALL PHOTOS BY ASHLEY CAMARA, SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Testimony, by Thelma Rosner, is on display at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery.

Celebrating chaos

UW art gallery features work of three contemporary Canadian artists who have their fingers raised and are gauging the winds of change

BY ROBERT REID
RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO
Throughout history, beginnings of new centuries have encapsulated the sense of endings. As a result, historical events occurring at the dawn of new centuries have been invested with an apocalyptic doom, dread and despair that far exceed the socio-political circumstances and consequences of the events themselves.

Matthew Arnold captures this terrible angst in *Dover Beach*:
*And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
Where ignorant armies clash by night*
This sense of ending is exacerbated when the new century heralds a new millennium — as is evident from events that have taken place since 2000.

Wars pitting world religions against one another, the feared proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the escalation of terrorism culminating in 9/11 are three of numerous examples of events that remind us of Yeats' lines in *The Second Coming*:

*Things fall apart/the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*
Artists not only respond to this sense of ending as witnesses, they seek to find meaning in seemingly random chaos.

This search for meaning is not only a moral pursuit, but a spiritual pursuit, often enacted outside the confines of institutional religion.

Guest curator Carol Podedworny, who was UW art gallery director/curator until last January when she became director of the McMaster Museum of Art, has assembled selected work by three contemporary Canadian artists who have their fingers raised, gauging the troubling winds of change.

Or as Thomas Hardy laments in *The Darkling Thrush*:
*The land's sharp features seemed to be
The century's corpse outleant
His crypt the cloudy canopy
The wind his death-lament*

On view through Oct. 19 at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery, *Split-Level Paradise* features recent work by Simon Glass and Ed Pien, of Toronto, and Thelma Rosner, of London, Ont.

Pien's large, interactive installation, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, dominates the gallery.

Constructed of hand-made paper, it consists of a column of densely packed layers of thin paper around which are two circular shells. The column has knot-holes through which to look at fetus-like creatures.

Gallerygoers enter the installation through an arched doorway as if entering a cave.

The work refers to Heironymous Bosch's famous 16th painting, a nightmarish phantasmagoria based, at least in part, on the Garden of Eden.

The interior walls are painted with various humanoid, but non-human, figures openly engaged in copulation amidst fecund vegetation and large swatches of colour.

Podedworny reads the work as a celebration of sexuality, pleasure, sensuality and desire beyond the strictures of conventional morality. However, she downplays the work's more sinister qualities, while acknowledging its dynamic "between desire and repulsion."

Glass' work features a series of 13 silver prints uniformly matted

SPLIT-LEVEL PARADISE

Who: Simon Glass, Ed Pien & Thelma Rosner
Where: University of Waterloo Art Gallery
East Campus Hall
When: Through Oct. 19
Phone: 519-888-4567 ext. 33575

and framed in black. Titled *The Thirteen Attributes of God*, the black/white photos combine images with Hebrew script positioned beneath each image.

The majority of images detail parts of the human body associated with sensory — and sensual — perception: eyes, ears, nose, mouths, hands.

The series also suggests mutability and mortality, through the depiction of young and old body parts, and images of eggs and dead birds. Images of feathers suggest spiritual transcendence.

Rosner's two companion series are described by Podedworny as the "before" and "after" of a "traumatic period in human history."

Andalusia consists of seven brightly coloured oil paintings of various kinds of fruit and vegetables between bands of ornate patterns, some of which resemble the Star of David. The paintings incorporate Arabic and Hebrew calligraphy.

Podedworny explains that the series refers to the medieval period in Spain when Jews, Muslims and Christians lived in peace.

In contrast, *Testimony* consists of the nine reverse-image paintings (18 works in total). Nine lean low against the gallery wall, while the mirror paintings lay flat on the floor. Scattered around the paintings on the floor are shards of brown clay.

Testimony refers to the Spanish Inquisition during the 15th century.

The colour has been sucked out of the sepia-like paintings, in contrast to the bold colours of Andalusia.

It's interesting how Rosner uses food and the rituals of eating as metaphors of contrasting socio-political realities created by the volatile dynamic of Church and State.

In their different ways Glass, Pien and Rosner challenge the world view expressed by T.S. Eliot in *The Hollow Men*, which seems to define how so many people feel today as we plunge headlong into a frighteningly uncertain future:

*This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper*
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The Garden of Earthly Delights, by Ed Pien is on display at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery.

The Thirteen Attributes of God, by Simon Glass, on display at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery.

