



SURROUNDINGS
ART GALLERY *of* REGINA

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In 1908 Dutch abstractionist Piet Mondrian painted *Avond (Evening); Red Tree*, a small image of a solitary tree executed less naturalistically than gesturally, as an emphatic form silhouetted against a twilight blue sky. Erupting from the trunk, the energetic twist of interconnected branches that occupy most of the picture plane is a flurry of curvilinear lines quite untypical of later Mondrian geometric abstractions but which, in their own way, record and presage his ensuing search for a kind of non-empirical knowledge that art might offer.

As a starting point, Rob Bos' tree top/branch paintings operate similarly as both representation – as a depiction of forms pointing back to the seen world – and as visual ideation – as metaphors pointing away from form to the formlessness of the unseen world. Tracking this notion of dissemblance rather than semblance, Bos sources the paintings in this exhibition from photographs of trees taken while on a family visit to Holland where his father is from. After photocopying and enlarging those images, he photographed the resulting photocopies, and then repeated this process over and over again. The consequent visual enlargement and mechanical degradation of image – the degeneration and disappearance of form – became the basis for the final painted works we see here. As an end strategy, Bos painted the trees and then overpainted them with white paint leaving the merest suggestion of edge – more a writhing network of lines – to both point to and away from 'tree'.

Altering our visual perception of figure-ground relationships, the spaces between branches now reveal their presence, negative space flips to become positive space: the visible is erased from visibility while the invisible is nudged into visibility. Here, the 'real' equivocates; here, dissolution and evolution go hand in hand. Bos reconfigures his own past physical and visual encounter with those trees for us without reiterating their literal form – without asserting them as described optical phenomena. Through effacement – through 'painting out' – he reduces active looking and induces something beyond optical sensation. These paintings act as traces and themselves trace more a felt response to the world; his installation of them in the gallery offering us a site of permabulation and contemplation.

As we walk through the gallery, we encounter four plaques or sign posts located beside the four benches that occupy the center of the gallery and are configured in a square. Each contains a brief statement, autobiographical in nature, that reflects significant moments in Bos' life so far. With the utmost brevity – with so few words that it seems like they could be voiced in the amount of time it takes to exhale a single breath – it is as if he is gazing backward reviewing or summing up his life, viewing the 'now' as a launching point to move forward. Arising in something akin to melancholy, Bos' words denote loss, sorrow, human frailty and human fallibility. And, indeed, with



nature at the core of this work, there is a connotation of Romantic yearning skimming across the surface of these paintings; it is, however, less Thanatos – the death instinct – and a union with ‘nature as the sublime’ that operates here than a deep yearning for the sublime of knowledge – to know. Taken not as individual statements but as a totality – as this installation itself intends – we grasp two parallel schemas articulated here: four physical or bodily stages in the physical cycle of human life and four stages of the development of knowledge (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age – or the intellectual condition of knowing/not-knowing).

In Bos’ ontology (theory of being), these many ‘I’s point quietly toward the unified self proposed by early 20c Greek-Armenian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff rather than the Freudian fractured self. Gurdjieff conceived of the individual as an entity comprised of a body (the physical organism), an ‘essence’ (what one is born with) and a personality (which is everything the individual has seen or learned over his/her lifetime), proposing that it is only the ‘essence’ that is able to evolve. For him, not only is human evolution the “evolution of consciousness”¹ but that “‘consciousness’ cannot evolve unconsciously.”²

Surroundings offers us a contemplative space both *of* self-remembering and *for* self-remembering. While trees as cultural formations conjure up all kinds of associations related not just to nature – which many understand as ‘other’, external to ourselves – but to family and attendant notions of generation and re-generation, those represented here, encircling us as we consider them, also act as an aesthetic simulation. In the last essay he wrote before his death, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a philosopher of perception and human consciousness, denied our separation from the world – of which art is a part – suggest-

ing that, like our present situation as viewers in the gallery here, "it's as if a room emanates from me, the zero point of spaciality I live and breathe it from the inside the world is around me, not in front of me."³ For Merleau-Ponty, as for Bos, not only are we united with the external world through the factuality of our bodies but our physical bodies, which occupy the world alongside all other phenomena, are the embodiment of our consciousness. With his gaze turned thus simultaneously both outward and inward, Bos' paintings link eye to mind, perception to consciousness, exteriority to interiority, subjectivity to objectivity and objectivity to subjectivity.

Merleau-Ponty quotes Paul Klee as saying, "In a forest I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt the trees were looking at me".⁴ Neither Klee nor Merleau-Ponty are suggesting that the trees (like those represented here) literally perceive us but that under conditions of acute self-reflective awareness – of hyper-consciousness – we become present via the agency of the trees: it is as if, being aware of the trees, the trees reflect ourselves – our being-in-the-world-ness – back to us. Thus the visible (the trees) and the invisible (ourselves) are not opposite each other but more sympathetically double each other.

Other perceptions – other accords of eye and mind – await us. Visit Bos' paintings long enough and his images disperse into other-than-trees: those skeletal branches transform from macroscopic branches into a microscopic flood plain of neural pathways deep inside the cerebral cortex; or into instantaneous bursts of energy like lightning in the sky; a towering fortresses of faceted ice-crystals; or nebulae from long ago and far away; or maps of the vast and complex digital net that extends endlessly outward as it shunts vast amounts of ephemeral and ever-shifting 'knowledge' throughout the social body and mind.

Bos states that, "the closer you get, the further away you get." Delineating both 'in here' and 'out there', Bos' minimal, monochromatic utterances offered us here, painted and re-painted over again – renewed – speak to a perpetual state of becoming; of reciprocally and endlessly vanishing and coming-into-being again.

– Jack Anderson

1. G.I. Gurdjieff, quoted in Peter D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949, p.70
2. *ibid*, pp. 56, 58
3. Merleau-Ponty, M., *Eye and Mind*, in G.A. Johnson (Ed.) *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993, pp. 121-149.
4. *ibid*

ROB BOS

Education :

2003 BFA with Distinction, University of Regina,
Regina, SK.

Selected Solo Exhibitions:

- 2007 "Enclosure", Neutral Ground, Regina, SK.
"Art at Home", S.C.E.S., Regina, SK.
"Lost and Found Thoughts", various public spaces &
web project
- 2005 "see you, see me", Art Projects Gallery, Regina, SK.
"You can't see the forest for the trees", Rosemont Gallery,
Regina, SK.
- 2004 "network", Art Projects Gallery, Regina, SK.
"...how to sit still in one room", Art Projects Gallery,
Regina, SK.
- 2003 "Changing Room", Art Projects Gallery, Regina, SK.
- 2001 "Skeletons, Staircases and Self portraits", Fifth Parallel
Gallery, University of Regina, Regina, SK.
"Disintegration", Fifth Parallel Gallery, University of
Regina, Regina, SK.

Selected Group Exhibitions:

- 2007 "Branches", Flatland Artist Studio Gallery, Regina, SK.
"Room for Changing", Art Projects Gallery, Regina, SK.
- 2005 "four artists using photography", Art Projects Gallery,
Regina, SK.
- 2004 "Covered", Neutral Ground, Regina, SK.
"Work in Progress", painting collaboration with
Derek Pennett, Art Projects Gallery, Regina, SK.
"Visage – Self-Reflections", Rosemont Art Gallery,
Regina, SK
- 2003 "smaller 2", Neutral Ground, Regina, SK.
"1st Art!", Invitational Student Art Competition
winners, First Canadian Place Gallery, Toronto, ON.
"(in)form", MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, SK.

Public Collections:

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