

# GRAPHIC VISIONS



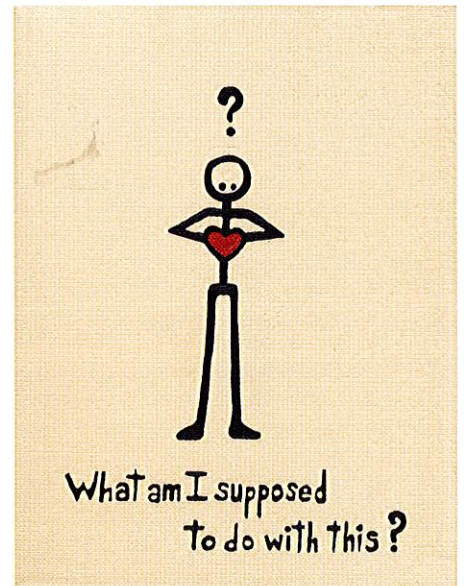
Art Gallery of Regina

**Tim Barnard**  
**Rob Bos**  
**Blair Brennan**  
**Dan Donaldson**  
**Chris Millar**  
**Shaun Morin**  
**Paul Smith**  
**Diana Thorneycroft**  
**Katarzyna Vedah**  
**John Will**

October 15 - November 22, 2008



Blair Brennan, "Sacra Privata" (80 individual works), mixed media on paper, 2007-08

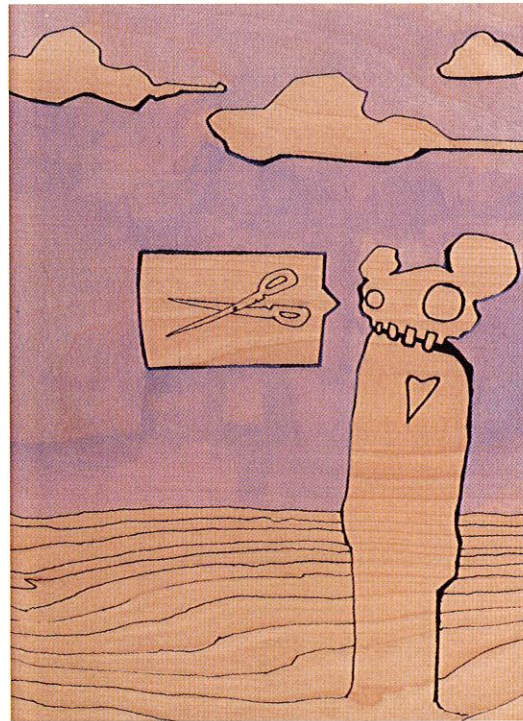


Katarzyna Vedah, "What Am I Supposed to Do With This?," acrylic on canvas, 2007

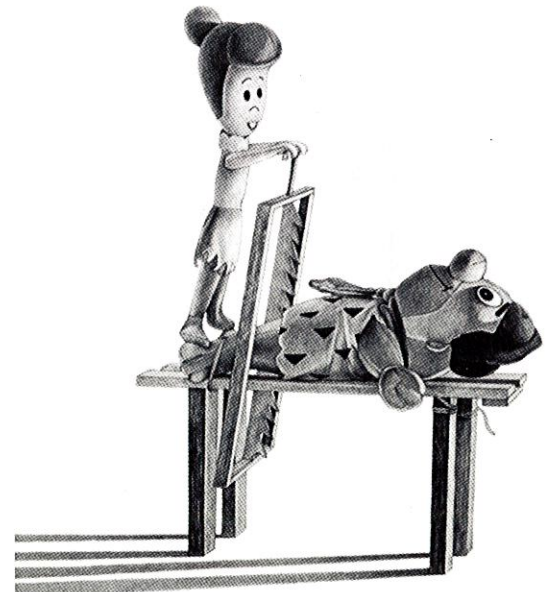
Cover: Tim Barnard, "The Short Films of Al Capone", marker on canvas, 2008



Chris Millar, "Ma Mabel's Eyes", acrylic on canvas, 2007



Paul Smith, "Rabbit Pulls Knife, Hears Words Burning" (detail), ink, acrylic, laser print, gold leaf on paper and birch, 2008



Diana Thorneycroft, "Desperate Housewives (Wilma and the Saw)" pencil on paper, 2006

# GRAPHIC VISIONS

**Graphic Visions** is an immoderate exhibition. Hundreds of drawings and paintings blanket the walls - far too many for this modest space. The gallery swells with manic creation. Thousands of people, animals, mutants and words writhe, mumble and scream for attention. The optical extravagance echoes the hypergraphia of its artists. This over-ripe show banks tens of thousands of hours of obsessive labour and condenses years of expression into mottled quilts.

Themes range from giddy love lightness to felonious rage - often simultaneously. **Diana Thorneycroft** (Winnipeg) extends the life of beloved cartoon characters and television puppets beyond the benign stories plotted by their producers. Sesame Street's Ernie hangs himself, presumably after breaking-up with his long-time co-habitant, Bert. Pinocchio learns the disadvantage of mortality when he meets his maker - maybe Geppetto had enough of his lies. Perhaps inspired by Depression era 'Tijuana bibles', in another series, Thorneycroft sexualizes cartoon couples and reveals their murderous fantasies. Child's play routinely rescues toys from conventional storylines and presses them into psychological service. They are used to understand and accommodate our wonderfully troublesome animal urges. Thorneycroft unearths the repressed side of childhood (and matrimony) and advocates the cathartic use of play and fantasy - and drawing, too.

The Graphic Visions artists share an enthusiasm for comic books, cartoons and popular culture. Echoing Edmonton art and graphic novel reviewer Gilbert Bouchard, **Blair Brennan** observes that those who were children in the '60s, and later, were the first to embrace mass culture without shame. However, unlike their Pop art elders, star power and the veneer of consumer capitalism holds less glossy thrall for those who would rather make and critique than just mirror and enjoy. Many contemporary artists have social and personal agendas - things they want to do with and to mass media. Some hi-jack popular forms to express unpopular ideas; others use media references as a shorthand to get viewers into a specific, shared time and mind space. Many mix so-called high and low cultures, with irony and sincerity. They can admit that the Dark Knight's internal life is as moving as Hamlet's.

Free of the myth of Greenbergian purity, many contemporary artists mix influences as freely as their mediums. Their mongrel constructions resemble the imaginations of their media saturated publics. Collage, image/text amalgams, the mix of irony and sincerity, this is the current mode. **Shaun Moran's** (Winnipeg) cut-'n'-paste-'n'-drawn collages scavenge multi-generational ads, slogans, comics and other pulp culture detritus. The waste is sorted in a fevered mind and expelled as elaborate pictorial ravings that trigger memories, associations and uncommon sense. It is hard to build these little pictures into meaningful sentences. If there is an organizing principle, it is indecipherable. Perhaps the artist has translated his life into these bits and it is meaningful to him. We can guess, but not be sure. Why worry about getting it right, when getting it wrong is so much fun? The collages seem unmoored from a guiding consciousness, from the pressure to mean. Internal and external visual worlds collide in the blender of the artist's giddy imagination like a dream, or nightmare. Bizarre juxtapositions are entertained but not disciplined into sensibility.

**Dan Donaldson** (Winnipeg) assumes the mask of those he teases. He has fun with, rather than at the expense of, the illustrators of the past by becoming one. His beautiful anachronistic mash-ups employ the skills of the commercial artists he tropes. There is an unselfconscious love of slick execution in these surreal confections. Unlike straight commercial pictures, the only things they sell are themselves and a twisted perspective of the world.

I have been thinking about this show for about fifteen years. In the early '90s, in Calgary, I was making comic appropriation paintings, but was wowed into submission by young geniuses whose unbound graphic inventions sprawled over acres of paper. Old comics, the new comix and graphic novel explosion, girrl-zine strips, Juxtapose, old Mad magazines, Basquiat, the accessibility to every visual thing and subculture that the blooming internet provides, their own restless imaginations, the revival of Pop, and the decay of art/world boundaries all conspired to inspire. Tim Barnard (Montreal) was one of these artists. He has since gone on to populate the world with his twisted progeny. His fine line, phantasmagoric doodle art drawings of zombie crowds unsettle because they seem to be waiting for something to happen, someone to take notice. They did not ask to be born and displayed. Wrenched into being by a mad hand and abandoned to this crowded stage without explanation or script, they seem to be waiting on us.

**Chris Millar** (Chicago) is one of the young masters of this over-wrought, associative and obsessional mode. His polished hypnagogic hallucinations take collage-inspired painting up a notch with mad skills that enable him not only to quote anything he likes but also to invent and weave new tricks and treats into his phantasmagoria. "Ma Mabel's Eyes" is busier, crazier and more perplexing than a Hieronymus Bosch triptych. His visual allusions alone ought to launch a dozen theses by future art historians. Good luck to them. I recognize Ron Moppet, Millar's former art teacher, whose advice and example seems to be honored here. After that, you are on your own. The painting is seeded with a plethora of in-jokes and references only intimates can glean, and perhaps the artist himself is the only qualified reader of this loudly introverted work - and he is not saying much. For the rest, we can enjoy the confusing profusion of visual delights as their own reward and stitch together meanings at our peril.

It is as if we are peering into brains in action rather than appreciating finished expressions. While some of these collections encourage an associative impulse and resist any efforts at narrative - nothing confirmed, nothing denied - other sets hover in suspense between. Visual cacophony yields to polyphony. **Blair Brennan** (Edmonton) regularly dips into his stream-of-consciousness and draws up what he experiences. His swims are compelled by curiosity, his drawings by a desire to understand his life and to leave a poetic trace. We fear a failed life less than an unnoticed one. "Drawing is a kind of daily notation, a way of understanding the world around me. If I am receptive enough, they also act as a kind of divination. They frequently offer signs of events to come." In his basement, Brennan engages in magical thinking, an alchemy that turns base materials, like charcoal and pain, into insights and future possibilities. In these subterranean diaries, notes from underground, he harrows through his life of pleasures, aches, obsessions, suspicions, addictions and home remedies. With some luck they do him good and resonate well with others.

**John Will** (Calgary) is another rough poet of the handmade confession, a visceral thinker who does not so much paint as ooze. Will is the bard of the abbreviated aphorism. Consider this self-deprecating response to Descartes' "I think; therefore I am" - "I Idiot." What more needs saying? His paintings feature mistaken identities, false profit/prophet fantasies, and a wheezing ego inflating and deflating like a smoker's lung punctured by a dart. For some of the young and disaffected in Calgary of the '80s and 90s, local heroes included near-anonymous graffiti artists, the never-to-exhibit mad boys making art out of garbage, and John Will, a perplexing wise/idiot irreverent, improbably blessed with university tenure. At the heart of every sub-culture is a cranky, enduring hold-out from another era - who did not really fit in there either. An anachronistic anarchist, critic, a conscience, an individualist, an obsessive old-mad-man or woman, keeper of the perpetual 'no' or 'yes', they are the beloved trickster teachers at the center and margin at once, known only by the young and nearby. (Yes, Mr. Brennan, you are shaping into one of these dyspeptic and hallowed guides.) Reluctant leaders, they resist the hype, go their own way, and encourage others not to follow, but do the same. "I Idiot?" indeed.

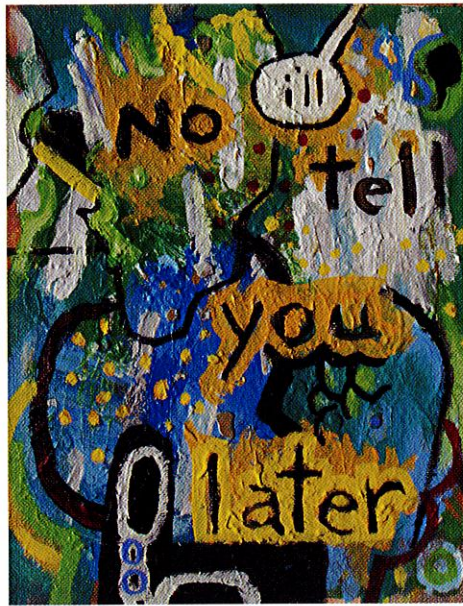
**Rob Bos** (Regina) confesses to Will's influence. His excremental lyrics also read like diaries of vague desires and struggle - mostly with love and art, mostly art. He acknowledges his comic book lineage by stacking his paintings in a box to be flipped thorough until you find something you like. You are also invited to rearrange his collection on the shelves. There is a democratic aesthetic throughout Bos' practice, and this exhibition, a sense that being accessible is not criminal. He wants you touch his work, violate the usual gallery protocol. Salespeople know that touching creates a subtle bond, an implied emotional contract, a secret obligation.

**Katarzyna Vedah** (Edmonton) is perhaps the Graphic Visions artist most directly inspired by the funnies. For Vedah, like Brennan, Thorneycroft and others, drawing helps make sense of turbulent worlds and selves. This series is about relationships. They are love comics. She drew as a "way of distilling such experiences (mine as well as others) in order to process and understand them in a more objective way. The medium of 'cartoons' has allowed me to address and explore the often raw and personal aspects of relationships without being immediately caught up in (or put off by) the emotional turbulence behind them. At first sight, these cartoons may have a simple and comedic quality about them, but looking closer, they may elicit something darker, revealing and complex." One figure points to a star, another to a pile of excrement; the caption: "different worlds." Through benign means Vedah explores some searing, affective content: confusing lust and love; being uncertain of one's own motives, our rich capacity for self-deceit and selective vision, the profound differences between people's views of the world, and one's dual natures, including the ability to give pleasure as well as pain. These are serious subjects dressed cute to sweeten the bitterness.

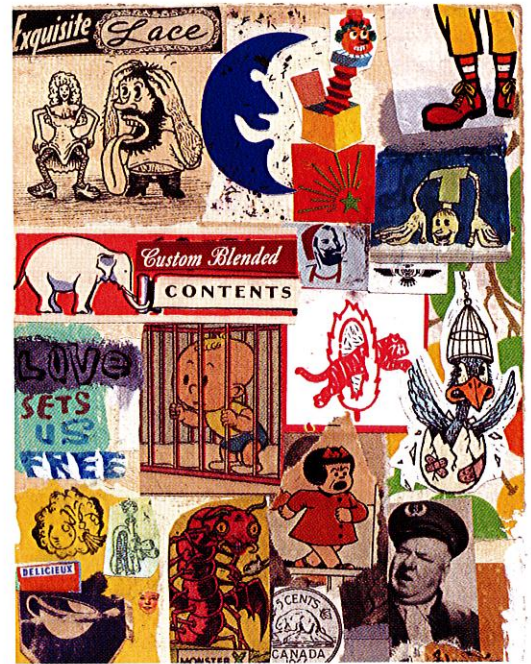
**Paul Smith's** (Edmonton) panels lie between comics and drawing. They look like cartoons dreaming of being paintings or vice versa. Some employ comic conventions like speech balloons but they mostly house more images. There are narrative threads, but they are not necessarily sequential. Smith describes his central figure as a trickster who usually occupies the form of a rabbit but shifts into other shapes as well. He explains that while each panel is a self-contained expression, it is also part of a larger myth. Rabbit seems to be negotiating a place for himself between the lures of popular consumer culture and money and the desire for romantic love. Rabbit is anxious about the environment, the future and seems to be contemplating self-immolation. Rabbit wants to maintain optimism in troubled times, but it is a challenge. While many of the images are autobiographies with animal proxies, Smith, like Vedah, also asked others for stories that he could illustrate. Perhaps our most personal contents are shared, extra-personal, archetypal.

Graphic Visions is an exhibition of creative fecundity. Many of these visual voices speak a patois that is difficult for some to understand. If the sign languages do not translate, the emotions and the urgent need to signify certainly do. All of the artists demonstrate the therapeutic value of art - of saying what you need to say, even if it isn't pretty. However, if you want to show such things, they ought at least to be entertaining, shocking, pleasing, or otherwise compelling if you want an audience to care and be seduced into an unfolding abundance and be potentially transformed.

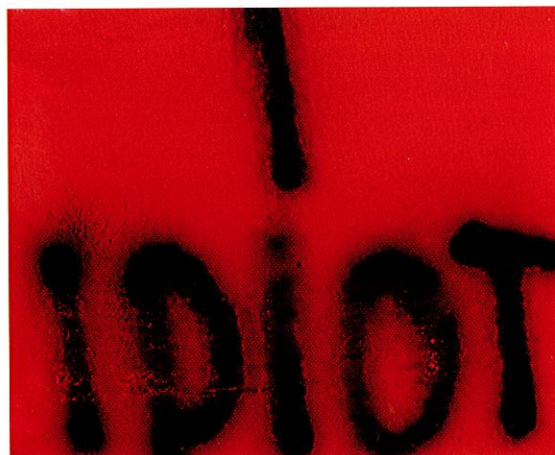
David Garneau  
2008



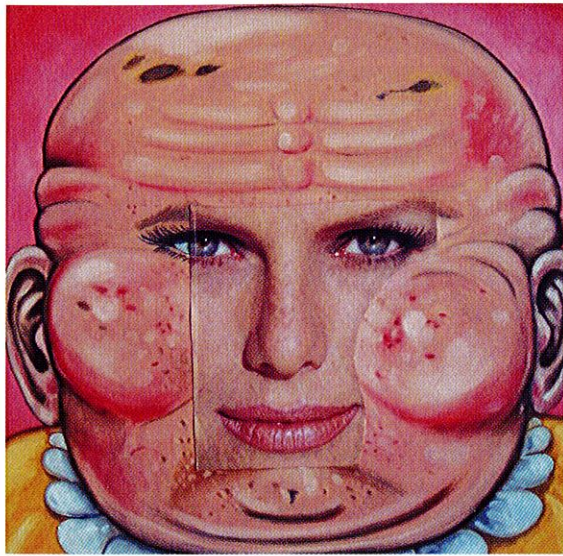
Rob Bos, "No I'll Tell You Later," acrylic on panel, 2008



Shaun Morin, "Custom Blended Contents," collage, 2008



John Will, "I Idiot," acrylic on canvas, 2003



Dan Donaldson, "Phathead", oil & collage on canvas, 2005

## GRAPHIC VISIONS

October 15 - November 22, 2008

# ART GALLERY OF REGINA

©Art Gallery of Regina Inc.  
Neil Balkwill Civic Arts Centre  
2420 Elphinstone Street, PO Box 1790,  
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3C8

ISBN # 978-1-896432-78-6

Gallery Director: Karen Schoonover

Guest Curator: David Garneau

Design: Steve McDonnell: Dalek Design @ dalek.ca

Sponsored by: **SaskTel** 

The Art Gallery of Regina gratefully acknowledges the support of the Regina Arts Commission, the Saskatchewan Arts Board, Saskatchewan Lotteries Trust Fund for Sport, Culture, and Recreation, SaskCulture, SaskTel, Sask Energy, SaskCentral, Greystone Managed Investments, TD Canada Trust, and the Cathedral Free House.

