

The Canadian Art Investors Guide

CANADA'S NATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR ART INVESTORS AND COLLECTORS

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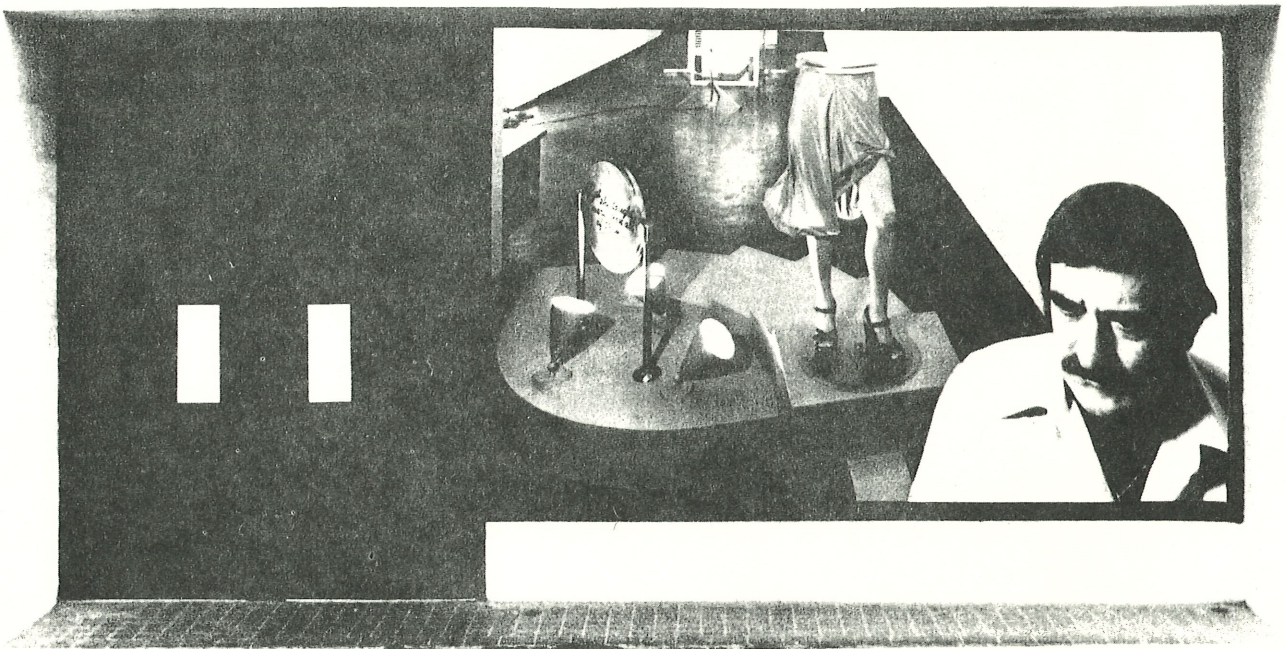
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Of Great Interest To Art Investors, Collectors, Connoisseurs and Estate Managers

THE TORONTO ART SCENE - AN INTERVIEW WITH CARMEN LAMANNA OF THE
CARMEN LAMANNA GALLERY

By Donna Goldman

CARMEN LAMANNA GALLERY



Ian Carr Harris, Solo Exhibition, December 1977, "But She Taught Me More Than All Of Them."

By the mid 1960's modern art, pioneered by abstract expressionism, was well becoming more acceptable and understood. An increased number of galleries were providing opportunities for new inputs to thrive, for experimentation to exist, and for unexplored artists to be recognized. Despite this artistic flourishing, a new type of gallery, the Carmen Lamanna Gallery, opened in 1966 on the site of the Dorothy Cameron Gallery at 840 Yonge Street, primarily as a reactionary force to a still "unchallenging trend". Lamanna saw more directional possibilities within the avant-garde, and decided to pursue them as his own contrib-

ution to culture. A framing business begun in 1960, metamorphosed into a gallery dedicated to the exhibition of solely innovational art.

To some the gallery quickly became a vibrant force in the movement of art; to others, a conglomeration of "oddities". Such artists as Murray Favro, Gary Lee Nova, Iain Baxter, Mary Janitch, being unhindered and unconstrained within the gallery walls, maintained for the Carmen Lamanna Gallery the reputation as one of the most avant-garde galleries in Canada. International acclaim followed. The gallery

participated as the Canadian representative in the Third International Pioneer Galleries Exhibition in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1970.

The gallery sells avant-garde works in the price range from \$200 to \$75,000. Following is an exclusive interview given to The Canadian Art Investor's Guide by Carmen Lamanna, owner/curator of the Carmen Lamanna Gallery.

DG: In the 1950's and 60's the abstract expressionists were becoming a vital force, aided from the onset by Isaacs Gallery in particular, was your primary motivation in 1966 to continue with the exhibiting of avant-garde art ?

CL: I opened the gallery to create my own situation. My attitude toward art was not to recognize styles - that was the revolution of the Carmen Lamanna Gallery. Individuality was the ideology of the revolution. Existing commercial galleries and art institutions supported only established artistic trends; young artists felt the pressure to mould themselves to these standards and their talent was destroyed under this restrictive system. An upheaval was needed to create a culture of individuals. My aim was to find artists who didn't agree to conform to current trends - - artists who insisted on expressing themselves through their own personal artistic language. At first the public was shocked by the art exhibited at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery; it was difficult, adventurous and demanding. They are no longer shocked, but the art still makes demands on them and challenges them. Most people don't understand it.

DG: How were you pursuing the so-called innovative artist ?

CL: I was looking for - - I'm still looking for - - individuality in an artist. Identity is achieved by degrees. The development of individuality is an ongoing process. You begin by observing day-to-day, questioning. Experimenting with the world and your place in the world you enter into a special kind of dialogue. As you talk you begin to develop awareness and perceptiveness. An artist

is someone who makes self-conscious statements about this process. His value to us depends on how deeply he probes and equally on how well he communicates this to us. A canvas is a kind of document representing the artist's judgement, his perception of the world at one particular moment in time.

DG: What do you look for in a work of art?

CL: I look for work which is demanding, fresh and unique. I am always in contact with artists, listening and observing. Through experience I have come to recognize art which is original and capable of maintaining my interest over a long period of time. An exceptional work of art can be found in any media or in any form. I do not look for art which is different for the sake of being different. Above all, it must be of value to me personally.

DG: How do you view Canada's potential in the international art market ?

CL: Canadian art is moving into an international realm in its own right. Interest in Canadian art comes from many parts of the world. Particular interest is expressed in the artists of the Carmen Lamanna Gallery. And we can see the results of this interest around the world. For example just in the past 6 months David Rabinowitch represented Canada at Documenta 6 in Kassel, West Germany, and both David and Royden Rabinowitch represented Canada at the 10th Paris Biennale in France. Currently General Idea is showing in London, England, and this exhibition will go on to Paris and other major European centres. Ron Martin is having an exhibition of his paintings at the Center for Inter-American Relations in New York City in February, and this summer he will represent Canada at the Venice Biennale. He'll have a show in Cologne in the spring. Robin Mackenzie is working towards an exhibition to be held in the U.S. in the spring. There is a very important exhibition of Canadian artists coming up at the Kunsthalle in Basel this summer. The artists were selected by the Director. All are outstanding in this diverse group: Iain Baxter, Robin Collyer, Greg Curnoe, Paterson Ewen, Eric Fishl, General Idea,

Ian Carr-Harris, Vincent Tangredi, and Shirley Wiitasalo. More than half of these are represented by the Carmen Lamanna Gallery. But there is no one style which emerges from the work of these young Canadian artists; they are strongly individualistic and this is where their merit lies. The exhibitions I cited are only a few examples. Every week I receive inquiries about exhibiting my artists in Europe. The international market is just now opening up for Canadian artists of exceptional talent.

DG: Do you find the Canadian public more knowledgeable and informed today about what your gallery exhibits ?

CL: The struggle for me these days is to have my artists recognized by the Canadian audience. I find it ironic that most of my artists have an international reputation - - David and Royden Rabinowitch, Ron Martin, Murray Favro, Robin Collyer, and Colette Whiten to name a few - - and yet their not getting the reputation they deserve in their own country. When I go to Europe they talk about the work I have shown there - - in some cases they may not be able to remember the names of the artist, but they remember the work. They realize the art is exceptional. A few Canadians do follow the art scene, and they do their homework by reading, by going to the galleries, and by keeping up with the artists' developing careers. Most Canadians remain remarkably uninformed. This isn't their fault but the fault of the commercial galleries and art institutions that failed to educate the public during the 1950's and 1960's. They showed art that was safe, easy to categorize, and traditional, generally speaking. The public wasn't given anything to stimulate their thinking or to stretch their imagination. And there's a definite lack of art criticism in this country still; criticism is needed to help build an informed art public.

I can give many examples of talented artists who do not get enough public attention. One is Murray Favro. He's one of Canada's most imaginative young inventors and creators; his work is highly esteemed by the National Gallery of Canada. Yet many people in the

country who consider themselves informed about art don't know his work or understand it. The art magazines don't have the courage or the capacity to cover his work. Why ? Because it dares to be different, because it doesn't fit into any set categories. This situation can be applied to most of the artists in the gallery. Another example is Paterson Ewen. Brought up in Montreal, he began painting in the abstract style current in that city in the 1960's. When he found the mould restrictive he branched out on his own, painting in a unique way. His uniqueness has been reaffirmed recently. The art movement in Montreal is dead, but Paterson Ewen's earth-space-weather phenomena paintings are fresh and original. His work is often requested for exhibitions across the country and there's a growing body of collector's of Ewen's work - - both nationally and internationally. But this recognition has been painstakingly earned over a long period.

DG: The advent of abstract expressionism onto the Toronto art scene was New York influenced. Has this influence on Canadian artists been beneficial or detrimental ?

CL: Well, in the 60's the influence was too strong and I think it retarded the growth of many Canadian artists. It took longer for those individuals to emerge independently. Really, someone else's statement was being repeated here. Of course, ideas can come from the outside but they can only be a beginning for the artist's own thinking; otherwise the result is mere imitation. Unfortunately, that's what happened to many Canadian artists.

DG: What were your impressions of the paintings of the Group of Seven ?

CL: The Group of Seven were struggling for personal liberty and national dignity. I can give them credit for struggling and I understand the difficulties they were going through. The artists were trying to free themselves from their European background and culture but they didn't succeed. The result was a gross misrepresentation - showing Canada as a land of gently flowing rivers, well-manicured fields and friendly

forests under a blue sky. Full of nostalgic memories for their grandparents' native land, they superimposed on Canada a sentimental image of the Old World, creating a romantic land of hills with no rugged character - - a family picnic country. In spite of their best efforts and countless admirers and apologists the Painters of the Northern Land didn't succeed.

DG: What about the problem of nationalism in Canada ?

CL: It doesn't affect my artists really. What's a national identity anyway? Identity attaches first of all to an individual; he discovers and develops his own qualities. The identity of an individual transcends provincial and national boundaries. Geography is secondary really.

DG: Do you think such artists as Jack Bush, William Ronald, Harold Town or Michael Snow achieved this individuality and personalization we are discussing ?

CL: I have no memory for names, but I remember the work of Michael Snow from the first time I saw it. His work revealed its personal meaning; it was fresh and innovative and of value to me.

DG: What were the economic consequences of opening a gallery which went beyond the avant-garde into the realm of the experimental?

CL: The economic consequences were disastrous, but the artists and I shared a conviction that what we were doing was necessary and important. Looking at the financial picture one would say that we should've closed the gallery a number of times...but this conviction we held kept it open. And look at us now - - we're still here, and now our presence is felt. We're known for artists whose work stands for ongoing investigation and continuing discovery. And it is work of lasting interest and value.

DG: Would radical stylistic changes in a gallery artist be acceptable to you?

CL: I have no objection to change. We should

progress all the time. As long as the artist and I maintain a sympathetic relationship with one another throughout this period of growth I'm all for it.

DG: What do you recommend as a good investment ?

CL: Because the artists associated with the Carmen Lamanna Gallery are original the value of their work continues to increase. These pieces represent long-term, solid, "blue-chip" investments.

I think all the artists associated with the Carmen Lamanna Gallery - - Robin Collyer, Paterson Ewen, Murray Favro, Ian Carr-Harris, General Idea, Robin MacKenzie, Ron Martin, David and Royden Rabinowitch, Reihard Reitzenstein, Colette Whiten, Shirley Wiitasalo, and Ed Zelenak, Mary Janitch - - each of them is a good investment. A work of art must be challenging: it has to hold my interest for years to come. I have lived with these artists' works over the years and I can attest to their lasting value.

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