

PHILIP MONK

Analysing a complex and controversial theory about Canadian art and artists

By GARY MICHAEL DAULT

Toronto writer Philip Monk is that rare creature, a professional art critic. The 34-year-old Monk doesn't teach part time or work in a bank or head up an advertising agency or write in the papers. He doesn't scribble poetry on the side, nor does he paint under another name.

What he does do—and has done since receiving his MA in art history from the University of Toronto in 1978—is to ponder the nature and direction of advanced Canadian art and to offer the results of his ruminations in what are usually regarded as rather difficult and sometimes formidably demanding essays. Having espoused, in turn, both the Marxist critic's Utopian desire for socially ameliorative action and the contemporary French structuralist's fascination with linguistic models by which both art and action might be parsed like a sentence, Monk has come recently, out of the synthesis of both these backgrounds, to an important way station on what is a mental journey of refreshing vigour.

For five years now he has been progressively focusing his not inconsiderable intelligence upon the large and elusive issues bound up in the nature and meaning of representation in Canadian art. This mission has taken the form of three major exhibitions, each shored up either with tough-minded polemical catalogues or sinewy supportive articles, mostly in *Vanguard*, the Vancouver-based art magazine.

The first exhibition, *Language and Representation*, while still referred to by Monk himself as a single exhibition, consisted of a

series of installations at Toronto's A Space (and a couple of evenings of film and performance at the Funnel Experimental Film Theatre) that ran from November 17, 1981 to February 24, 1982. The series featured projects by Brian Boigon, Andy Patton, Kim Tomczak, John Scott, Judith Doyle and Missing Associates (Lily Eng and Peter Dudar). "The aim of *Language and Representation*," Monk told me recently, "was to work out a model of representation that was adequate to the process of making art. I wanted to give position and value to what I felt was a largely discredited or at least a much misunderstood term."

To reclaim and redefine representation, Monk began by insisting that it be confused neither with the traditional idea of imitative image-making, nor with historical realism, nor with the mode within which New Image painting was currently manifesting itself. Rather, he saw representation as an antidote to the moribund history of modernism itself—which he defined in his catalogue essay as "a history of the progressive loss of content" in art. Modernism, Monk believed, had increasingly shunned representation in favour of what was "immediate, concrete and irreducible." This process inexorably established the limits of representability and erected instead, upon modernism's own self-purifying and increasingly theoretical models, the culture-wide triumph of that style's look, its image, its sign. What was lost in its purity, presumably, was any possible ambiguity or resonance about its meanings. The literal reigned supreme. For the modernist artist and critic, what you saw, to paraphrase Frank Stella, was what there was.

For the postmodernist artist and critic, on the other hand, art—as a more accurate model of the times it reflected—was quite properly fragmentary, narrative, anecdotal, tentative, personal, confessional, anxious. It would be only representational art, furthermore, that could carry the discursiveness of these modes. For Philip Monk, representation offered itself as a sort of centrifugal escape from what he had come to regard as the life-negating vortex of modernist artifice. Representation, fully understood, was,

he believed, the way out of modernism's imposed constructs. In addition, where modernist art was closed and bounded, representation was, by contrast, a true discourse, an argument, a stance-taking, a *naming*, an investigation of value—in the societal, not the materialist, sense. "A search for value," Monk wrote in the *Language and Representation* catalogue, "can only take place through representation. Revaluation of representation... may be that passage from socialized to social desire." That is to say, it is in correctly understanding representation that we are able to see beyond the irresponsible encodings of advertising and mass media generally to the real desires and meanings that lie within us as fully conscious human beings.

Representation, in Monk's view, involves a double use of the idea of "standing for." In the first place it means that a work represents (re-creates) something: an image and its clutch of reverberatory meanings. But the work also "stands for" by taking a position and saying something, something to do with "social desire"—that is, something to do with what is real. In the one passage in all of Philip Monk's writing where, for a daring, multi-coloured moment, he risks a flight of impassioned language, he writes in the catalogue for *Language and Representation*: "To be more than symptoms or parasites, clever inhabitants, bachelor machines or bricoleurs; to be more than Baby Boom Baudelaires or critical terrorists; to recognize the crisis of overproduction equally in art and in the market, and not to accede to a reactionary or recessionary criticism [would be, finally,] to reconstitute the avant-garde in its original social terms." As he points out in his catalogue essay on John Scott's piece at A Space, *Class Struggle 1982, A Drawing Disco Installation*, "There comes a time in contemporary history when work has to be taken at its word. Rather than formal work on structure, material or sign, the times demand something be said." This argument, of course, bristles with ambiguities, raising as many questions about method



Joanne Tod, *Second in Command / First Church of Christ, Scientist* (1984), oil on canvas, two panels, 137.2 x 152.4 cm. (54" x 61"). Courtesy: YYZ



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"In the case of artists, women are mastering pictures", wrote Monk in the catalogue to *Subjects in Pictures*, "but as women they are traditionally mastered subjects." "Tod's paintings criticise social and aesthetic values through an ironic, often smart-alecky use of representation. Here our interpretation is halted by the word "Sagittarius."

and validation, procedure and reward, as it lays to rest.

What was most significant about *Language and Representation* and its closely argued if not always radiantly understandable thesis was that, for Monk, modernism was bankrupt. Furthermore, neither Marxism (of which his language was more redolent than it is now) nor the semiological adventurings of the French structuralists, so much a part of the fabric of postmodernist critical procedure, was going to rescue art from what was closed off in it, what was "determined." To bring what, in art, lay deeper than style, deeper than the formal model, to bring that ineffability that Monk calls "the Other" to speech—that task, for Monk, is the role of representation. In his view, it is only in representation that art and action meet.

The second exhibition in Monk's representation trilogy was one he curated for the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in June, 1983, called *From Object to Reference*. This show, basically an anthology of works from the late '60s to the early '80s, illustrated the way a number of advanced artists in this country had moved during the past decade from formal objecthood to a preoccupation with works that engendered and engaged in a dialogue with concerns—most often linguistic concerns—that lay beyond their formal limits. There was no official catalogue for this exhibition, though Monk's ambitious article called "Colony, Commodity and Copyright: Reference and Self-Reference in Canadian Art" in the Summer, 1983 issue of

Vanguard essentially served as such.

The newest exhibition, *Subjects in Pictures*, was designed to be a synthesis and a summary of the concerns explored in the two previous shows. *Subjects in Pictures* contained paintings, drawings and photographs by six artists, all of them women: Shelagh Alexander, Janice Gurney, Nancy Johnson, Sandra Meigs, Joanne Tod and Shirley Wiitasalo. The exhibition ran at YYZ in Toronto from September 24 until October 13, then was bundled off, in a slightly expanded form, to the 49th Parallel in New York, where it ran until November 24. "That all of the artists in the show are women," Monk pointed out to me recently, "is a coincidence—but not fortuitous." Which calls for some explaining.

Much that lies within Monk's rather cryptic utterance can be unlocked through a reading of his controversial essay "Axes of Difference" in the May, 1984 issue of *Vanguard*. In this now infamous article, Monk proposed that, for the new art in Toronto at least, while representation can lead to action rather than to the mere contemplation allowed by formalist modernism, it is nevertheless only women artists who, in Monk's estimation, have shown a genuine and authoritative acquisition of representation and all that this slippery term means. "Axes of Difference" is important alone for the light it throws on just what representation really means for Monk—a light that is generated within his argument about the differences between men's and women's art in Canada. "The lines of difference," Monk wrote, "... are really between a passive resignation and melancholy despair, pessimism, nihilism and decadence on the one hand and the sense of the possibility of action on the other." Men, Monk insists, have given themselves over to a

romantic yearning for aesthetic unity, to dreams of a fallen wholeness, to a longing for heroism; men he says, are basically expressionists. It is women who hold sway over meaningful representation. The reasons for this are not, in his view, all that complex.

As he put it in "Axes of Difference": "I would like to characterize the differences here in sets of oppositions. We seem to witness an access to power by women accompanied by a sense of loss of power by men in an inverse proportion, marked by a confidence and a withdrawal respectively. This access and confidence lead women to deal with representational practices, as instituted by modern forms of communication and reproduction; the sense of loss of power and withdrawal by men lead to a retreat to art history and tradition. Thus the referents for subject matter and practice are located in the real for women and the gallery and art world for men."

According to Monk, women are still able to act—to act vigorously—within the very culture in which they have seen themselves as merely the *content* of a world of representation and value that has been stacked against them, a world against which they are engaged in making brilliant headway. (I have a feminist friend who claims that most women are still far too *reactive* to think alternative modes of representation can change anything, but who also thinks that Philip Monk is too sympathetic a man to understand that.) Men, on the other hand, find it impossible to act and therefore end by creating only "emblems of that failure." The jobless, hopeless crowds of faceless nomads in John Scott's *Class Struggle*, for example, are oppressed by everything from poverty to the Cruise missile. They are, in Monk's analysis, "a helpless mass of

bunnies”—the artist’s sentiment here being expended upon his sympathy for mankind’s generalized helplessness “rather than attacking or analysing the conditions and sources of that helplessness.”

Nancy Johnson’s seven-part set of gouache drawings on paper (with subtexts) called *Allies, Part I* (1984)—included in the New York edition of *Subjects in Pictures*—is, by contrast, a detailed identification with and proclamation of personal pain for a female student from Maalot, Israel, whom Johnson saw on TV being carried bleeding from her bombed school. (“She began to represent specific feelings to me,” one of Johnson’s texts runs. “I get a greater stirring than for any imagined pain.”) Here, representation is a sort of swinging gate, admitting the subject of Johnson’s pictures to Johnson’s own sensibility and allowing her to reach out to this desperate “subject,” using her art as a conduit for her concern. For Monk, Johnson’s set of pictures risks a genuine subjectivity (as opposed, say, to the sort of mere emoting often associated with the term, the sort Monk associates with men’s art).

“The conditions and sites of subjectivity are in active, contradictory process—constructed in totality, not consumed as content,” Monk wrote in “Axes of Difference.” Genuine subjectivity, in other words, is the product of an in-depth struggle to understand oneself and the world as mutually—and radically—interactive entities. You can’t acquire subjectivity just by claiming it as the content of your art and filling up your paintings with it, as a kind of forced significance. It is only women, therefore, Monk feels, who can understand representation and the true nature of the subject in art, and that is simply because “to have the conditions of representation inscribed within one, socially, not essentially or biologically, *is to be aware of the conditions of representation in every aspect of one’s own representational practice*” (my italics). To be content in other words, is to know content. A man’s subjectivity weighs him down with culture-wide, art-historical despair. A woman’s subjectivity, on the other hand, helps her analyse the nature of her own identity. And so there is a singleness of purpose in men’s art, a doubleness in women’s.

Now all this sounds eerily like the position-taking of a dedicated and energetic but necessarily peripheral supporter of what is essentially the art of the colonized. Given that the dominant ideology of our times is not Marxism but feminism (and therefore one of power), and given that men have nothing to fight but themselves, it looks to me as if Monk wants a meaningful battle and has thrown in his lot with the only war in town. This rather aloof positioning of Monk’s is further underscored by the fact that, as he

made clear to me, he is interested exclusively in “the broader cultural values in a work, what a work represents beyond the intentions of the artist.” He is like James Joyce’s artist, sitting somewhere behind the work, haughty, removed, paring his fingernails. That there is, within postmodern critical practice, a strong anthropological tendency—an eschewing of the formal exploration of a particular work in favour of an examination of what it represents—has been cogently argued by Walter Klepac in an article in the third issue of *C*, the Toronto art criticism journal: “There is a tendency in postmodern criticism to *bracket* any attempt to describe particular objects or conditions in the world and consider it, rather than to describe or investigate those things first hand. The question is not whether some particular statement is true but why it is thought to be true by a particular group of people or culture at a particular time and what criteria confirmed its truth.” Which helps explain why it is that Monk finds, for example, the parallel gallery system itself “a more interesting object of analysis than any individual work.”

Which may also help to explain why *Subjects in Pictures*, while it was far from a weak show, was nevertheless more disappointing than it ought to have been—and less absorbing than the thesis that generated it.

Central to Monk’s double-barrelled investigation of the idea of the subject in pictures (both the image itself and the exploration of personal selfhood on the part of the artist) is his statement in his most recent catalogue that “the work by these artists situates subjectivity in and as an order of representation. At one time or another they have variously addressed issues of representation, subjecthood and women’s (and men’s) position in the ideological presentations of mass media—advertising, film, television, the means by which viewers are situated and subjected to the image. We are subjected to the image, a ‘reality’ that has the power to constitute our very selves. Whether all the works are as direct as this, all depict one form of the subjective moment, the conditions for the constitution of the subject—and its undoing. As such, they do not stand critically outside these images or inhabit their codes in appropriation. But they are critical in contributing to a nonsubjective theory of subjectivity.”

Shelagh Alexander’s compilation photographs—*Loonytoon* (1984) and *We see nothing and tremble* (1984)—fared well as demonstrations of work that presents both images as subjects (family snapshots and movie stills provocatively interposed—intercut almost, they are so much like film) and the artist’s struggle to reconcile conflicting modes of power and memory, real and arti-



Shelagh Alexander. *Loonytoon* (1984), compilation photographs, 106.6 x 243.8 cm. (42 1/2" x 97 1/2"). Courtesy: YYZ

In Shelagh Alexander’s all-at-once photo-dramas, family snapshots and movie stills are provocatively interposed in an attempt to reconcile conflicting modes of power and memory, real and artificial relations.

ficial relations, on the same plane and within the same bounded space. “A unique space is created,” Monk writes in the catalogue, “seamless yet disruptive . . . the space of intervention. The results of this method [the compilation method] match the atemporality of ideology: time and history are condensed in this space.” In Alexander’s all-at-once photo-dramas, Monk suggests, there is “no dialectic of blindness and insight, but an opposition between power and lack of power.” Similarly, Janice Gurney’s complex amalgams of photographs, and her own painted interventions upon these received images, swarm around the artist’s personal history and cultural inheritance to the point that, in Monk’s estimation, “representation becomes a reparative intervention.” Clearly, Monk’s message is that women seem able to actually do something about culture now; men can’t seem to, probably because they’ve already *done* it.

Shirley Wiitasalo’s *Cashstop/White House* (1984) seemed pressed into service in the show as another example, for Monk, of the artist’s production of works that act as a “fulcrum in the vacillation between containment and catastrophe,” a switchboard connecting the objective and the subjective. In this two-part painting, the two modes are



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melded in a most unsettling way. The otherwise realistically portrayed building in the first glows inside like a furnace, like the very embodiment of evil or violence (which, for some reason, is colouristically echoed in the lurid red sky dropping behind the city). It's as if the building had been morally X-rayed and found unclean. The white house of the second part of the work appears to sit amid a sort of dunescape that is innocently enough depicted. At the same time it is in the act of being either blown away or engulfed (in a sandstorm, a paintstorm, a petulant moment of indecision in the artist?) and now seems to stand for the very heart of impermanence.

For Philip Monk, Joanne Tod's paintings are about the ways in which women are both "constituted as subjects and consumed as objects." Monk sees as the basis of her wry, ironic and sometimes deeply troubling vision a fetishising power by which Tod's paintings become surrogates for the artist herself and her ability simultaneously to describe and to offer a critique of societal values. While this has often been true—especially in such pictures as the famous *Self-Portrait* (1982), *Congruence* (1983) and the recent *Nemesis* (shown at Lamanna this past October)—it seems no longer true of the needlessly obscure *Second In Command/First Church of Christ, Scientist* (1984), where the viewer is stopped cold on entry to the painting by the overspecificity of the word "Sagittarius" printed in red across the blue-sky backdrop to her protagon-

nist's smarmy confidence and willingness to serve. Nor is this puzzling key (non-key, rather) made more useful by the not-very-amusing information that the young man's astrological sign will be the topic of Sunday's sermon at the Christian Science Church. There is doubtless a horde of meanings that could crowd in at the viewer's determined behest. But with Tod's having essentially closed down the painting with the use of a highly non-ambiguous word, those possible meanings now seem merely luxurious in the face of Tod's own witheringly smart-alec behaviour. Since what interests Monk is having Tod in the show in the first place—for what she has done and what she presumably stands for—the fact that this one painting doesn't work is probably of less importance to him than it is to me. The trouble here is that postmodern criticism is annoyingly lofty about its wish not to subject a particular work—such as this one of Tod's—to sustained formal scrutiny, which would be seen to delimit it in some way. And so the entire exhibition suffered by its inclusion.

As it also did with Sandra Meigs's *The Night Tree* (1984). *The Night Tree* is a seven-panel work showing a crudely limned tree, thickly built up on canvas with modelling paste and then brightly painted in cartoon hues. At panel six, it undergoes a sudden convulsive blowing apart. Panel seven is a field of amoeba-like shapes, possibly a close look at what is left following this silvan disaster. It appears as if the beleaguered tree—read woman, perhaps—has exploded under the duress of its own responsibilities. If so, it's a very impoverished demonstration of

Monk's comment in the *Subjects in Pictures* catalogue about Meigs's more ambitious works (such as her *Purgatorio, a Drinkingbout*, 1981): that Meigs strives to account for "the uneasiness at the realization of her/his responsibility to initiate an action," for the terrifying onus on any individual (especially a woman) to "catch her/himself in the act. Any act." Here, with *The Night Tree*, it is possible to catch Meigs in the act of self-trivialization. Still an act, of course, but not a good one. Monk's five-year thesis—as brilliant and stirring as it often is—seems unwilling or unable to filter out this particular kind of vacuity.

All this leaves Philip Monk on the horns of a peculiar critical dilemma. For it doesn't seem clear how he can move further into feminism without becoming a sort of critical subordinate clause within something larger—something that does not need him as explicator. Nor does it seem likely that he can afford to sit around waiting for male artists to modulate into something more authentic (he has, after all, effectively barred men from postmodernism entirely). What lies in between are more exhibitions of the art Monk feels to be significant. And he is not a man to repeat himself. If raw intellect can provide the necessary footwork, then Monk's next critical stance will assuredly be a virtuoso tap-dance. What shape it will take, when and where it will be mounted, is anybody's guess—probably, at this point, even Monk's. CA

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