

Remarks to honour Carmen Lamanna's naming to an Honorary Fellowship from the Ontario College of Art, delivered at the Graduation Ceremonies, June 3, 1988

Introducing Carmen Lamanna is a little like explaining dada: everyone knows of dada, but noone knows what dada is. Everyone knows of Carmen, but noone knows just who Carmen is. Who is this Carmen?; you will hear it asked in beer gardens in Berlin, coffee bars in Milan, conferences in Ottawa, the streets of New York.

It is hard to answer: you won't find his biography conveniently listed in library indexes; no handsome catalogues describe his career. You will only find, if you look, that those same catalogues will, time and again, discretely state, behind the title page, the phrase "and I would like to thank Carmen Lamanna of the Carmen Lamanna Gallery for assistance in all aspects of this exhibition". Carmen is, perhaps, stories people tell; support his artists count on; Carmen is long, passionately argued letters to harried institutions, or 'institutes' as Carmen likes to call them. Carmen is, in fact, that rare thing - a living legend. It is that legend we are honouring here today.

The past twenty years in this country have been crucial years in the construction of those comprehensions that ultimately determine a culture's self-recognition. Self-recognition is important; it is axiomatic that until one recognizes the self, one cannot recognize others - and recognizing others is what constitutes human intelligence. Those twenty years have been etched with sharp debate, radical manoeuvre, immense production and international action among artists, arts officers, curators, critics and teachers in Canada. Carmen is neither an artist nor a curator, neither a critic nor a teacher; he is simply an art dealer. Yet Carmen has been a central figure in those impressive debates and productions. I want to say a few words about this, to sketch very quickly the dimensions of Carmen's presence.

We have built in Canada since 1967 a remarkable infrastructure of artist-run centres. These centres have become a 'parallel' system to the public gallery and museum network, providing a vital and shifting arena for artists to exhibit their work within a context of intellectual exchange. That arena has meant that we in this country have come to expect a high degree of intelligent commitment and professional engagement. I was a young artist in 1970; I was a founding member of A Space, considered to be the first artist-run centre. And I can tell you that it was Carmen's gallery - his artists and his standards - by which we judged the quality of our own work, and our own demands. It is one thing to read theory in art periodicals from New York or Milan, to understand intellectually the significance of ideas; it is vastly different to encounter the reality of those ideas worked out within our own context. Carmen's insistence - all the more striking for a commercial art dealer - that artworks were not simple commodities, that in fact they must not be commodities, that they were instead ideas which embody 'peculiar' understandings through which to recover a notion of shared experience - these insurances were precisely what we in 1971 wanted to insist on as well. To many of us then, and now, Carmen was a living model, a perplexing and complicated model not easily classified in the lexicon of correct structures. I think that fact itself



has contributed significantly to a different understanding of ourselves, has enriched our debates and productions ever since.

While we face a vastly more complicated context today, the product, after all, of those twenty years, Carmen remains centrally important within that context, as fiercely advocative and committed as he was in 1970. I want to comment on that commitment, because in a curious way it anticipated the recent determination by Philip Monk and others to 'recuperate' our own history, a history we failed to register in the long periods of our historical amnesia. For Carmen, it was never a matter of simply showing good art, of noting and demonstrating production. It has, quite consciously, been a matter of establishing an historical comprehension, of recognizing that this art, these artists, have a story to tell, a country to define. Carmen represents many fine artists, artists like Paterson Ewen, or Murray Favro, or Ron Martin; Colette Whiten, Shirley Wiitasalo, John Scott, Louise Noguchi, Robin Collyer, Joanne Tod ... I could go on. Despite great pressure to do so, Carmen has rarely exhibited artists from other cultures - not because he does not appreciate their work; quite the contrary. Carmen's purpose has simply not been to 'show art'; it has been to show this culture to itself, and to others who will look. And increasingly, others do come, to Carmen, to look. And what Carmen shows them is not just the artists he represents; he shows them what he thinks they should see. This is an appropriate occasion to note that most recently, just last week, in fact, this has included the work of several of this graduating class, work that Carmen believes should be seen. It is this natural curiosity and genuine concern that both sets Carmen apart, and secures him in our History. It is this that we, in a college rich in its own history, wish to recognize today.

Ian Carr-Harris, June 3, 1988

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ian Carr-Harris". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.