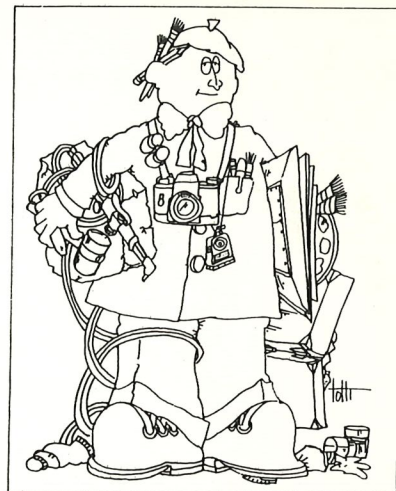


Art

Guarding the avant-garde:
the case for Carmen
Lamanna



Carmen Lamanna Gallery



STEPHEN TOTH

By Adele Freedman

From his little office running off the rear of his gallery on Yonge Street, Carmen Lamanna often hears people screaming insults at his exhibitions or, at the very least, laughing incredulously. This seems only to elicit Vesuvian outbursts of laughter from this handsome, heavy-set Italian who dared Torontonians to run their fingers through the fringes of the avant-garde back in 1966 when he opened on the site of the Dorothy Cameron Gallery. Lamanna was considered an enigma then and no one to this day has solved the riddle of his personality.

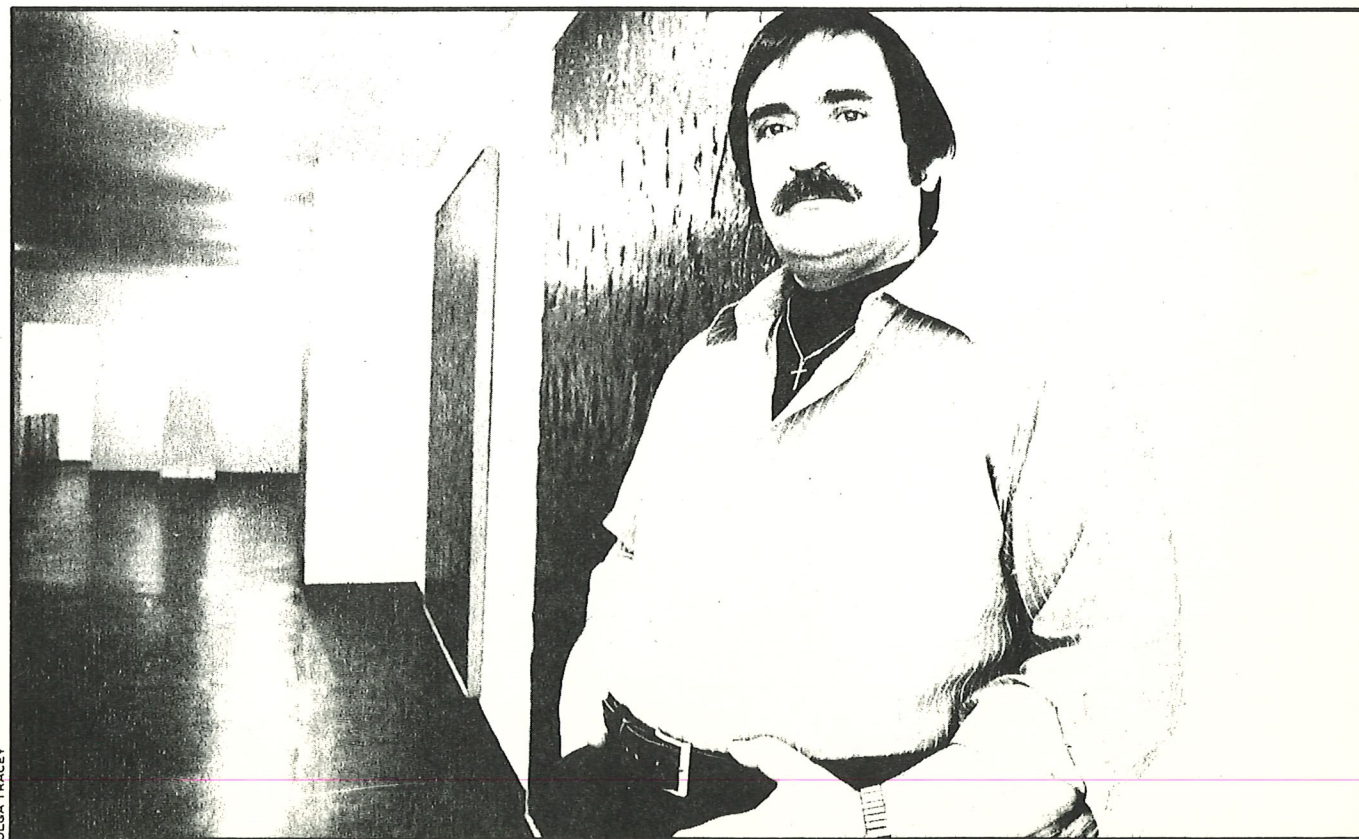
It's no wonder that visitors to the gallery nervously fiddle with their laughter mechanisms and fill Lamanna's guest books with obscenities and long,

dithyrambic outpourings. For once, there are no precedents to consult, no book of art gallery etiquette to tell you what to think. Whether on account of their unsalability, their outrageousness or their conceptual difficulty, works like those on display at Lamanna's do not often grace the refined and frosty premises of most commercial galleries.

Had you been visiting the Lamanna gallery regularly over the last 11 years, you might, for example, have seen large pieces of scaffolding with chains, belts, stocks, racks and clamps used by Colette Whiten to hold men in position while making plaster casts of their bodies. Or the finished fiberglass sculptures of severed arms, legs and torsos exhibited separately on wooden shelves

like so many trophies. Or one of sculptor Royden Rabinowitch's huge steel cones glistening under a layer of the heaviest industrial grease available. Or Murray Favro's half-scale model of a Sabre Jet, not to mention his complete reconstruction of Van Gogh's room. Or works by Robin Mackenzie often sprouting vegetation. Or a complete wooden reconstruction of the interior of the gallery cleverly inserted there by Iain Baxter, alias the N.E. Thing Co. Or even a cheesecloth sculpture by Mary Janitch incorporating photographs, cake boxes, ribbon and a dainty pair of white slippers.

The display of curiosities such as these is strictly in keeping with Lamanna's concern with the innovational



OLGA TRACEY

quality of art and, thus, with its existence in the present. Since the artists exhibiting in his gallery are working now, he believes the response of the viewer must be equally immediate. For Lamanna, "The most important aspect of truly contemporary art is its capacity to free itself from the past. The work is so unique and deals so completely with the present that not even the artist can pin it down in traditional ways."

If not the artist, then who? Often other artists can't decipher these exhibitions. Some, like Dennis Burton, who shows at the Isaacs Gallery just down the street, even suspect that they're not art. "I can't understand his kind of art and I'm an artist," remarks Burton, concluding that "maybe you have to smoke pot a lot to appreciate it."

Other dealers, confronted by one of their colleagues breaking ranks, can be critical, too. Walter Moos accuses Lamanna of "playing the isms game to the hilt." Somewhat highhandedly, Moos dismisses conceptualism as a form of artificial insemination: "I am sure it, too, is on the rise, even without consulting statistics, but I can categorically say to you that the majority of babies will be produced in the usual manner." For Moos, swimming elegantly in the mainstream of art, Lamanna is a vessel stranded in unsavory backwaters.

But Lamanna's lack of orthodoxy doesn't mean that he's a man without a past. Lamanna's life is nothing if not dialectical. Ironically, he may have more of a past than many of his detractors. As *Time* magazine noted in 1970, he's "steeped in the gilded classical tradition of Renaissance and baroque Italy." His father owned a gallery in Monteleone, near Naples, where Lamanna was born, which specialized in 18th- and 19th-century painters. His father was a wood-carver and restorer who passed his skills on to Lamanna.

Lamanna used his woodcarving ability to develop a framing business, but this was only the means—albeit a very good and profitable one—for Lamanna to achieve grander designs. "When I was growing up," he told a journalist in 1966, "I'd say to my father, 'Picasso is already here. But where is the next Picasso?' That's how I feel today. Maybe there is a Picasso here in Canada. I would like to find him."

It's clear that Lamanna is a man with a mission. He couches his conversation in terms of contributing to culture, almost as though his gallery were a large black-and-white ark that might alone survive some inevitable deluge. To hear him talk, Canada's entire artistic future might just be resting on his brawny shoulders, and Lamanna is perfectly prepared to support it with the full force of his personality. This very con-

troversial personality, in fact, is the pedestal on which his gallery rests: "I prefer a gallery that is characterized by a personality rather than a well-defined body of precedents or preconceptions, because only the former makes constant evolution possible . . . I exhibit what has value to me personally on the assumption that it may have value for others as individuals."

Lamanna began his search for the new Picasso when he moved here as a young man. Having broken with tradition by leaving the Old World for the New, he came face to face with yet another tradition, this one of the Canadian variety. It was 1951 and Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven were then the rage. Lamanna "couldn't stop buying" Thomsons. But in 1960, when Lamanna opened a framing shop on Yonge Street, the configuration of the art scene was shifting. Under the banner of abstract expressionism, Harold Town, William Ronald, Michael Snow and Jack Bush began to lead Canadian art out of the woods. The Isaacs Gallery, which opened on Bay Street in 1955 and moved to its present location in 1961, provided the forum for the kind of art that couldn't find a place in the crusty old art societies that preceded it. In the mid-1960s, David Silcox became visual arts officer of the Canada Council and money became available in large quantities for the visual arts. Nonetheless, it was still an act of daring for Lamanna, an unknown figure on the artscape, to open his gallery in 1966. Despite the flourishing scene, many galleries were closing their doors. The general opinion—and it's one that's persisted—was that Lamanna was simply an eccentric.

Apocalyptic premonitions, however, suited Lamanna's ambition perfectly. He sets great store on individual effort. As Royden Rabinowitch remarked, Lamanna is "the paradigm of the individual working alone; he's an old-fashioned 19th-century romantic"—with this exception: He is raising his contribution to culture on the invisible pin-point of the present.

Lamanna began to support artists who were a generation younger than Isaacs' artists, playing the same role that Isaacs had played before him. He sought out artists by pounding on studio doors and following the paths of chance. His first breakthrough came when Kog Reid, wife of Dennis Reid, now a curator at the National Gallery, introduced him to David Bolduc. Bolduc's one-man show was a huge success.

Lamanna took risks. He gave artists in their 20s free rein at the gallery when no one else would even look at their work. Brydon Smith, another curator at the National Gallery, remembers that "something different was happening in

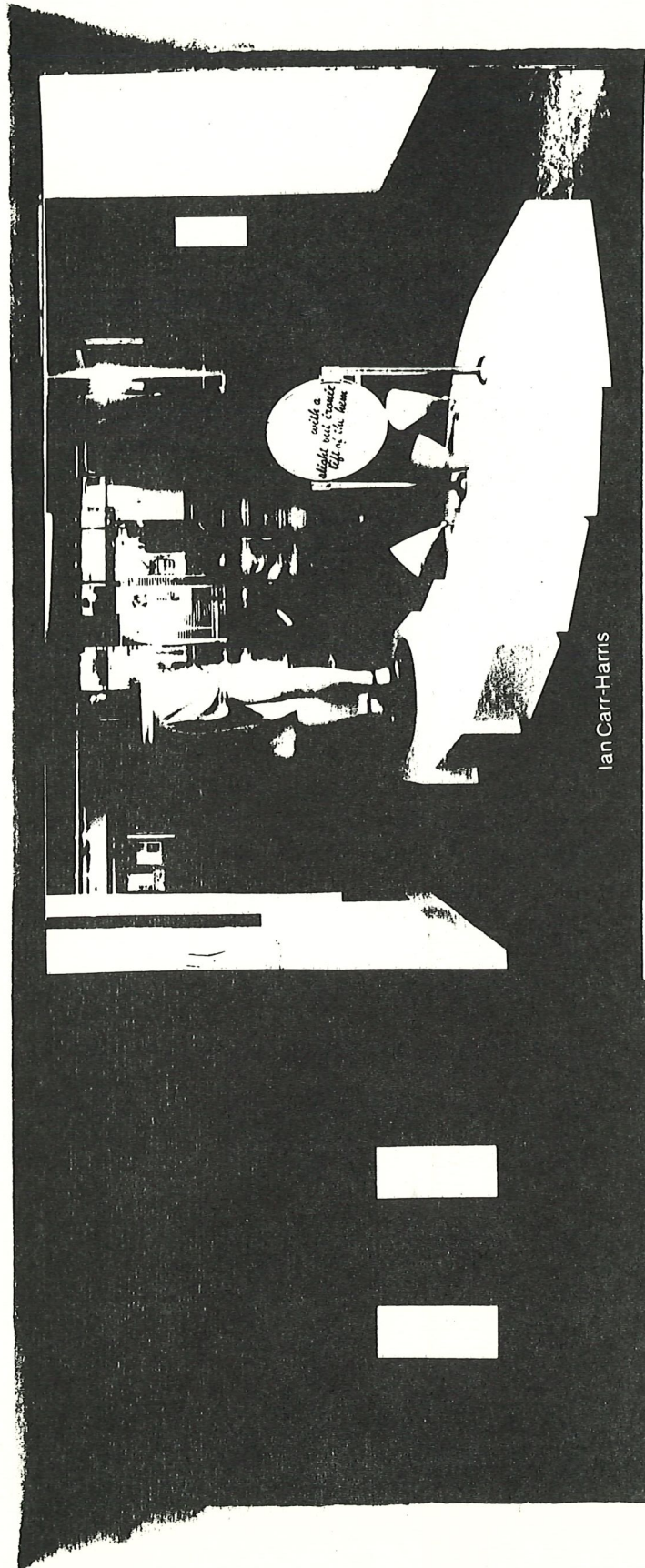
our midst. Lamanna was taking risks on artists who wouldn't sell for at least five years. That's not necessarily a Canadian trait."

His receptivity and support even mystified his artists. "He continued to show me through thick and thin," recalls sculptor Rabinowitch. Another artist comments in the same vein: "Whatever I did, he would stand behind it. To have one person behind you was something. You could crap on the floor as part of your exhibition and he'd trust you."

Lamanna's "odd primitive talent" for flushing out the artistic secrets of the present attracted critical appreciation at once. The adjective "fresh" recurs with such frequency in reviews of his shows in the '60s that he would appear to have been showing vegetables, not art. Gradually, the Lamanna myth began to build. By 1970, critic Barry Lord observed that "Lamanna's commitment has been almost perverse; in a city where even the market for familiar, accepted art can be tenuous, he has followed one difficult show with another, and has suffered the economic consequences." Four years later, Robert Fulford called Lamanna "perhaps the most aggressive and adventurous contemporary art dealer in Canada."

The rise in Lamanna's stature came about partly through his gallery's participation in the third International Pioneer Galleries Exhibition in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1970. Lamanna's was the only gallery invited from Canada, one of only 13 countries that were represented at the exhibition. Writing to Lamanna after the exhibition, organizer Pierre Pauli remarked, "The quality of the figures you have exhibited has been a real revelation to the international public." Thanks to the success of his 12 artists' work in Lausanne, Lamanna became something of an international figure. European dealers and critics sought him out. When they come to Canada, claims Smith, he's the only person they want to meet.

But Lausanne marked a turning point in Lamanna's career in another, more troubling way. After much haggling, Lamanna managed to wheedle \$20,000 from the Canada Council to help defray the costs of transporting his artists' works to Europe. To his delight, seven other countries asked for the exhibition after Lausanne. Thinking that he'd made all the arrangements, Lamanna returned home—only to receive a telegram from Amsterdam announcing that the entire exhibition had been cancelled. Two years later, Lamanna learned that the Canadian government would have supported the exhibition had it been sponsored by any of the Canadian art institutions such as the AGO or the National Gallery but wouldn't allocate



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any more funds to a private gallery. Regardless of the precedent he would have set, Lamanna felt embittered. Here he was, an individual building a collection of individuals for the greater glory of Canada, and he was being stifled. "Since then," argues Lamanna, "I've been fighting. I've put my finger in anywhere, only because I can't accept that. If some crazy guy comes along to do something in the country, leave him alone"—by which he means, support him.

It's this stubborn, combative side of Lamanna that has deepened his enigmatic reputation. "He's more than one person. I can even say he's more than two," says Brydon Smith. Others speak of him as half-saint, half-devil, a man whose entire identity is tied up in his gallery. "The gallery is his alter ego; it goes beyond the bounds of business," claims one of his former artists.

Much of Lamanna's darkness wells out of his self-appointed role as seeker out of the avant-garde. He desperately wants his personal taste, which is, after all, the motivating spirit behind his choice of artists, to be proven right, both in Canada and abroad. He doesn't like making mistakes. And like a father who's raised a brood of difficult children, he doesn't like his artists to leave him—as Bolduc, Guido Molinari and Jean Noël have done. When they do, it's as likely as not to lead to lawsuits.

The precipice looking out over the future is a lonely, even foolhardy, place to stand. It exposes you. Since Lamanna does most of his business with institutions (what individual would buy a greased cone?), it's important for him to feel that the institutions are supporting him. When they don't, he feels betrayed. As Rabinowitch puts it, "Carmen's especially exposed because he's a tester. If Pierre Théberge of the National Gallery won't pick up on his artists, that's it. When he makes a mistake, he'll correct it. He's not sentimental. He's like a dog, sniffing out weaknesses. All the best dealers are."

One can't help admiring Lamanna, despite his alleged Dostoevskian side. He's passionate and committed. Money is not his primary concern. He's put his personality on the line in a way that some dealers would find distasteful, even vulgar. Inevitably, Lamanna's story reminds one of a Captain Marvel episode, but that's the way he's set it up. Will he succeed in carving a palace of art on the cliffs of the avant-garde? Will he sidestep the pitfalls of paranoia or will his insecurity reach out to find an echo in his artists? Whatever the future yields this man, his daring presence lends a touch of most welcome melodrama to the sedate plains of the gallery world. ■