

"Seven Toronto Artists," Artists Space:

John Scott's large and exuberant charcoal-drawn *Tower of Babel* could have been the titular metaphor for this exhibition of Toronto artists. The *Tower* is a heaving pile of mismatched military and cultural apparatus, which culminates in multinational chaos. Communicative systems at odds with each other is a theme that runs through this show, and gives the impression of an art that is at odds with itself. Even the humor, notably in David Buchan's work, elicits an ambivalent response, a slightly chagrined smile. A belly laugh, or any gut level response, would be inappropriate. Instead, the sustained tone is of stylistic and thematic diffidence which perhaps

makes the show, inadvertently, more topical than it would be otherwise.

The work which deals most explicitly with political issues does so in a deliberately ingenuous manner. Scott's pastel drawings of a Skylab hovering over the yellow land mass of China, or the sinister shadow of an airplane labeled "most evil vehicle" gliding over a bright blue earth, are affectionate sketches of the machinery of war and surveillance. The fraudulence of identity dictated by style—barbs are aimed at fashions in art as well as in attire—is the subject of Buchan's ironic work. He appropriates the format of glossy magazine advertising to confront the repressive politics of both the advertisers and the medium from a position that itself seems embattled.

Robin Collyer superimposes high decibel headlines and words designating sounds on pages of Latin text (the universal language of obfuscation) and slightly blurred photographic and video images. The promises of lurid stories are deliberately unfulfilled, and the images of real and emotional noise are silenced. Jerry McGrath's fragile columns papered with irregularly white-washed real estate ads and photographs seem to echo Buchan's swipe at the "latest in support structures" (one of the latter's epigrams about shoes). And, as in Collyer's work, images and text are made illegible, and historical modes of art-making are conflated.

Susan Britton and Shirley Wiitasalo both set the multiple against the autographic. Britton's photographs are mounted within loosely painted frames. Her subjects are emblematic (a greeting card kitten, studded boots, an astronaut) and captioned ("the dark ages," "complete corruption," "victory"). Are these clichés put to expressive use, or emotive subjects deliberately depersonalized? Wiitasalo restates the question with figures which are stenciled on canvas. In one, a disembodied arm places the arm of an unseen phonograph on a record, which is paired with a congruent and unexplained gray ellipse. Characteristically, the subject is missing: the person extending the animate arm, the phonograph supporting the mechanical arm. Again, the question is whether Wiitasalo made these choices in the belief that elision creates dramatic tension, or that attempting to express a dramatic situation is a futile enterprise.

Paul Campbell's photographs present topographical maps of landscapes created by mass-produced items—toys, bits of cloth, Dynel. This is his contribution to the examination of the most highly reproducible elements in our cultural domain. As in other works in the exhibition, the point is thoroughly, if not stridently, driven home that we are living in a time of humbled circumstances.

—NANCY PRINCENTHAL