

## at the galleries

# Wealth of creativity not enough to live on

By ELISSA BARNARD  
Staff Reporter

Artists don't like being poor, says Scott Marsden, curator of a show about the lives of working artists.

Marsden, a Toronto visual artist who has a "secondary" job as an arts administrator to survive, wants to destroy Canadian myths that artists are "the people who live in the lofts and they like to be poor."

In Working Artist Exhibition, at the Centre for Art Tapes to Feb. 24, artists from Vancouver to Halifax reveal how hard it is for them, as individuals, to live and create.

Halifax video artists Cathy Busby and Melody Calvert comically dramatize the frustration of an art gallery director who makes \$16,000 a year and dreams of winning the lottery.

Toronto's Debbie O'Rourke depicts an arm shooting up out of a pile of laundry to bend its fist, clutching a pencil, over a drawing board. A Vancouver couple makes a case for an artist's living wage, while Montreal painter Vivienne Pearson angrily carves a waitress, with gaunt face of sunken blue shadows, in a florid pink bar and grill.

Marsden's own work, the painting Culture Should not be for the Elites of the Boardroom, depicts artists trying to break through to the boardroom where rich people, who can afford to buy art, are blind to artists' problems.

The real life of the artist, as depicted in the show, is one of struggle to survive economically, often by working in a non-art field, and

to find time to produce art.

"Artists are in a limbo," says Marsden, "because it's very difficult to establish your own work when you don't have the money to do it and you can't depend on Canada Council grants because they're too few and far between."

"The gist of the show is saying art is work but it's work people love to do and they want compensation for that work because they see it as a job. It's not a hobby," says Marsden.

"In a lot of other countries, artists have a lot of support and are given certain rights."

About 60 artists sent in slides to Marsden for The Working Artist, a presentation of the community arts committee of the A-Space gallery, Toronto. This exhibit exposes the problem. Now Marsden is planning a Part II show, for late spring, which will be called Critical Visions and will have artists suggesting solutions.

Then he'll put a book together.

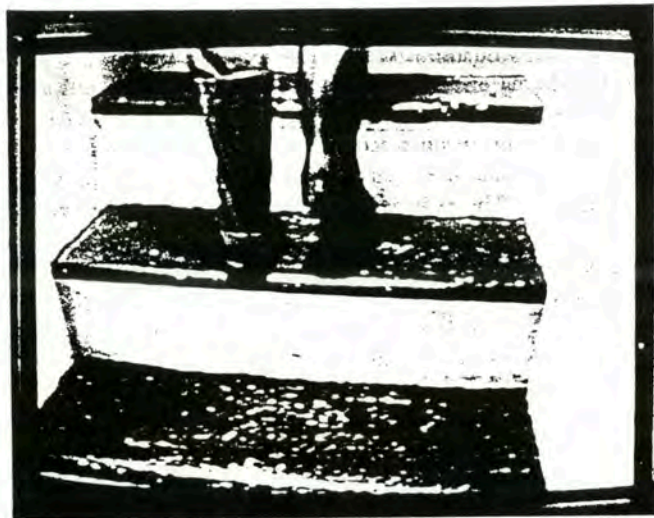
"Everybody who's an artist knows what this is about but nobody has ever made a show out of it. Artists want control over their own lives."

## Rare close-up of photographers

"Though not a report, the photographic documentary is a denunciation of violence, racism, injustice," writes Quebec photographer Pierre Crepo.

Michel Campeau writes in a

Hold the exterminating



Donna James, still from *Maigre Dog*, 1990, colour video, 7:40 min.

scene in which we see hands quickly thumbing through a small booklet of open landscapes interspersed with text which relates to the experience of leaving and being left (is *leaving* a singularly Maritime obsession?). It is an inviting beginning, but the remainder of the tape seems unfocused and inconclusive in terms of narrative, theme or image. Contemplative images of a figure in a bathtub, moving trains and flowing water never satisfactorily form a canon to the opening cadenza.

Donna James, a black photographer with roots in the Caribbean, explores, in *Maigre Dog*, vernacular language through two perspectives. The soundtrack has James, her mother and family friends discussing interpretations of idiomatic Jamaican expressions such as "No blue boots to climb eleven steps," and "Like a maigre dog he turns around and bites you." In the foreground are simple domestic images of a broom sweeping a hardwood floor, flour being sifted, a burning hearth and a houseplant. The substance and images of daily life are bathed in the language which arises from them. There is some poetry here but James omits images of the speakers themselves. Empty of humans, *Maigre Dog* has a strangely hollow feel and neither the images nor the soundtrack have sufficient resonance to fill the void.

The final work of the program was Karen Bondarchuk's *Heartblock*. As an alumnus of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design's video program, Bondarchuk displays a felicity and facility with the medium working with multiply layered images and sounds. Juxtaposed and crossfaded onto sequential images of a car being started and brought "up to speed" are the images of the editor in control of the technology which is creating this very videotape. This creates a compelling "strange loop" in a Hofstadterian sense with a recursive causality chasing its tail as we try and map it on this Möbius strip. A voice-over narrative gives the clinical details of a condition known as "Heartblock" (medically incorrect as a physician in the audience informed me but

therapeutic accuracy is hardly the point here). As we are told about the ever more acute symptoms of this heart-block/heart-attack, the video imagery staggers in response as the driver and editor struggle to control their respective vehicles. Finally video-arrest takes place and the tape slides into techno-death.

The screening was followed by high energy performances by Halifax rap artists J-Roc and D.J. Jo Run, who are part of the group *Down by Law*, as well as the premiere performance of a new all female rap group known as *M. C. Shy Love*. Both groups brought the crowd to its feet with provocative and political lyrics, and dynamic and high energy dance. This juxtaposition of video images and rap music struck me as singularly apt, for the rapid fire lyrics, the staccato movements, the repetitive choreography and the arresting imagery of this voice/movement medium were a faithful doppelgänger of the video medium. Like the editing of rock-videos or up-tempo television, the barrage of images is relentless. The rap lyrics and choreography have no contemplative space. Their ever permuting shape forces the viewer into receiver mode, racing simply to absorb and not drown in information overload.

The Centre for Art Tapes is planning a national tour of *Out of the Center* later this year. These voices and their images are indeed "out of the Center" for Halifax is nothing if not on a geographical/economic/cultural margin.

— CHRISTOPHER MAJKA

PARACHUTE 59

## WOMEN WORKING THROUGH HISTORY

## PROGRAM 6

*Women Working Through History* invokes several processes. The most fundamental of these is simply paid and unpaid labour: women's contributions to an entire sphere of production — conspicuously unwritten. Much of the work presented in this programme is informed by the kind of revisionism so essential to Western feminist thought. More than any other political movement in history, Western feminism has steadfastly insisted on the *personal*, bringing to the forefront areas of life previously considered irrelevant to 'real' political struggle. As a result, entirely new realms of investigation have emerged: division of labour in the domestic sphere, socio-economic conditions of women's labour, theologies of sacrifice, ideologies of representation, legislation of women's bodies, sexuality, the Unconscious — to name but a few. New epistemologies are in the making as history's oversights, its safely guarded borders, are being traversed and *worked over*.

**Say It**  
Sherry Moses/  
Colleen Finlayson  
1987, video, 8 min.  
Alberta  
*Video Pool*

**Keep the Home**  
**Fires Burning**  
Sara Diamond  
1988, video, 45 min.  
British Columbia  
*Video Out*

**A Woman's Work is**  
**Always Done**  
Tamithy Basaraba/  
Jennifer Babcock  
1987, video, 2 min.  
British Columbia  
*Artist*

**Girls Just Wanna**  
**Have Funds**  
Cathy Busby/  
Melodie Calvert  
1987, video, 11 min.  
Nova Scotia  
*Canadian Filmmakers*  
*Distribution Atlantic*

**Reportage Bresil**  
Nancy Marcotte/  
Collette Loumede  
1987, video, 16 min.  
Quebec  
*Groupe Intervention Vidéo*

**Proud Women,**  
**Strong Steps**  
Producers: Skyworks for  
Women Working With  
Immigrant Women  
1988, film, 35 min.  
Ontario  
*DEC Films*



*Girls Just Wanna Have Funds*

We were many coming from different countries, we had hopes and expectations... We didn't understand the language, we had difficulty to communicate.

Those are the first voices in Barbara Badessi's *Distant Voices* and, indeed, they are distant. Between 1928 and 1971 some 1.25 million people (my parents included) passed through Halifax's Pier 21: the gateway to a promised land. Propelled by famine, war, pogroms and poverty, they came from distant shores, pouring through the slim neck of this human funnel. Badessi, who herself immigrated to Canada in 1985 from her native Italy, was drawn into its now empty corridors now inhabited solely by pigeons. Silently the camera roams the deserted hallways and looks out over the harbour where freighters still ply the waters, their horns echoing across the water. "Where are those people?" the camera seems to imply, "Can we still hear echo of their voices?" They had both difficulty to and in communicate(ing), but Badessi's voice is clear.

*Distant Voices* was the first of five short videos presented as part of the Center for Art Tapes annual *Out of the Centre* presentation at the Pub Flamingo. All are the products of a video production scholarship program which gives video-

graphers (both novice and not) with a promising idea \$ 500 plus \$ 800 in production services to produce a five minute tape. The resulting works were organized and curated by Liz MacDougall, the Center's production co-ordinator.

Cathy Busby is one of the driving forces behind *Lifesize*, the woman's film series/festival/seminars based at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. In her video, *Survival in a Suitcase*, she becomes a voyeur of life in transit. Busby's subject is the drama of existence as condensed through travel. Fear, indecision, parting, sorrow, joy and anticipation — all are inflamed by change and centrifuged into transit lounges by the revolving baggage carousels. Unlike Badessi, who also is sensitive to the drama of transitions, Busby intrudes literally into her subject becoming an on-screen commentator who offers such banal truisms as "There's baggage that you need and baggage that you don't." Ultimately, her camera shies away from showing the literal and metaphoric dimensions of change and, as Jan Peacock observed in the program notes, "life-in-transit at the Halifax airport remains circuitous and bland..."

Kim Truchan's video, *Conjunctions*, opens provocatively with a