

Joseph Plaskett

Winchester Galleries, September 7 - 27, 2008, September 11 - 25, 2008

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Self Portrait Holding Brushes

VICTORIA, BC

JOSEPH PLASKETT

Brian Grison

THE FOCUS OF JOSEPH PLASKETT'S ART IS HIS OWN PERSONAL WORLD AND HIS FRIENDS.

THIS THEME, WHICH CAN BE LOOSELY CHARACTERIZED AS THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE ARTIST,

AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH IT THAT VIEWERS DEVELOP, IS UNCOMMON IN CONTEMPORARY ART.

IT RESULTS FROM PLASKETT'S PREFERENCE FOR ART THAT RADIATES A DISTINCTLY NARRATIVE

AND PERSONAL ATMOSPHERE.

Self Portrait Holding Brushes could be a self-portrait in a mirror, but it also suggests that someone knocking on his glass door has disturbed Plaskett at work. He portrays himself with a handful of brushes as he approaches the glassed door; he must be busy with a painting, but not too busy to welcome someone. His refracted face and hand suggests the tricky relationship between his social and working life.

There is another possible meaning to a self-portrait through the beveled glass of a door about to be opened by the depicted artist that is worthy of a brief comment. Plaskett's position relative to the door (if that's what it is) and the viewer's position relative to the painting implies that the viewer is the visitor and that he or she (or us), rather than Plaskett, is (or are) the subject of the painting. His willingness or not to open the door is a sign of Plaskett's uncanny ability to be simultaneously present and aloof in his art. One suspects that he has studied the

psychological geometry of *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez.

In *Pink Cloth with Teapot and Grapes*, Plaskett is offering us a somewhat tamed and casual still-life compared to the extravagance of his former Parisian dinner tables set for several guests. Here he is still domestic, but there is a gentle quaintness that conveys the Englishness of his more recent countryside home, of which the teapot is a lovely metaphor; in France it would be a wine bottle. In this painting, the wine has been restored to its more prosaic form, though the classic form of their bowl still hints of frivolity. The pink tablecloth is also a touch luxurious, as if to remind us what a generous host Plaskett can be. The composition is also telling; his still-life art in Paris, with their mirrors, tall wine glasses and huge bouquets of flowers, suggest French elegance. Here, the casually scattered tablecloth, the random position of the teapot, grapes and smaller ceramic items, is less formal, as if his life has become more

like an English garden than Versailles.

Plaskett has made numerous quick soft pastel travel sketches throughout Europe. These drawings are as much psychological self-portraits as they are views of well-known places. *From 119, Boulevard St. Germaine*, is as much about the atmosphere of historic presences within contemporary Paris as it is an evocation of Plaskett's long romantic relationship with the ageless City of Light. The predominant blue of the sky and street in the drawing, coupled with Plaskett's impressionistic style, suggests a balcony view of the city by Claude Monet, or one by Daguerre in the early days of photography. It would be interesting to know if Plaskett deliberately sketches views that have been captured by nineteenth-century artists.

The particular lesson that Plaskett's art reminds us of is that like the accumulation of human wisdom, we live in the, albeit frail, wisdom of history. The apparent nostalgia of his art is not a longing for the past as much as it is a reminder that our culture, for all its historic and contemporary faults, is rich with human meaning. This is why Plaskett has lived in Europe most of his adult life, and why he furnishes his homes with the detritus of the nineteenth century.

Joseph Plaskett is a romantic of Western Europe before the Great Wars. His art evokes a gentle bohemian social culture that is now almost non-existent, even among artists, and therefore seems old-fashioned. He prefers the settings and props of an earlier era, but his subjects are nevertheless contemporary. In this sense he is a time traveler, affection-

ately observing the present world from self-imposed exile in a slower, calmer era; this could explain his playful presence and absence, almost as an optical illusion, or inquisitive cipher hovering in the background, in many of his paintings. Since the early 1950s, he has been an expatriate in several ways. Important among these is his refusal of abstraction; he is too sociable a person to reduce the world to the grim solitude of squares, circles, or gestures, a way of painting he learned from Hans Hoffmann in New York in the 1950s. He is an expatriate from both colonial and contemporary Canada; this land is both too young and too busy for his tastes; what passes for contemporary leisure here is too fast for the time required to experience the fullness of his artistic and personal affections. □



Pink Cloth with Teapot and Grapes

EXPOSITIONS

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 Winchester Galleries:
 2260 Oak Bay Avenue,
 Victoria, BC
 TEL.: 250-595-2777

September 7 – 27, 2008

796 Humboldt,
 Victoria, BC
 TEL.: 250-382-7750

September 11 – 25, 2008