

*Vancouver artist Roy Arden became aware of Al Neil in the late 70s while a resident at the artist-run gallery, Pumps. His interest in Neil's presence and influence in the Vancouver scene has maintained itself over the years. Vancouver has not displayed distinct lines of aesthetic "tradition" from one generation to the next and yet it is with artists such as Neil that one can discern a subtle and sustaining influence, virtually underground but nonetheless pervasive. With his recent body of collages, Arden claims, Al Neil has begun to make that spirit public.*

## Music, Medicine and War: Al Neil's Collages

Roy Arden

*"Give up philosophy because I'm an old man? It's at the end of a race that you break into a burst of speed."*

*Diogenes*

Al Neil is 61 years old. In his lifetime he has been a music student, a soldier, a junkie, a jazz musician, a drunkard, a writer of a picturesque autobiography, and most recently – an artist who has been pouring out the stuff of his life and mind in a flood of elegant and disturbing collages.

From 1966 to the present, Neil lived in a beached house-boat on the north shore of Burrard Inlet. This is the same rocky beach that was once paradise for Malcolm and Margerie Lowry. The similarities between Neil and the author of "Under the Volcano" extend beyond a fondness for drink and an interest in the Kabbala. While it would be folly to go too far in comparing Neil to a genius of Lowry's stature, it might not be disingenuous to suggest an affinity to one of Lowry's protagonists – Bill Plantagenet from Lunar Caustic.

For the past few years Neil has spent much of his time with fellow artist and companion Carole Itter at her historic Strathcona house. It was in this more comfortable dwelling that he began his latest string of collages. The new work differs markedly from the collages and assemblages that

Neil exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1971. These earlier works displayed a playful irreverence towards the "fine art" status of the art object that was in keeping with the attitudes of that period's avant-garde. More importantly, their subject was contemporary and topical; they now seem dated – tokens of an era. In contrast, the new pieces exhibit little worry of revealing an educated and cultured aesthetic, albeit a bruised one.

From the nomadic prerogative of the post-modern, Neil has widened his scope; all history becomes fair game for his musing, the collages become voyages on a "drunken boat" through time, space, and emotion.

This harvest near the end of a life is the result of an unswerving attentiveness to the eternal Logos which few men ever hear. Like the German artist Wols, Neil found his truth by the sea – "in the little waves of the harbour which are always the same without being the same."<sup>1</sup> It's not surprising then that his collages often mimic the formal structure of the tidal pool. Instead of driftwood, shells, and seaweed, however, we find fragments of snapshots, esoteric religious images, and medical illustrations. Throughout his life Neil has demonstrated a commitment to a poetic of the real. Collage is the most important artistic innovation of the twentieth Century. Neil has practiced it with respect for its tradition, one which

stretches from Schwitters in the 20s to Rauschenberg in the 60s. Had he felt the urge to express the sublime through the abstract (which is latent in all his work) to the exclusion of the bric-a-brac of this world, we would have missed out on a fascinating inventory that speaks in a worldly vocabulary accessible to all who have the will and the stomach to hear it.

Powerful and authentic, the works come not from any professional commitment, but from an inner necessity; “not chance, not aleatory, but true intuitive combine from the centre spoken.”<sup>2</sup> The charged presence of the works originates in the same poetic necessity that informs the art of children, the insane, and the animistic cultures of the past.

The first of the new collages were seen at a solo exhibition at the Western Front Gallery in 1983 entitled “*Codices*”. In a later two-person show with Carol Itter (Coburg Gallery, 1984), Neil introduced a thematic structure for his project in a trinity of categories: Music, Medicine, and War.

*“War is the father of us all and our king. War discloses who is god-like and who is but man, who is slave and who is freeman.”*

*Herakleitos*

“*Rotterdam/Amsterdam 44-45*”. A large collage on military brown paper contains a yellowed photo of one of the artist’s wartime buddies posing on the beachhead at Normandy just after D-Day. He stands, in mock surrender, with his hands on the captured German helmet that crowns his head. Below the snapshot are various continental bank notes and a laundry ticket. The collage surface is a compost heap of torn scraps that give it the look of an aerial view of a bombed-out city. The whole is held together by Neil’s calligraphy which he has referred to as an “unknown language”. In the context of this work, the scratches, lines and blotches remind one of blood, waste, shrapnel, and hair.

Standing back from the scabrous surface, a face begins to emerge. Faces or masks often lurk within Neil’s work but this one is the most haunting and memorable. Deep furrows are suggested around the eyes making them seem great, grave, and sad. This then is a portrait of the King. Resignation rather than outrage characterizes Neil’s artistic treatment of the war theme. Neil is a pessimist. He sees no end to war, the only relief he offers is contained in the clownish grin of his friend in the photograph. Peace, at best, is a matter of moments to be savoured in one’s personal life.

Another collage addresses the theme with a more contemporary face – Ronald Reagan’s. A postcard of the president shows him in his acting days playing the part of gangster or G-man. Caught in the act, his hand holds a bundle of crisp bills. Below the Grecian Formula president is an old illustration by the physiognomist Cogle of the typical facial features of “vain and lustful men” – Reagan’s profile is an apposite match.

Neil has said that nuclear war is his greatest worry. This would be mere gratuitous lip-service if his life and work didn’t testify to the fact that the bomb has already gone off within him.

*“The psyche lusts to be wet and die.”*

*Herakleitos*

In this trinity, the Son exists via the metaphor of Medicine. Like Antonin Artaud, Neil the hypochondriac presents himself as a “case”. His hocus-pocus style (the hoc est corpus meum of the sacrament of the Eucharist) says “shit to the spirit”.<sup>3</sup> This is my body – take it or leave it.

A triptych entitled *Doctor Bogoch’s Opinion* contains three photocopied pages from a medical report on the artist. In grueling and banal detail it lists specifics of the artist’s condition. Number of bowel movements per day, consistency of stools, quantity of alcohol and drugs consumed, condition of liver and kidneys; evidence of a self-abusive life style and a bad conscience. As he spurns the Masterpiece as a symbol of a culture that espouses Civilization whilst practicing Barbarism, so he spurns his body – allowing it to decompose as a cipher of the decomposing god that we have all killed.

Neil is the latest in a heritage of modern artists, from the Dadaists to the Beats, to emerge from the battlefields at war with themselves. "Whosoever despises himself still respects himself as one who despises."<sup>4</sup> This is perhaps the key to his thanatos and his survival. The wounded surface of the collage documents the artist's sufferings and reflects the sufferings of the viewer. We are all of us *compagnon misères*.

The brush work in the centre of the panel of the triptych grows out from the centre in every direction; east, west, north, south. The spinal motif that is constant in his work now becomes the trunk of a tree with its attendant roots and branches. The life of a tree, the matrix of a life, the fate inscribed in the lines in the palm of a hand. "Character is fate" said Herakleitos, so the artist offers an estimation of his own at the bottom of the left panel. From a favourite book on the history of magic he has torn an illustration by Cogle which contrasts the "lips of a mendacious and lustful man" with those of a "modest and temperate man". The latter is circled in ink and captioned, with some mendacity – "Me". If Neil's torment seems tainted by vanity, it is the boast of one who knows that "the consolation of those who experience death gradually must be the fact that they are the only one who have some notion of how life is made up."<sup>5</sup>

*"Opposites cooperate. The beautifullest harmonies come from opposition. All things  
repel each other."*

*Herakleitos*

Introduced to music at an early age through the sombre world of the Conservatory, Neil proved himself a keen student and a prodigious talent. After the war he immersed himself in jazz, which, along with Buddhism and heroin, provided an alternative to the classical western culture that had become bankrupt in light of the atrocities of the war and the fluorescent nightmare of Eisenhower's America. In the 60s he strayed from "straight" jazz to explore the possibilities of a collage approach to improvisation and multi-media performance. He pushed the limits of his music to an idiosyncratic extreme with a belief that everything was permissible if it genuinely emanated from the locus. As of late, Neil has expressed a desire to return to the classical jazz that was his first love, abandoning to some degree, the avant-garde posturing that became his trademark.

An untitled collage from Neil's last exhibition at the Coburg Gallery addresses the theme of transcendence through music. At the centre of this work a report card from his early music studies accredits Neil with "first class honors" – a reminder of the prosaic hierarchy of a music culture that places a premium on technique and "progress". In the upper right corner hangs an image of a sleepwalking woman in a gauzy nightdress; she glides towards us bathed in the otherworldly glow of a full moon.

Faint horizontal lines seep through the entirety of the image, traces of the music which only she can hear. Below, and to the left of the somnambulist is another image of divine transportation; literally floating on clouds are two women/angels from an ancient Chinese painting. A caption reads, "...emerged or descended from similar Dionysian rituals of intoxication/ if we wish to plunge backwards in time..." Yet beneath that text is a plate from Botticelli's Neo-Platonic treatment of "*The Divine Comedy*"; standing on the high ground of paradise, Dante and Beatrice gaze up at a sky pregnant with the tiered multitudes of a heavenly choir. The accompanying text informs us "that the highest choirs derive their bliss from seeing". In what is probably the most understated sample of drawing to be found in Neil's oeuvre, a circle and a square effortlessly described across the surface gently gather the accumulation of appropriated materials together. To see Neil in performance is to witness him acting as his own physician. A soul physically affected, he has made a project of his illness. His utilization of Medicine as a metaphor for human mortality leads us to the actual medicine of his life – music. Music is the means by which we can hope to achieve the levitation of matter, rest from the chore of becoming, and dwell for a while among the gods.

In another collage music merges with medicine graphically when blood-like tachist spatters or notations for loud noises seem either to come out of or attack a medical illustration of an ear. Elsewhere, the calligraphy is reminiscent of Michaux's mescaline drawings and Masson's automatic drawings. In Neil's case however, one could speculate that

musical notation rather than the écriture of French Surrealism or Cy Twombly served as a paradigm. These confabulations in ink sing in mumbo jumbo – the grand mumbling of the unconscious. They don't describe so much as evoke the eurythmic consistency of nature whether discovered through a microscope or telescope.

Having come through six dangerously lived decades in one piece, Neil now enters the post-modern arena with a project which is poetic in nature and encyclopedic in dimension. A traditional approach to history aims to record, order, and study events with the belief that what is learned can be transformed into power. Neil's undialectical and static conception of history places him outside of such an endeavor; he views history much like Benjamin's *Angel of History* as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage".<sup>6</sup> The angel is propelled into the future by the storm of progress, his face turned towards the past with its dead – whom he wishes to awaken, and the ruins – that he would reconstruct. Traveling through all time and all territories, Neil lifts heterogeneous signs, souvenirs, and images from their sources, resets them in new positions and activates them with the touch of an elumineur. The resulting conjunctions and disjunctions manifest ruptures that threaten to dissipate the world in a plethora of possible meanings.

To act without a total picture of life is foolish, yet modernity leaves us without the possibility of such circumspect a vision. Rather than contenting himself with the role of the specialist, the artist asserts his authority over all matters. "Fools have big wombs"<sup>7</sup> – Neil's forte for foolishness is thus probably the key to his enduring creative energy. At once a symbol of fertility, the womb is also a vessel. It is empty, and then full as life springs from its void. The artist declares – "All is false"<sup>8</sup> and suddenly everything is possible.

These collages betray a desire for immortality that can be best accounted for with a quote from Neil's "*Remembrance*" of his friend Sam Perry: "There was nothing saved and nothing learned. So he shot his brains out." Near the end of a race, the artist breaks into a burst of speed with a signally urgent intent to summarize – like some mystic Diderot – a life's worth of experience and revelation. Neil is a survivor, and we are the benefactors.

## Footnotes

All quotes attributed to Herakleitos and Diogenes are from Herakleitos and Diogenes , translated by Guy Davenport, Grey Fox Press, 1976, San Francisco.

1. Part of an aphorism by Wols (Alfred Wolfgang Schulze, 1913-51) from Wols – Watercolours, Aphorisms and Drawings , Werner Haftman, Koln, 1963.
2. Al Neil, from 7 rue Neale in Slammer , Pulp Press, Vancouver, 1981, pp. 71.
3. Shit the Spirit is an article by Antonin Artaud – “...spirit...That grub of expelled wind that wanted to give itself substance without taking the trouble to earn it.” “The spirit was never anything but the parasite of man, the ringworm of his worthy body...” Artaud Anthology , ed. Jack Hirschman, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1965, pps.110-111.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Epigrams and Interludes”, Part 4 of Beyond Good and Evil , translated by Walter Kaufman, Random House, Toronto, 1966, p.81.
5. Artaud Anthology , pp. 25.
6. Walter Benjamin, Illuminations , Hannah Arendt Ed., Schocken Books, New York, 1969. pp.12–13.
7. The first sentence of Kora in Hell by William Carlos Williams, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1957.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, “European Nihilism”, in The Will to Power , translated by Walter Kaufman and R. Hollingdale, Random House, New York, 1968. “The end of Christianity – at the hands of its own morality (which cannot be replaced), which turns against the Christian God (the sense of truthfulness, developed highly by Christianity, nauseated by the falseness and mendaciousness of all Christian interpretations of the world and of history; rebound from “God is truth” to the fanatical faith “All is false”; Buddhism of action)”.
9. Al Neil, “Sam Perry – A Remembrance”, Vancouver Art and Artists 1931–83 , Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983, p.152.