

This series of essays  
on emerging Canadian  
artists is sponsored  
by THE FRASER ELLIOTT  
FOUNDATION in memory  
of BETTY ANN ELLIOTT

[ Spotlight ]

# Swinging Lumpen



Recent work by **Steven Shearer** rocks the conventions of high art  
By Roy Arden



ABOVE: *Manpile (small version)* 1998  
 Photolaminate/acrylic on canvas  
 188 x 180 cm Photo Chris Gergley  
 Collection of Allan & Sandy Switzer

OPPOSITE: *Activity Cell with Warlock  
 Bass Guitar* 1997 Plywood,  
 upholstery, aluminium  
 145 x 244 cm Photo Chris Gergley  
 Courtesy Monte Clark Gallery

I am in Steven Shearer's studio, it's almost midnight and we've dropped by to have a beer and see his latest work. His first completely hand-rendered paintings since art school, they are fluorescent, apocalyptic visions of heavy metal concerts. If they were less expertly executed they could pass for the tribal, folk-art expressions of a suburban fan. Our attention is diverted from the art by the arrival of three young artists who have arrived to jam in the adjacent studio. We join the weekend rockers as they plug in their amplifiers and tune their instruments. Shearer picks up a guitar and starts to play a solo from Led Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker" with remarkable facility. The other artists soon beg us to leave, as Shearer's virtuosity is an inhibition to the enjoyment of their nocturnal hobby. As we depart, I ask Shearer why he quit the guitar when he had innate talent and years of training behind him. Musical ability has always seemed magical to me, so it puzzles me that anyone



ABOVE: *Cradle of Filth* 1998  
Acrylic on canvas 140 x 104 cm  
Photo Chris Gergley  
Courtesy American Fine Arts Co.

OPPOSITE: *Metal Archive #2* (edition of 5)  
(detail) 2001 Archival ink-jet on photopaper  
122 x 91 cm Courtesy American Fine Arts  
Co./Monte Clark Gallery

would discount it, especially after they had mastered the craft. Shearer explains that having spent his adolescence practicing the technique of heavy metal in his parents' suburban basement, he came to disdain both the musical genre and the notion of rock stardom. Shearer also loved to draw and so, faced with his parents' ultimatum to go to school or get a job, he enrolled in art school, at Emily Carr in Vancouver.

After school, Shearer made a reputation for himself with paintings combining text and geometry in a questioning of notions of expressivity. Since 1996, when he returned to figurative art, he has produced several distinct bodies of work that focus on youth and those forces that aim to affect or control it. These forces are driven by different motives. While profit is the indisputable goal of the entertainment industry, other forces are more ideologically driven. Modernism has its own youth program, rooted in the Enlightenment's elevation of children and childhood. For modernism, all creativity is identified with childhood, and the nurturing of childhood creativity is seen not just as responsible parenting, but as the means to ensure the future of civilization.

*Activity Cell with Warlock Bass Guitar* (1997) is a construction of fine birch plywood with fitted cushions in bright orange and aqua that is derived from a 1960s modernist design for a "teen recreation module." Shearer has placed a Warlock bass guitar inside to suggest an activity a young person might pursue in the

cozy playhouse. However, the cartoon Gothic aesthetic of the guitar is somewhat at odds with the liberal, modernist ethos of the module's design. A companion piece in the form of an edition of green vinyl stickers which read "A GEOMETRIC HEALING SPACE FOR YOUTH" points directly to the problem of *Activity Cell*—these types of structures were created in the belief that modern design could affect or control behaviour; the sublimation of potentially destructive, primitive energies into positive, enlightened creativity was the goal. The Warlock guitar is at odds with any such healing; its very name invokes dangerous medieval magic. It could stand as a figure of the youth whose rebellious spirit resists the behaviour modification of the cell and defeats it—or is defeated by it. We are not invited to enter the cell; this isn't a piece of what has come to be known as "service art." Instead, "Do Not Enter" labels assure us that this is an autonomous artwork, and neither a naively utopian attempt to rejoin art and life nor a cynical capitulation to art as entertainment.

Shearer first exhibited *Activity Cell* surrounded by a group of silkscreen paintings collectively entitled *Puff Rock Shiteaters*. If the *Activity Cell* harks back formally to the literal realism of American minimalism, the *Puff Rock* silkscreens directly recall the Pop Realism of Andy Warhol. These paintings depict the fabricated teen stars of the 1970s, those created by the corporate music industry to provide an affirmative, or less threatening, version of rock and roll for younger or more strait-laced consumers. Shearer has gleaned images of teen acts such as the Heywoods, the Partridge Family and the Osmonds, and reconstituted them as formally austere tableaux. Some of the *Puff Rock* paintings play with the folk collage of the unauthorized "sneaky snapshot" pages of the fanzines, leaving us to ponder the significance of their formal resemblance to classic Dada and avant-gardist collage.

Most of the *Puff Rock* paintings present iconic portraits of feminized pubescent boy-stars. The portraits of Andy and David Williams, Leif Garrett and Shaun Cassidy speak both to the dubious ethics of an industry that treats children as sex commodities and to the Aquarian ideal/fantasy of male androgyny. These paintings are complemented by a text-only poster in black and white that reads "Puff Rock Shiteaters/Sexualized Mormon Children." While some have mistakenly interpreted them as presentations of objects of desire, the *Puff Rock* paintings are closer to self-portraits. A similar confusion surrounded Richard Prince's *Girlfriends*, a series of appropriated snapshots of semi-nude biker girls taken by their boyfriends and published in biker magazines. When attacked for supposedly re-victimizing the biker girls, Prince argued that these subjects were proud to be pictured, and did not need more inhibited and upper-class people to protect them. Furthermore, his own relation to the subjects was one of identification rather than desire—Prince didn't want to *have* the biker girls, he wanted to *be* a biker girl. While Shearer may not now envy his *Puff Rock* subjects,



## Shearer has visited his working-class heroes upon the sacred, monochrome ground of high modernism

he is concerned with the constructions of masculinity and heroic artishood that both he and they have had to negotiate.

The silkscreen-on-canvas technique pioneered by Warhol and Rauschenberg came to be so identified with them that few artists have ever dared exploit it. It is not until the late 1980s and the direct, truth-telling works of Cady Noland that we see an artist make good use of what could and should have become just another viable medium. Shearer employs the medium in a subtly different manner than previous artists. He avoids the sloppy registration and drop-outs of Warhol, Rauschenberg and Noland, and aims instead for a careful and precise printing in “process” colours that refer to the material basics of mechanical reproduction. In his use of a wide array of media including silkscreen, photography, readymades, construction, installation, painting and drawing, he appears to have taken his cue from artists like Noland, Sigmar Polke, Richard Prince and Martin Kippenberger, all of whom employ a wide variety of media and quote freely from both high art and popular culture.

In the 1950s, the Museum of Modern Art published a book prescribing art and craft projects for children that were ostensibly inspired by modernist or avant-garde works. Artists who exhibited primitivist traits, like Picasso, were especially paradigmatic for this exercise in modern art as therapeutic craft. In his *Craftmonster* series of silkscreens on canvas, Shearer has blown up the grainy black-and-white images he found in this and similar books and, in some cases, infused the images with colour. Thus, the images have been returned to the high-art substrate from which they were supposedly derived. In *Cradle of Filth* (1998), a photo of a collage made by a child from a messy tangle of string, undoubtedly inspired by Jackson Pollock, has been returned to the gallery wall. Shearer has added nasty stains of brown and red and as with all of the *Craftmonster* series, he has borrowed the work's title from a death metal anthem. Other paintings in this group depict the child-artists themselves, shown in pleasurable or violent contact with the raw materials of their art or performing “primitive” dances behind grotesque masks. Again readable as ironic, readymade self-portraits, these works have titles such as *Diabolical Conquest*, *Entangled in Chaos*, *World of Shit* and *Hatework*. The association of death metal and modernist art therapy brings out the perversity of the latter and diminishes the shock value of the former. Perhaps, in providing a controlled, cathartic means of emotional release, death metal has succeeded where modernist art therapy failed. Another work with a death metal title, *Invocation of the Continual One* (2000), appears as a prefab aluminium garden shed. The door is locked but light seeps from beneath it while a very loud sound system shakes the shed with frenetic, demonic guitar playing. Is the music an attempt to exorcise a demon, or is it a form of possession—a demon itself?

Another series, *Swinging Lumpen*, extends Shearer's research

into adolescent culture. These works are made from colour photographs heat-laminated to canvas; each consists of a cut-out photo on a bright, process-colour monochrome ground. The photos are all copied from snapshots of proletarian suburban teen life in the 1970s that the artist found in a discarded photo album. As in *Manpile* (1998), a rough-cut collage of blue-collar testosterone, the people here are invariably depicted while partying, or on the morning after. The things depicted are symbols of a lifestyle and culture: muscle cars in need of body work, stereo systems set up like shrines, electric guitars and household pets. The documentary nature of these photos induces an unease in viewers whose class guilt is unresolved; the act of appropriating personal photos also always feels like a violation unless the pictures are so old that the subjects are no longer living. Yet against the clean, emblematic monochrome grounds that have become an instant device for referencing modernist art, these slices of lumpen life are sometimes tender. *Slumber* (1998) shows a young tattooed father asleep in ubiquitous baby-blue briefs and curled around an infant in diapers. The formal treatment of the work elevates the snapshot to an iconic level that recalls the great sacral paintings of the past. As Caravaggio once placed common, contemporary people in his religious scenes, Shearer has visited his working-class heroes upon the sacred, monochrome ground of high modernism.

The nature of Shearer's identification with his subjects becomes abundantly clear the next time I visit his studio and see a new series of collages derived from his own personal snapshots and his metal archive (a collection of heavy metal imagery culled from the Internet). The difference between the two sets of images is negligible. In his own photos he poses proudly at 15 with his collection of electric guitars, or at 17 with his black Firebird Esprit. Another photo shows him at 12, fully decked out for a KISS look-alike contest at the mall. The Internet photos depict amplifiers, rare Black Sabbath 8-track tapes and other memorabilia. These two groups of images, the one autobiographical, the other anthropological, are combined in seemingly casual compositions reminiscent of Richard Prince's “gangs,” Hans-Peter Feldmann's “bilder” or Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*. The ruse of this formal approach is that a *beaux-arts* approach has been abandoned in favour of a casual, scrapbook-style accretion. However, since the classic period of conceptual art, this type of composition has become a mannerism, subject to subtle connoisseurial laws.

In spite of the affectation of casual concern, Shearer's art is as refined and sophisticated as his subjects are raw and real. His works present themselves as catalysts for serious discourse on the intersections of youth, class, modernism and culture. Whether mining his own life experiences or turning an anthropologist's eye on the larger world, Shearer's taut, critical poetic is at once personally, aesthetically and historically necessary. ■