

DIRECTOR'S CUT

DIANA SHERLOCK

Perhaps more than any other Calgary artist-run centre, Stride Gallery has often been known to adopt and exude the personality of its Director of the day. So perhaps it is fitting that Stride has decided to kick off its 25th- anniversary celebrations by forefronting the former Directors' artistic practices — artistic practices that often went on the backburner while they were running the gallery — in *Role The Directors' Show*. My practice is a curatorial one so, in the context of this 25th anniversary exhibition, I chose to bring together for the first time nine paintings gifted to former Gallery Directors by infamous Calgary artist and long-time Stride Gallery Board Member, John Will. Situated within the Stride Gallery's office, *Director's Cut* is a small exhibition within *Role - The Directors' Show*.

In many cases, these paintings were specifically produced by John for the Gallery Directors and presented, on behalf of the Stride Gallery's Board, to each Gallery Director (and later, Assistant Directors) on their departure from their positions at the gallery. They are gifts from the artist to the Director, or more rarely the Director, because of an intense attachment to the subject, has pilfered the painting from the artist's studio for her own collection. In fact, stories as to how some of the paintings came to reside in their current collections vary wildly, casting suspicion on the provenance of some of these works. Regardless of how these paintings entered the individual collections, together these works are a testament to John's generosity and denote a set of particular personal and professional relationships that have characterized the Stride Gallery since its start in 1985.

John's relationship to the Gallery Directors was most often solidified over a beer, wine or scotch. He is well known for arriving at the gallery, strategically, around closing time to discuss a very important point of gallery business that needed to be attended to immediately over a suitable libation at a nearby local haunt. Indeed, in hindsight, it is amazing to recall how many crucial schemes and dreams regarding the gallery's future first started on a Friday afternoon to be resumed later at the next opening or board meeting. A healthy dose of gossip and heated, but always good-natured, sparring and jarring over semantics, bureaucracy and politics characterized these afternoons, and substantially shaped the gallery and its face in the community. In this way, Stride continues to be defined by, and sometimes criticized for, its clubhouse management style, which *if you're in the house*, is often a very pleasurable and efficient way to do business.

Little did we know at the time, these seemingly innocent social forays or long office chats with John were, in fact, part of his intense research process that would result in the production of one of his *most* important series of paintings. Second to the Director, John remains Stride's most constant fixture behind the office desk that doubles as the opening bar. So for this installation it seems fitting to seat us all here once again in this tiny gallery office that is Stride. These nine paintings, which span 20 years of Stride's 25, trace a sliver of John's prolific artistic production. Replete with spelling errors, John's clever, caustically-coloured witticisms belch a truth in lies about the Directors, the gallery and John himself. These paintings reflect characteristics about the Directors keenly perceived by John during his obscure mentorship of us while we worked at the gallery.

In these paintings, his characteristically self-deprecating aphorisms and/or sardonic self-aggrandizements tell the story of a gallery and a community that survives, if not triumphs, in the face of adversity. As is the case with much of John's work, each painting was produced in response to a particular incident, story or in-joke. Many of the paintings demonstrate a point in common or contention between John and the Director. Certain perceived, and without a doubt exaggerated, personality traits rise to the surface of these paintings — heated, steadfast, idealistic, demure — although it often remains unclear what being highlighted, the gallery,

the Director and/or John. For example, Aurora Landin and John share an affinity for rapid-fire word play and the particularities of language that can still be witnessed today if one catches a glimpse of the two sparring over this or that current affair at a local casino. Her painting *A ROAR-A LANDIN*, the first to be gifted to a Stride Director and hang in the gallery office during her tenure, typifies Will's wordy wit and the type of character necessary to keep the doors of a small artist-run centre open.

John often perceptively highlights the Gallery Director's conflicted relationship with the gallery, an all-consuming position that Directors sometimes love to hate, but hate to leave. Cast as the Devil himself, John, and his tempting cohorts, Calgary painter and Board member Chris Cran and Director Shelley Ouellet, offer us a "*Show in Hell*," a.k.a. Stride on 11th Avenue, literally the *hottest* gallery in town. Lissa Robinson's *Moana Lissa* and my *P.A. to D.S.*, which is accompanied by a framed Paul Anka 45 of his single *Diana* from 1957, tell turbulent love stories. Similar in execution, John borrows another lyric, "She sits in the treetop all day long..." from Bobby Day's 1958 *Rockin' Robin*, to paint a third sweet serenade for Robin Arseneault.

Full of innuendos, many of these works hint at how the survival of the gallery has always teetered on the brink of impropriety. Collaged to the surface of the paintings, less than flattering paparazzi-style photographs of Ouellet, Robinson and Black capture Stride Gallery's seedy underbelly. *Moana Lissa* and Anthea Black's *THE MARKET'S HOT NOW! (and as you can see, so am I.) BUY!!!* overtly expose John's play with sexuality and gender, a hotly debated topic at Stride given that almost all of its employees have been young women who strongly identify as feminists. Other gaps between theory and institutional practice might also open up for critique in Pavitra Wickramasinghe's *PAVITRADARSHINIWICKRAMASINGHE* and, for the only boy in tow, Kyle Whitehead's *Sloppy No*.

Hilary Knutson acquired *A Fairly Small White Painting* during an impromptu visit to John's studio with Diane Colwell after a day of conducting interviews for her replacement at which she recalls being "flabbergasted at the sheer volume of work in the [John's] studio." She attempted to buy the work from John, but, as is his way with those he knows well, he just gave it to her; a suitable complement to Hilary as outgoing Director and to her interest in text-based conceptual art practice at that time. The way in which

Hilary acquired her painting, on the spur of the moment, but not without consideration, speaks loudly to John's generosity and perceptiveness as an artist and a mentor. In some ways, it also reflects the spontaneity and generosity the gallery has attempted to cultivate and maintain during its 25-year history. Without a doubt, each painting holds a prized and, dare I say, priceless place in each of our hearts, and this too is likely the way most of us feel about Stride.

— Diana Sherlock, 2011

Biographies

John Will was born in Waterloo Iowa. He received his MFA at the University of Iowa in 1964. In 1965 he was awarded a Fulbright to Amsterdam. He arrived in Canada in 1971 where he has resided ever since. His work has been shown in many local, regional and national group exhibitions and numerous one person shows. He has taught at various institutions including The University of Calgary, NSCAD, Emily Carr, the University of Wisconsin/Stout and the The Banff Centre. With Jeff Funnell he was the co-founder of Artists Anonymous but has since fallen off the wagon and currently tries to makes work about nothing.

Calgary independent curator Diana Sherlock was Stride Gallery's Director from 1996 - 1999. She has produced exhibitions for Stride Gallery, Calgary's Artwalk Festival, the Edmonton Art Gallery, Nickle Arts Museum and Walter Phillips Gallery. Her interests include display culture, exhibition histories and collecting practices. Sherlock publishes regularly in catalogues and contemporary art journals including *Canadian Art*, *FUSE*, *Blackflash*, *Ceramics Art & Perception* and *Border Crossings*. She teaches in the Liberal Studies Department at the Alberta College

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gallery hours: Tuesday – Saturday, 11 am – 5 pm

exhibition dates: January 7 – February 11, 2011

ISBN: 978-1-897551-11-0



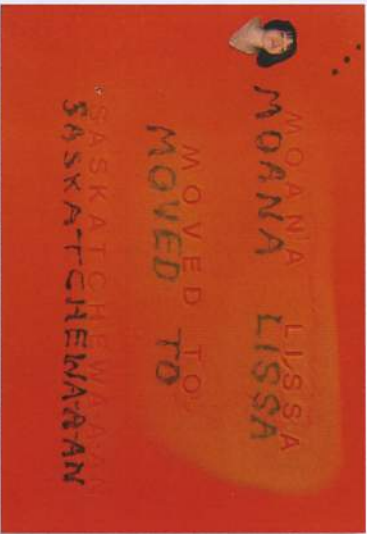
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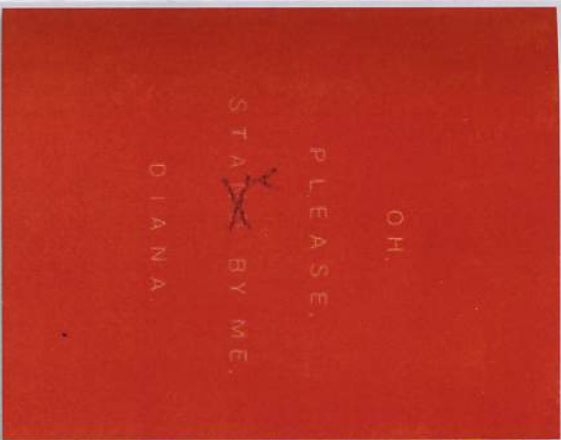




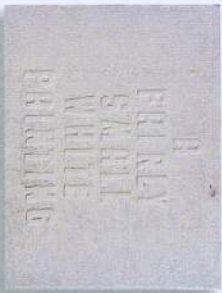
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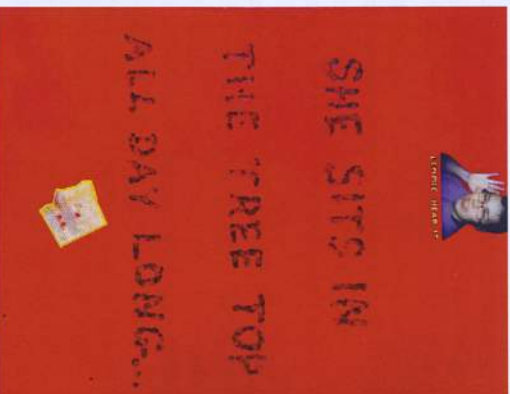
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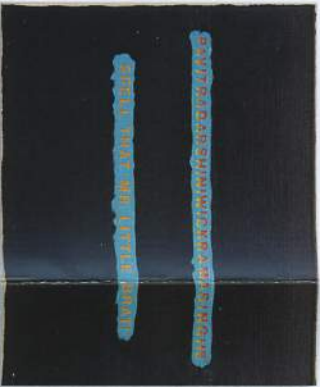
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List of Works (a.k.a An abbreviated history of Stride)

1. *Aurora Landin*, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 46 cm, March 1990 Collection of Aurora Landin
2. *Would you like a Show in Hell*, acrylic paint and photograph on canvas, 105.5 x 96.5 cm, August 1994 Collection of Shelley Ouellet
3. *P.A. to D.S.*, acrylic on canvas, 61 x 50 cm, August 1999 Accompanied by a framed Paul Anka 45 of Diana from 1957. Collection of Diana Sherlock
4. *To R.R.A.*, acrylic paint, photograph and newspaper collage on canvas, 80 x 68 cm, June 2001 Collection of Robin Arseneault
5. *Moana Lissa*, acrylic paint and photograph on canvas, 40.5 x 51 cm, May 2003 Collection of Lissa Robinson
6. *PAVITRADARSHINIWICKRAMASINGHE*, acrylic on canvas, 41 x 51 cm, May 2004 Collection of Pavitra Wickramasinghe
7. *THE MARKET'S HOT NOW! (and as you can see, so am I.) BUY!!!*, Sharpie and photograph collage on newsprint, 33 x 28.5 cm, November 2004 Collection of Anthea Black
8. *A Fairly Small White Painting*, acrylic on canvas, 15 x 20 cm, 2008 Collection of Hilary Knutson
9. *Sloppy No*, acrylic on canvas, 15.5 x 20.5 cm, April 2010 Collection of Kyle Whitehead

Many thanks to John and everyone who graciously agreed to loan their John Will paintings for the exhibition.

Curator: Diana Sherlock
Gallery Director: Lisa Benschop
Brochure Design: MN Hutchinson
Printing: Keystone Graphics