

Northern

Carte Blanche Vol. 2 reveals a wealth of Canadian talent

Canada is envied the world over for its vast open spaces, progressive social values, and its exploration of the inadequacy of visual perception inherent in the paintings of Will Gorlitz. Ring familiar?

By Jacqueline Nunes

If not, then certainly your national pride shines when considering the paradox of blending freefall invention with the ruthless reorganization of shapes and patterns most common in the works of Fiona Ackerman... and don't get me started on Peter von Tiesenhausen. Actually, while most of us would be hard-pressed to name even a single Canadian contemporary painter, that's precisely the impetus behind the new book *Carte Blanche Vol. 2*... to "open the eyes of Canadians to the vastness of artistic talent in this country," says MaryAnn Camilleri of the Magenta Foundation, the Canadian publisher behind the series. "Carte Blanche Vol. 2 is a testament to something most Canadians don't even know exists."

Camilleri, who founded the Magenta Foundation, Canada's first arts publishing house, is the catalyst behind a *Carte Blanche* series that also includes *Vol. 1: Photography*. A native Torontonian, MaryAnn worked in the New York City arts scene for

ten years, collaborating with major art-book publishers, such as Phaidon, Powerhouse and Abrams, before a trip home convinced her that she was needed in her native country. "I realized there was an abundance of Canadian talent and no significant person really doing anything to help propel it," she revealed to a journalist in 2005. "So I decided to give Canada an arts publishing house." A year later, the Magenta Foundation published *Carte Blanche Vol. 1*, an anthology of Canadian photography. The book contained the work of 226 Canadian photographers, whittled down from more than 1000 candidates. Among the contributors were well-known names, such as Edward Burtynsky, Yuri Dojc and Christopher Wahl, who shared the spotlight with younger, emerging artists.

"An important aspect of the *Carte Blanche* books is that they're internationally distributed," says Clint Roenisch, a Toronto-based independent curator. "They bring Canadian artists all over the



The Fight (Reichertz), 2 of 7, 2007, oil on canvas, 87 x 67 inches / 221 x 170.2 cm.

Opposite page: *Red Man/Black Cartoon (Cran)*, 1990, oil and enamel on board, 60 x 48 inches / 152 x 122 cm.

The Beer Hall (Fitzgerald), 2005, acrylic and caulking on canvas, 216 x 144 inches / 548.6 x 365.8 cm.

Psych Test (Gilmore), 2007, mixed media on canvas, 90 x 72 inches / 228.6 x 182.9 cm.

world.” Roenisch, co-curator of the *Carte Blanche Vol. 2* exhibition with David Liss, the Artistic Director of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, reveals that the first volume helped many Canadian photographers get work in the United States and around the world. He has high hopes that *Carte Blanche 2* will raise the profile of Canadian painters internationally; “Canadian art remains under seen and undervalued,” he exclaims. Of course, Roenisch hopes the book will also raise the profile of Canadian painters in their homeland, where most citizens are unaware of a Canadian contribution beyond the Group of Seven. “Unfortunately, people are intimidated to go into galleries and museums,” says Roenisch. “They’re missing out on the vitality of Canadian paintings.”

Flipping through the book, Roenisch offers a preview of that vitality. Pausing on a landscape by the Winnipeg-based painter Wanda Koop, he points out that she channels the rich tradition of Canadian landscape with a contemporary twist – her acidic, Day-Glo palette and blocks of colour “break the illusion of the landscape,” he says. Mike Bayne, an emerging artist based in Kingston, Ontario, paints suburban scenes that look like photographs. “Only when you get up close to one in person,” says Roenisch, “can you see the brushstrokes.” Small and dense, the paintings evoke a feeling of claustrophobia. “Like what it’s like to be young and think that you’re never going to get out of the neighbourhood you grew up in,” he adds.

Another emerging painter, the Vancouver-based Angela Grossman, describes her work in *Carte Blanche Vol. 2*. “I was taught that to add anything to a painting that wasn’t paint was basically very wrong. After ‘painting’ for many years, I got bored... [now] I rip, smudge, tear, scrape, draw, bleach, splatter, strip, drip, cut, scrub and sponge on a daily basis. My hands look like shit.”

The Montreal-based “mid-career” painter Sylvain Bouthillette combines Buddhist and punk-rock imagery in his work. One painting of a skull with wings and a polka-dotted party hat subverts a Chinese propaganda slogan, which now reads: “The monks shall inherit the earth except for a very thin layer at the surface.” In *Carte Blanche Vol. 2*, Bouthillette writes, “My work is always on the verge of total compositional disintegration, echoing the notion that everything in the universe is made of energy in motion... The task here is to transform a material object, a work of art, into a conveyor of spiritual energy.”

Like the paintings it showcases, *Carte Blanche Vol. 2* gives off a palpable energy – it makes you wonder why so few of us know about the talented painters in Canada. And while a lack of government funding may be partly to blame, the creators of *Carte Blanche Vol. 2* insist that the book doesn’t have a political message. “The strength of Canadian painting – that’s a political message,” says Roenisch. “Despite the lack of government attention, Canadian painters keep painting.” In that context, *Carte Blanche Vol. 2* is a vital book. “What publishing does for any artist’s career is help validate them,” Camilleri told a journalist prior to the release of *Carte Blanche Vol. 1*. “And it also gives validation to the collector, the dealers, the galleries and the people who rep them. Books are an integral part of an artist’s career.”

Perhaps then, the only thing left is to wonder what realm of underrepresented Canadian art will Camilleri and the Magenta Foundation shine their spotlight on next. “I’ve always envisioned four volumes of *Carte Blanche*,” she says. Though she keeps the future of the series well guarded, the dramatic impact of these initial two volumes assures us that there remains a diverse wealth of talent hiding across Canada’s renowned vast open spaces. In his preface to *Carte Blanche Vol. 2*, Roenisch describes how the early paintings of a famous Canadian painter were stashed away for years in a barn somewhere in Grafton, Ontario. “Welcome to Canada,” Roenisch writes, “a country full of barns.”

R.T.H. except for (Bouthillette), 2006, oil, spraypaint, acrylic, collage and charcoal on wood, 90.6 inches / 230 cm diameter.
Green Zone (Colour Bars) (Koop), 2006, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 inches / 61 x 91.4 cm.

