

Book Review “26”

26 is a book that illuminates the spirit of Toronto painter Michael Davidson – an artist in search of “the factual language of the invisible”. It is a one of kind publication that comprises four intricately woven and intimate essays written by Davidson’s partner and artist Nicolle Collins, art historian Ihor Holubizky, contemporary painter Francois Xavier-Saint-Pierre, and Father Daniel Donovan. The numerical title signifies the address of Davidson’s primary studio and residence in Toronto. Actually, the font type printed on the book cover is a replica of the number on the house.

26 is not a survey of Davidson’s work that spans over twenty five years. The eleven color plates included in this publication feature Davidson’s recent pictorial investigations from 2001 to 2006. With nine other plates 26 lends itself as a collaged reality composed through juxtaposition of photographs, quotations, poems and reflections by other artists, including a very “cool” album cover of *Jazz at Massey Hall* designed by Canadian artist Arnaud Maggs for Debut Records in 1953, and a delicately charming *Random Doodle*, a pencil and ink drawing by Davidson’s daughter Matilda to whom this book is dedicated.

Davidson’s art has been shaped by his art historical awareness of the modernist painterly abstraction of Willem de Kooning, Phillip Guston and other members of the influential New York School, as well as by his

traveling and interests in photography, music and literature. But how does Davidson's homage to modernist language of abstraction fit within a post-modern criticism of painting and its pretenses to sublime, spirituality and universality of aesthetic form? 26 brackets itself outside of post-modern concerns, reminding its reader of the proximity between art and life rather than claiming that painting is not dead.

In her essay, *True Believer*, Nicole Collins writes: "I live with some of these paintings. I sleep next to two of them and eat in front of one. What could be more intimate? These paintings are witnesses to our lives". Collins' essay distils Davidson's genuine vision for painting, and the spirit of the communion between the two artists and their perseverance in making paintings.

The concept of freedom of expression in art is central to Ihor Holubizky's essay *Brushes with Freedom*. Holubizky and Davidson share an avid interest in music and Free Jazz of 1960s. In fact, Holubizky associates Davidson's intuitive and painterly approaches to abstraction with jazz performance that rests on improvisations. I find this essay very engaging as Holubizky's uncovers the symbiotic relationship between art and music and reminds us of the importance of listening to music and finding the notes that are not there.

Francois Xavier Saint-Pierre writes on Davidson's painting *Chushingura* (the title refers to the story of the forty-seven samurai). Saint-Pierre links the qualities of this particular work to his notion of painting as a way of slowing down and stretching the time. Saint-Pierre's analysis of temporal and sensuous aspects of painting, may lead one to think about painting practice as an antidote to our culture of speed and dematerialized images.

Father Donovan's essay, *Art and the Spiritual*, offers delicate and valuable discernments between religious and spiritual art, and the concepts of *art for art's sake* and the *art for life's sake*. "Although all good religious art is spiritual, not all spiritual art is religious in this explicit sense" writes Donovan. He associates the word spiritual today with the idea of the human spirit and artists who see themselves as "...creative agents, as people reacting against this or that external force or situation, affirming themselves, questioning limits, seeking meaning and authenticity". According to Donovan, the contours of such struggling spirit are materialized in the work of Canadian painters such as Betty Goodwin, John Brown, Harold Klunder and Michael Davidson.

With each essay offering a lens onto Davidson's pictorial expeditions concluding with an afterword written by the artist, 26 conjures up a value that is not so openly discussed in contemporary art theory – art as an act of

faith. 26 is a publication that will enthrall anyone who loves painting and wonders about its magical ability to convey the invisible to us.

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