

CLIFF EYLAND

RICHARD MUELLER

RECENT WORK



Three small squares, one green and two red, are set in a ground of saturated colour in Richard Mueller's 1986 work *Is Red More Wicked Than Green?*, an acrylic and paper abstract painting. That is all you need to know about a much more complicated painting in order for me to make two quick characterizations of Mueller's work.

Firstly, Mueller is a natural colourist who delights in strongly saturated paint. Secondly, and one can read this between the lines of his artist's statement, Mueller's painting grows partly out of his life as an art educator, someone who continues to be art-educated himself through teaching at the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design and the Technical University of Nova Scotia School of Architecture in Halifax. Mueller's native enthusiasm, combined with a deep respect for students, opens him out to many artistic discoveries.

The recent works in painting and sculpture mark a significant development for Mueller. For several years he has made investigative, formal paintings which easily align themselves with a certain long pedagogical art school tradition. If nothing else, *Is Red More Wicked Than Green?* is an analysis of the visual elements of painting; colour, line, form, material, perspective, and emotional weight are juggled for effect. Such painting gives one the sense of going over the evidence of an artist's quiet, philosophical play.

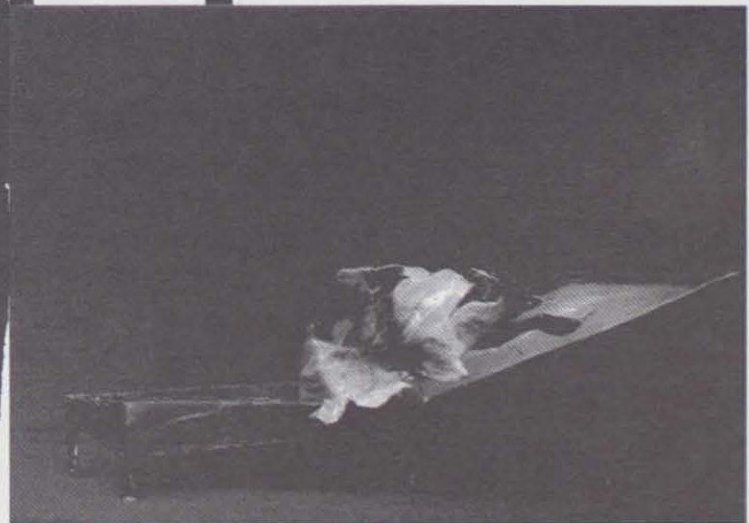
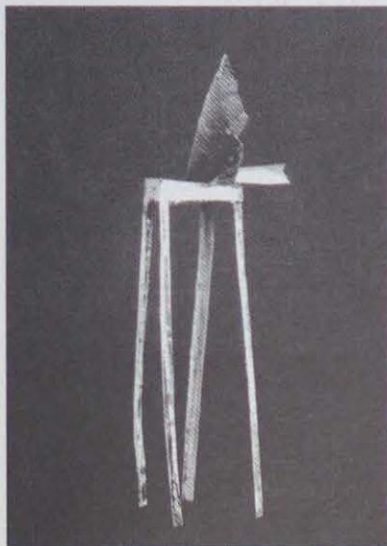
The recent works, however, add loaded imagery to formal play, setting the philosophical mix on edge. These paintings, sculptures and drawings participate with much other current art in the politics of environmental catastrophe. For Mueller, the

references to toxins highlight an essential paradox in technology, which he characterizes as being simultaneously symbolic of human annihilation and human salvation.

The artist's experience of the Emergency Training Centre for the Department of National Defence got the work started. Halifax is the location of a major armed forces base in Canada, and the military occupies many scattered sites around the city. Witnessing emergency training procedures at the base as he drove past on route home, Mueller was intrigued by one particular set-up of boxes used for training in fire fighting. He arranged for a full tour of the facility and the current imagery is a distillation of a broad range of images he made out of the experience.

Painted and sculpted flames shoot through many of these pieces. Thickly applied colour is sometimes complemented by a line of wire or a piece of sheet metal, giving some of the work the look of stray bits of military hardware - a metallic high-tech look. The surfaces of the paintings are scumbled and overpainted into rich portrayals of acrid smoke and searing flames. Many of the works are painted on, or cut out of, aluminum, a very thin support, and sometimes paint is scraped through, exposing a shiny ground. Tar, paint and metal combine to convey the repulsive 'beauty' of toxic chemicals. Like a rainbow patch of oil on the road, pollution can look good.

There are a number of repeated images in the paintings and sculptures: open boxes (sometimes on wheels and sometimes not), smoke and flame. Other images occur only in the earlier works, for example, a wind sock and some scaffolding.



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A PROGRAM IN PROGRESS



In my last year at the Maryland Institute of Art (1969), after completing six years of continuous art training, it occurred to me that art instruction, in appropriating traditional and current conventions, either focussed on the development of mimetic skills through formalized drill, or encouraged a random search for direction in a non-structured survey of media. Exercises were assigned, and assumed relevant to a fixed order that existed somewhere "out there." Generally students entered art school with vague notions of making art, and no real sense of what that meant. Most mastered the essential skills with varying degrees of success. Variations of approach, within the parameters of a problem, were considered indicative of a developing personal style, with little attention to the corresponding thought (or lack of thought). The eventual message was, given a basic repertoire of techniques, "anything goes." Art making had by then seen the impact of Dada, Abstract Expressionism, Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptualism, each rich in its own rhetoric, each unquestionably modern, each distinctly disjointed.

My response was to feel somewhat lost. I realized the properties and limitations of the various "schools", and had effectively worked my way out of having a particular subject matter. I could draw, paint, and sculpt from a set-up, but it all seemed somewhat repetitive and futile. Once the formal class exercises were removed, and I had to work alone, I became bored with the flash of Expressionism, and was seduced by the intellectual play of Conceptualism. My ideas were racing, but my adopted techniques and conventions provided no personal program.

Interested in perception and the way in which we understand the world, I found myself looking for some way to devise an imagery expressive of my ideas. Conceptualism seemed locked into dry academicism, as abstraction grew increasingly mannered. Each had evolved a contemporary and relevant vocabulary, but while one enshrined the primacy of material and process, the other renounced it. Abstraction, in its focus on surface and medium, compromised "content." Conceptualism, appropriating various natural or contrived systems, sacrificed spontaneous dialogue between concept and object. One satisfied my need for intellectual input, and the other encouraged me to rethink the role of the object in art.

The relevance of painting has been an ongoing debate in modernism. It is tempting to assume a certain static two-dimensionality in painting, and disregard the intimate interaction between the object/symbol and viewer. In their broader potential for cultural meaning, through various mechanisms of association, objects serve as powerful fixed physical symbols within an expanding network of ideas, some mundane, others profound, but all significant in the endless struggle toward a knowable "reality".

Striving for poignant reasoned imagery, relevant to circumstances of time, space and intellect, I seek works that come together dynamically through the working process. Elements within each work assume certain roles in an underlying conceptual drama. Interacting within rhetorical contexts, these "events" describe, through metaphor, the essential dialogue between our conscious selves, and the mysteries of the objective world.