

feature



# Doug Robinson at arm's length (reconsidered)

ARTISAN GALLERY (NOW AARON ROSS GALLERY), VANCOUVER

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by Didier Spinks

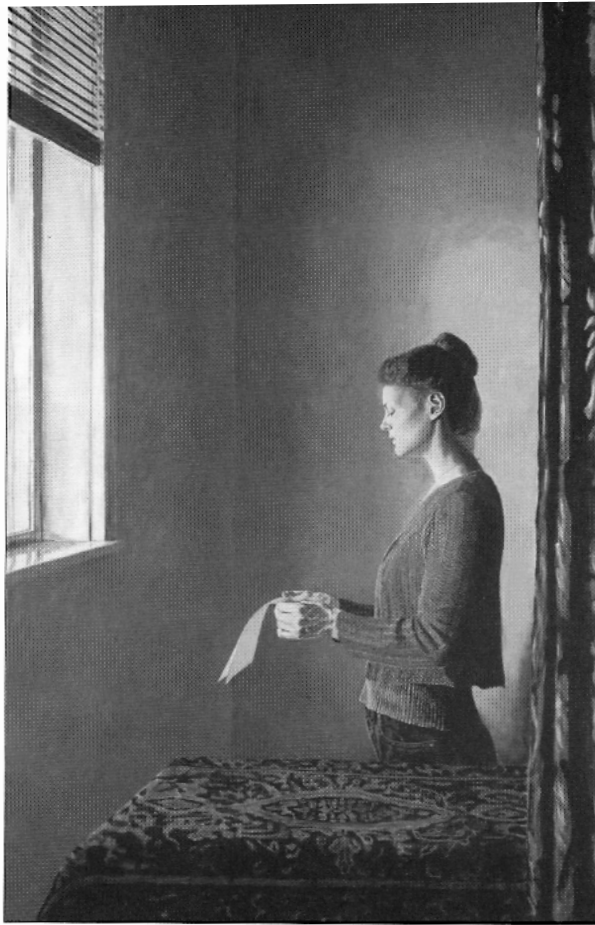
Guided by a review by Dylan Cree published in the Spring 2002 issue of *Artichoke* [VOL. 13, NO. 1], my attention was drawn to the mathematical strictures by which Doug Robinson's contemporary paintings are said to be governed. The review posited that Robinson's prevailing strategem is a structuralist enterprise; one that, instead of a concern for human figures and feeling, generates portraiture out of a fundamental interest in geometric forms. Although I am somewhat reconciled to the broad-stroked assessment that a mathematicality guides Robinson's hand, I contend that his passion for the "algorithm" is fundamentally of a political nature. His is not an academician's neutral and pure calculus. Robinson's work is a geometrics operating within the social sphere; a mathematics that manoeuvres in and between the class divisions of our stratified life.

*At Arms Length*, a solo show featuring only six paintings, effectively exhibits a vast array of talent that plays within an underlying political aesthetic. Apart from thematizing mathematics, the article identifies the jaded sense of humour integral to Robinson's work. Curiously, such humour gets reified as the impetus for animating the artist's geometric compositions. As much as humour plays a role, I contend that it is more a texture, a moment of resignation, than it is a force. Rather, the driving force of Robinson's work is the

conflict and strife born out of our suppressed classist society. The six paintings in the exhibition, *Rachel*, *Sheena*, *Duckpond*, *Fatguy*, *Van Art Gal*, and *CoWheeler Supreme* are sober works that cause us to take inventory of class difference and class struggle.

The principal subjects in these pieces demonstrate the limited spectrum of desire and longing commonly experienced in contemporary capitalist culture. In one form or another the paintings are about dosing up on dream and hopefulness. I have chosen *Rachel*, *Sheena*, and *Duckpond* to examine, partly because they were overlooked in Cree's review, but mostly because of their strategic placement in the gallery exhibit. I read Robinson's work as creating a dialectic both within and in relation to each of these paintings.

*Rachel*, clearly a Jan Vermeer (1632-1675) "appropriation" and, as such, a nose-thumbing at the uppity art world, was hung strategically as the host piece in the left-to-right viewing sequence of paintings. Just as the woman reads from a letter in Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657), *Rachel* stands in her chambers at the culminating point of sunlight, imparting a middle-class hopefulness. Her gaze tells of promise and, relative to the paintings to the right of it in the gallery, a cloying sense of comfort. Robinson has headlined the collection with this piece to underscore the predominating bourgeois ideals by

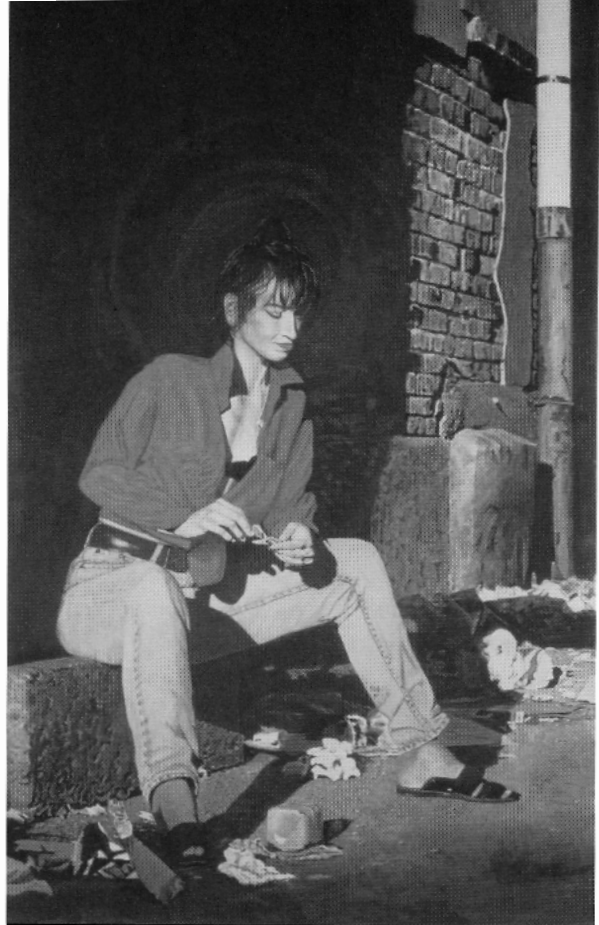


*Rachel*, acrylic on linen, 48 x 77 inches, Doug Robinson, 2000

which all is measured. It is no accident that *Sheena*, a portrait of a female junkie in an alley, is placed like a book end at the extreme right of the series of paintings.

Seated amid trash, *Sheena* is lit by only one of many culminating points of sunlight. Her status suggests she is equal to the vertical sewage pipe and the balled-up paper refuse. Her hopefulness is in the unwrapping of a packet of smack hidden in a 649 lottery ticket. In slick contradistinction to the tidy calm of *Rachel*, Robinson represents this all-too-common Vancouver scene as its own vibrant drama. The lottery ticket contains the hope being sold to the hopeless. In this moment of Vancouver exotica, well removed from the safe and secure world of *Rachel*, the letter-like object in *Sheena*'s hands promises to claim yet another victim of the dream merchants.

*Duckpond* features a bored Coca-Cola-slurping carnival operator surrounded by a panoply of toys. Like the security guard in *Van Art Gal*, or the Ferris wheel attendant in *Fatguy*, Robinson depicts this insignificant worker biding her time. Her dream is to be elsewhere; however, for the moment she is stuck, she has no hope, she merely facilitates the cheap thrills of others—as well as the institution of “cleptocracy” or legitimized theft. In a statement on the bankruptcy of



*Sheena*, acrylic on linen, 48 x 77 inches, Doug Robinson, 1998

the working class (by making this game host larger-than-life), Robinson inverts the worker aggrandizement motif common to Communist propaganda art. Effectively, the image he presents of the working class hero is as slave to corporate greed.

With these aspects in mind, *At Arms Length* takes on more potent meaning than previously stated. The *Artichoke* review summarizes Robinson's paintings as being “a systematic production of estranged relations.” His scenes don't merely execute different geometrical systems; rather, they perform the alienative narrative of muted classism in North America. Instead of the reviewer's assessment of there not being an “overriding architectural lexicon,” Robinson's work should be recognized as shot through with analysis of social hierarchies. The mathematics governing these very hierarchies are not on equal footing, but are subordinate to prevailing bourgeois ideals governing our corporatized world. ♦

Didier Spinks says he is an art historian who teaches interdisciplinary studies at UBC and SFU. Thuja Press will soon be publishing his next book on contemporary architecture, “Bobbles, Beads and Our Bourgeois Post-Modern Age.”