

DAZZLE & DELIGHT HM's Jewellery Guide
CORE BELIEFS Bob Bratina stands up for downtown

Hamilton

Winter 2004

magazine

Goodbye Good Fellas

The New Face of Crime:
Who's In Charge Now

Breaking the
Segregated Suburb

Master Painter
Chris Bacon

\$3.00 Cdn

VOL. 2 | ISSUE 6



PIA40099100



Art

True to Life

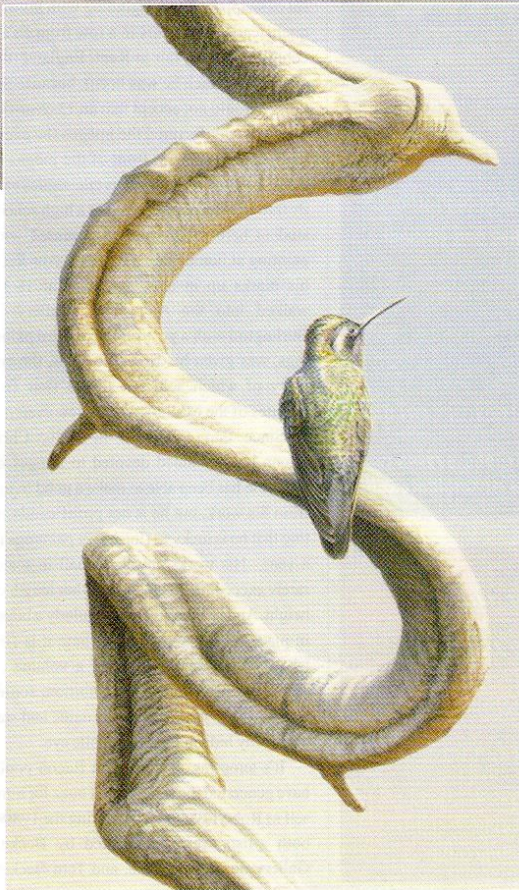
Masterful painter Chris Bacon transcends “wildlife painter” pigeonholing By Tor Lukasik-Foss

For art snobs, it has always seemed easy and somewhat fashionable to dismiss high realism painting. Since the advent of photography over a century ago, high realism’s function has been in question, and its appeal to the flashy, hyperbolic contemporary art palette has steadily lessened (unless it is used ironically or to serve a complicated postmodern agenda). Only a trickle of it makes it past the guarded gates of the public art edifice.

Worse, within the private gallery and art publishing universe, high realism is often stereotyped as a populist money maker. Through an economy fabricated from prints, posters, and other reproducible knick-knacks, all manner of well-crafted yet accessible imagery is peddled. Whether it’s the saccharine throttle of cottage-scapes, pet portraiture, or anything from the semi-pornographic depths of fantasy art, there are myriad examples of high realism which sound the alarm that an artist is showing off his or her technical gifts whilst descending head-first into sentimental and heroic clichés.

How then, amid this difficult climate, do you understand an artist like Chris Bacon? This reclusive Burlington resident is a humble, disciplined, self-taught painter who uses watercolours and occasionally alkyds to craft luminous, meticulously composed images exclusively of birds. He works almost completely outside of the spheres of public and private art in

(clockwise from the top) Artist Bacon drawing inspiration from nature; *Stormwatch (Long-billed Marsh Wren)*, 2002. Watercolour and acrylic on rag board. Collection of the National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson Hole, Wyoming.



Canada, and yet has been steadily garnering the kind of acclaim which places him with the best high-realist painters on this continent. Despite the ease with which he is categorized as a “wildlife painter,” Bacon is poised to prove that he is more than just a genre realist, that his works are imbued with the complexity and craft that warrant appreciation from a wider swath of the artistic community.

Two years ago, Bacon was invited to show his work as part of the contemporary component of the McMichael Gallery’s Call of the Wild exhibition. This exhibition, which focused primarily on early 20th Century master Carl Rungius, argued that “wildlife art” should no longer be exempt from the critical discourse of Canadian museums. Rungius after all, helped pioneer a rigorous tradition of painting, one which balances intense field study, scientific attention to detail, with a carefully considered aesthetic strategy. This tradition continues to have faithful proponents, and Bacon, (clockwise from the top) *Storks on a Ridge* study, 1994; *Demoiselle Crane II*, 2003, watercolour on rag board. *Purple-throated Mountain Gem*, 1994, watercolour on Arches paper.

Leadership, Discipline & High Academic Standards

Total Care Education System® delivers success!

- 1500 students from 48 countries
- Emphasis on discipline, leadership and high academic standards
- Online academic marks and attendance reports for parents
- Wired and wireless network in school and residences
- Unique partnership with 9 universities
- Food service by Sodexo Food Services
- Separate boy's and girl's residences with 24 hour security, evening teacher tutorials, live-in hall masters, comfortable, safe and modern living, open 365 days
- Custodianship for students under 18 years of age
- Multi-lingual staff facilitate communication

COLUMBIA INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE

Columbia International College is the largest private boarding high school with a Pre-U program in Canada. We offer the most effective and efficient educational system for international students.

Programs

- Grades 9 – Pre-University • ESL (English as a Second Language) • TOEFL Preparation
- University Transfer Program (AP) • Summer and Winter camps

STUDY IN CANADA

1003 Main St. West, Hamilton T: 905-572-7883 ext. 2801 F: 905-572-9332
E: admissions@cic-TotalCare.com On-line application: www.cic-TotalCare.com

Fascination and Rosery Florists

Quality Floral Designs

Fruit and Gourmet Gift Baskets

www.fascinationroseryflorist.com
 905.527.2881 • 800.353.3018
 fascrose@on.afbn.com

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

along with legends George McLean, Robert Bateman, were showcased as the best of present-day examples.

This past September, Chris Bacon was invited to be the 26th Master Wildlife Artist named by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, in Wausau, Wisconsin. The LYWA Museum has spent the last quarter century developing an expertise in avian wildlife art, and hosts the annual Birds in Art Exhibition, a juried show which has essentially become the international benchmark for painters of this genre. The LYWA Museum is also credited as having done seminal work to legitimize the artistic merits of avian and wildlife painting across the globe. Being named Master Wildlife Artist is arguably the highest complement an avian artist can ever hope to receive, and Bacon is the youngest to have ever been offered the title.

Bacon's biography can be reduced to a set of snappy stories beginning with his disqualification two years in a row from an art contest at a local fair in Kent, England (the country in which he was born), because the judges would not accept that an 11-year-old boy had manufactured the images (he eventually had to draw in front of the judges to prove he was no cheat). This tale segues easily into another about Bacon as a high school student here in Ontario, so obsessed with painting at home that he couldn't even keep his marks up in art class, until at 18 he walked into the Alice Peck Gallery in Burlington with a portfolio of 20 bird paintings, was given his first solo show, the entirety of which sold out in the first five minutes of the exhibition's preview evening.

Since that exhibition in 1980, Chris Bacon has remained devoted to images of birds. He has been able to make a good living from his work, but he is not prolific, admitting that he is lucky to finish five paintings in a year. His works are also small in scale, rarely exceeding 20 inches in either length or height. And because there is regularly a buyer in place for a painting the minute it is finished, he has rarely amassed a volume of work to constitute a solo exhibition, something that has helped keep his name and status mostly hidden from the public eye.

It's tempting to think that Bacon could have generated the same sort of buzz for himself as Robert Bateman did during the 1980s; both artists were represented by Beckett Gallery during that time, and Tom Beckett

had established a solid base of patronage for Bacon throughout Ontario and into the north-eastern United States. Although Bacon enjoyed a good relationship with Tom Beckett, he remained wary of the habitually corrupt culture of wildlife art, one in which dealers would routinely inflate the value of an artist's work up to the point where it would stop selling, or where artists faced pressure to radically adapt their practice to cater to the appetites of art publishing. Therefore, when Beckett retired in the early '90s, Bacon seized it as an opportunity to simplify his universe, work alone, and vigorously protect and intensify the integrity of his work.

"I needed to have a code of focus and discipline that I could live by. I didn't want to be sucked up and spat out of the machine. What I wanted was long-term survival. I knew I couldn't survive as a Bateman copy; I had to be my own person. So when Beckett retired, I went out on my own. I had to control my own prices, find new audiences, everything. I also shied away from the print market, because I'd seen other artists get caught into a life of serving their market with warm and fuzzy images. It's dangerous. The first three prints I made helped me to purchase a condo... the money can be huge."

What was key for Bacon was that he remain faithful to his subject matter, and to the purity of his artistic practice. He therefore is perpetually traveling the world doing field study, and relating those experiences artistically and with a painstakingly authentic level of detail. However, he differs from other artists of his ilk, because he does not concern himself with generating images that strictly adhere to the environmental and biological circumstances in which the birds are observed. His concerns are always with the painting, and he is not beyond depicting a bird in an unusual circumstance for the sake of serving a more important aesthetic goal.

"None of the images I paint are photographic – meaning, I don't paint things I've seen. Rather, I compose images in my head and spend a great deal of time drawing them out on paper, and tweaking that drawing until it is compositionally perfect. To me, these paintings are not about birds; birds are simply a vehicle I use to compose paintings. The paintings themselves are things that will hopefully manipulate the viewer into an experience that I may have had, an experience

Your Realtor for
All Seasons

JUDY
MARSALES
REAL ESTATE LTD.

905-522-3300 905-628-2200
WWW.JUDYMARSALES.COM

2005 ACURA RL

All the expected amenities

ACURA

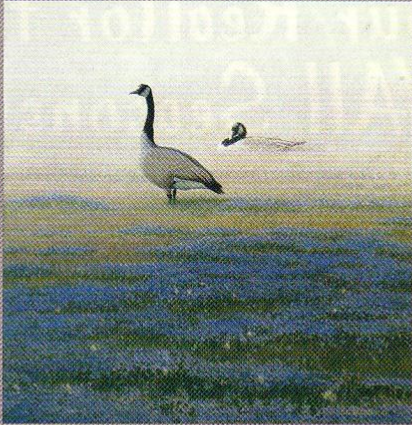
ACURA of Hamilton

925 Main St. West, Hamilton 905-528-7335
Visit our website: www.acuraofhamilton.ca or email: info@acuraofhamilton.ca

Wild Geese in Blue-eyed Grass
10.5" x 10"

Very Fine Quality Archival Giclee Print on Watercolour Paper
Signed and Numbered
Edition of 150 unframed \$250 CDN

Awarded MASTER ARTIST 2004 by
Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum USA



Enquiries: Chris Bacon
Tel: 905-637-0388 chris@chrisbacon.com

www.chrisbacon.com

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT


of vastness perhaps, or a certain emotional feeling."

What also sets Bacon apart from other avian painters is that he doesn't mythologize moments from the field; there are no ducks erupting from the water or falcons bravely gliding down razor-edged cliff faces. Instead, the artist studies moments in between movement or, as he puts it, "when you toss a ball in the air and it stays still for just an instant before it falls back to earth." The result is a very powerful depiction of the interior life of nature. The birds in Bacon's paintings are usually standing utterly still. What moves instead is light, as Bacon is clearly dedicated to the shimmering, bending, shafting aspect of light, and the delicacy of his watercolours seem nicely suited to relay these qualities. As a result, a very Japanese, Zen-like degree of composure emanates from the work. Bacon's paintings unfold in singular, carefully paced gestures; the eye is always being led through a very subtle yet perfectly conceived pathway.

Achieving this sense of balance requires careful, exacting attention, and Bacon admits that virtually every rock, stone, and blade of grass is mapped out and arranged to suit a compositional objective. "I'm obsessive," he admits. "I paint until there is nothing else to paint, and if I paint one stroke too many then I agonize trying to take it off again. I suppose I will go mad eventually... The way I work means that I have intense burnout spells. Usually I'm in agony about how I should try and change the way I paint (Bateman always told me to paint from elbow, allow for bigger strokes, but I just can't). Inevitably, it's always some new piece of education that I should have learned years ago that breaks me out: how two colours create an optical vibration, that sort of thing."

The 2004 Birds In Art Exhibition featured over a dozen of Bacon's pieces, marking the first time in almost 20 years where a body of his work has been displayed in public. He was also honoured through a series of high-brow functions held at the LYW Museum, including a banquet held for master painters wherein artists like Bateman and McLean sang his praises. It will be interesting to see if Bacon's work and reputation will begin to stretch significantly beyond the "wildlife" classification. Until it does, he will most assuredly still be working, quietly and steadily pushing forward. **EV**

J TAYLOR ANTIQUES
*Importers of fine English antique
and period furniture*



192 Locke St. S.
Hamilton L8P 4B4
Tel: 905-521-6844
www.taylorsantiques.com

Open Wednesday – Sunday
10:00 am – 5:00 pm