

Bill Rennie

WHERE I WAS BROUGHT UP: 6949 HARRIS ROAD

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BY AMY GOGARTY

Not Far From Gold

BY SALLY MICHENER

Bill Rennie - A Thinker and A Fighter

JEANNIE MAH

Artist's Statement (2007)

BILL RENNIE



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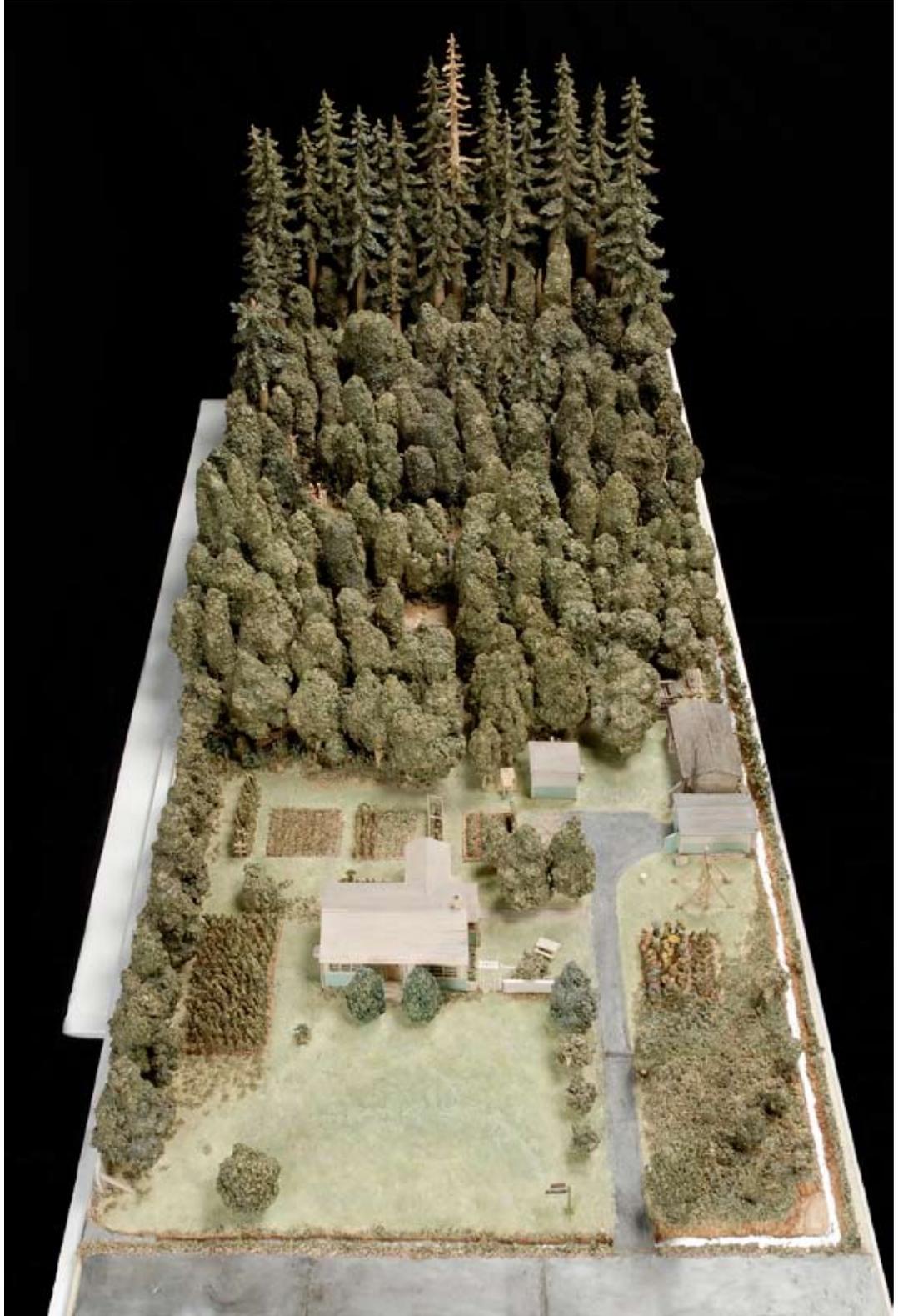
By Amy Gogarty, 2007

Bill Rennie is a maker who creatively evokes a sense of place as embodied in fabled architecture and specific locales. As far back as high school, he drew inspiration from magazine images of monuments in far-away lands, enthralled with the history and romance that they offered a young boy growing up in the suburbs of Surrey, British Columbia. As with many creative people, Rennie learned more from his own research and reading about the culture and history of ancient civilizations than from the required curriculum. Working with clay slabs and press moulds, he developed ways to construct large-scale and

Bill Rennie
Where I Was Brought Up:
6949 Harris Road, 1990

clay with glaze and watercolour
(82 x 66 x 165cm)
SAG 2004.01.01

Photographs by Scott Massey



highly detailed portraits of structures ranging from Hagia Sophia in Istanbul to Greco-Roman palaces to Assyrian ziggurats to South Asian Buddhist stupas. Exactitude was not his concern, as making according to plan produced nothing more than an architectural model. Literal accuracy detracted from his real interest in capturing the essence or soul of the structure-in much the same way one might capture the essence of a person in a portrait. He was particularly attracted to the richness and decorative diversity of ancient buildings, valuing them for their inherent beauty (and difference from modernist concrete bunkers!) and for the technical challenges recreating such detail presented. Rennie found himself drawn to romantic ruins, structures poetically transformed by time and decay, and spolia-once-beautiful monuments stripped of their luxurious cladding and ornament by conquering cultures, whose members reused the booty to embellish their own designs. In a sense, spolia represent an architectural form of ethnic cleansing-a terrible and elegiac reminder of the violent and brutal consequences of civilization's progress.

Rennie's understanding of history, geography and clay sculpture advanced as he obtained an education degree from the University of British Columbia and an honours diploma from the Vancouver School of Art, as Emily Carr Institute was known at the time. Numerous exhibitions confirmed his commitment to ceramic sculpture as opposed to ceramic vessels, which had wider currency in Vancouver in the 1970s and 1980s. Along the way, Rennie became well known for his rakish sense of humour, sardonic wit and willingness to skewer pomposity wherever he found it. For example, he sent up his alma mater, Emily Carr, with *The Grace McCarthy Finishing School for Young People* (1986), and he placed a faux column front on a miniature replica of the building housing the artist-run Western Front, christening

it *The National Gallery of the Avant-Garde*. The particular humour in this work derives from the fact that the original building sports its own Prairie Gothic false-front, and the conflation of the two façades makes a deft metaphor for what he considered pretentious about much contemporary art. He also did not shy away from more pointed political attacks on developers, the havoc they wreak on low-income inner-city neighbourhoods and the general lack of affordable artist housing. In this endeavour, he has stood behind his convictions, serving as president of an advocacy group, Artists for Creative Environments, which lobbies for affordable live-work housing.

It is in the context of Rennie's political convictions and fascination with grandiose historical architecture that one must situate *Where I Was Brought Up: 6949 Harris Road*. At first blush, the work appears to have little in common with earlier works in that it depicts a modest bungalow rather than a famous landmark, and its political content is elusive. However, a closer examination of the work and the arena within which the work operates demonstrates unsuspected connections. Simultaneously, it reveals levels of complexity and ambivalence embedded in its multiple meanings.

Formal and physical qualities of this work place it outside ordinary conventions of genre and style. Rennie refers to *Where I was Brought Up* as sculpture, yet this work might more properly be considered a tableau. The work consists of numerous individual elements-trees, shrubs, a house and sheds-placed on a surface that integrates them into a self-contained naturalistic scene. The rectangular shape of this surface functions like a picture plane with a surrounding frame, a device that effectively removes the tableau from its immediate environment. Traditional sculpture frequently consists of site-

specific monuments, such as a commemorative memorial, the base or plinth of which symbolically links it to the ground on which it stands. Modernist sculpture rejected the plinth in its claim for universal status, while post-modern sculpture often uses installation to address or incorporate the actual space surrounding it. This work blurs numerous genres associated with fine art sculpture and, instead, suggests links with popular forms of entertainment such as the diorama, topographical model, theatre set or child's toy. This linking with the popular is deliberate, given Rennie's political convictions and past history of poking fun at the pretentiousness of much fine art. The suggestion of a frame raises the question of whether or not this can be considered a landscape and thus subject to many of the issues of meaning raised by landscape painting. Rather than being innocent or merely pleasurable, depictions of landscape inevitably incorporate ideological codes and conflict (Andrews). In "Imperial Landscape," W.J.T. Mitchell (declares:

Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package (5).

Keeping this in mind, it is worth first exploring what exactly is "represented and presented" in *Where I Was Brought Up*.

Bill Rennie's childhood home in the 1950s was in Newton, a rural suburb of Surrey at the time. His home was a small house on a large lot, as opposed to the super-sized Macmonster house crammed onto a tiny lot that is now common. A tattered family photograph reveals that the house, which has since been demolished, closely resembled the one we see

here (Rennie, *Hot Clay*35). Rennie carefully replicated its aqua and white clapboard, low-pitched roof, back extension and burgeoning cedars standing guard on either side of the front door. Situated on a patch of mown lawn, the house is surrounded by vegetables and flowers as bright as rainbows. A tarmac drive leads to the house, garage, wood and tool sheds. Although the house is shut tight against prying eyes, the doors of the garage and a shed are propped open, revealing tantalizing glimpses of their interiors. A dog house, bird bath, picnic table, camp tent and swing set signify children's activities and family life. Each form is rendered with meticulous detail: roof tiles and siding are carefully limned; three lights transect the wood-veneered front door; vegetables and flowers planted in neat rows can be identified: cabbage, onion, corn and pea; dahlia, sunflower and rose. The foliage-dominant to the point of becoming the main character in the story-is sculpted with tiny beads of clay, grog and other additives, glazed to create a rich variety of surfaces and forms, all true to type. A sign by the road reads "6949/Rennies." This last detail is perhaps significant, since while the Rennies lived in the house they witnessed a drive to regularize street names and addresses to facilitate orderly development and good government, a change described in Jack Brown's history of the area:

Until 1957 there was no efficient system of addresses in Surrey. In the closely-knit community of earlier years location was determined by the name of the property owner. With the completion of the Trans-Canada Highway and the removal of the tolls on the Patullo Bridge in 1952, the population of Surrey surged and the problem of location of properties for fire protection and mail delivery became paramount...In 1957, the Municipality joined with the rest of British

Columbia's municipalities in adopting a grid system of streets and addresses.

Rennie's use of recycled clay and found objects recalls a formative period in his own life; it endorses the importance of free play and imagination in the life of the developing child. The house sat on the remains of a saw mill that was worked back in the 1920s. In its reincarnation, a slim ditch bridged here and there with rough-hewn planks leads away from the house and into a forest, which comprises two-thirds of the tableau. Douglas fir loom over the deciduous trees and the house itself. The forest set the scene for many of Rennie's childhood adventures, as recalled by the artist-shaping castle turrets from decrepit remains of termite-hollowed stumps, building and setting fire to cities constructed from discarded roof shingles, manufacturing floods to demolish besieged villages (Rennie, Letter to Author). *Where I Was Brought Up* is an allegory in praise of creativity and hand-making, a mute protest against disembodied conformity and the homogeneity that characterize so much contemporary life. The work exemplifies even as it represents the awesome power of the imagination to transform everyday materials into fantastic forms. Rennie's uncanny ability to simulate such a wide variety of surfaces and textures so simply and directly triggers memories in the adult, who can appreciate the power of analogy, similarity-in-difference, at work in the construction of the piece.

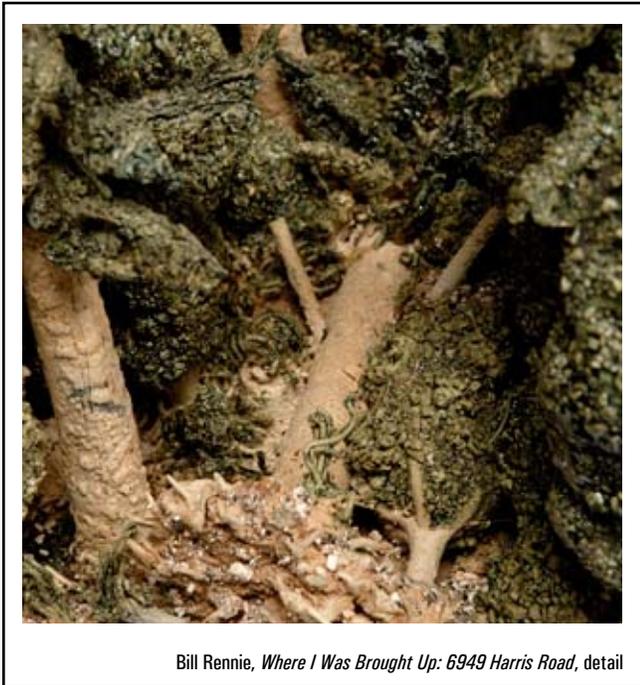
Historically, forests have served as powerful metaphors for the interior world of the imagination. Forests contextualize relationships between memory and place, establishing deep and tangible ties to geography and psychic reality. Harkening back to a primeval time before the advent of civilization, forests gave birth to human culture, as noted by Giambattista Vico: "This was the order of human institutions: first

the forests, after that the huts, then the villages, next the cities, and finally the academies" (quoted in Harrison). Urban dwellers experience nostalgia for an ancestral home in the forest; even as a place that for them never existed. As Lucy Lippard comments:

The lure of the local is not always about home as an expressive place, a place of origin and return. Sometimes it is about the illusion of home, as a memory. . . . One can be "homesick" for places one has never been; one can even be "homesick" without moving away (23).

The forests of Surrey lured entrepreneurs, loggers, mill workers and other settlers to the region towards the end of the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, most of the ancient forest giants had been felled, and many logging operations ceased to exist (Brown). When the Rennie family moved into the region in the fifties, they joined waves of newcomers enticed by available land, opportunities and booming amenities that developed after World War II. It was thus by historical accident that Rennie spent his youth in an area that still retained near-mystical ties to an ancient geography and ecology. *Where I Was Brought Up: 6949 Harris Road* commemorates and laments a brief moment in history in which the sort of unfettered freedom, imagination and communion with nature he experienced could flourish. Nostalgia, the pain experienced in being separated from or longing for home, is itself conservative, in that it looks back to what has been lost-or squandered-without thought for the future. In this sense, the nostalgia roused by this work sounds a very contemporary ecological alarm, calling us to task for our failure to shepherd and care for the natural wonderland that existed in this place within living memory. This paradise is recollected in Rennie's impassioned rendering of the fir trees, with their massive straight trunks, heavy

branches and bracing rhythms. Majestic even in defeat, as crumbling stumps, the fir trees symbolize an essential tie to the land for many Canadians. Vitruvius and other architectural theorists locate the origins of architecture in a forest clearing, linking the primitive hut to the magnificent temples and civic structures that evolved in its wake (Dripps 9). Thus recalling his own architectural fantasies, Rennie



Bill Rennie, *Where I Was Brought Up: 6949 Harris Road*, detail

claims status equal to any edifice for Canada's natural beauty and sylvan bounty.

That the personal is political is one of feminism's most important contributions to public discourse. Politics is rooted in the particular rather than the abstract, and committed political action is one of Rennie's enduring legacies to his community. Lucy Lippard suggests that if landscape is defined by space, place is space thickened by history and memory: a "lived-in landscape becomes a place" (9). Both personal and communal memories, in recollection, stitch individuals into the history of a place to become its voice and conscience. As

Henry Glassie has written, "History is the essence of the idea of place. In place, the person is part of the history" (quoted in Lippard 13). Contradicting his carefully cultivated "curmudgeonly" persona, Rennie opines "Politics is really about hopefulness-trying to improve our lot" (Rennie, Letter to Author). Rennie locates the origin of his identity and politics in this particular place, which he shares generously with viewers. Making art that insists on humane values, community, imagination and creativity constitutes a hopeful-and political-gesture.

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Not Far From Gold

By Sally Michener, 2007

Bill Rennie arrived in the Ceramic area at Vancouver School of Art in 1974 (I think). In those days Bill often swaggered into school late (well, we were all pretty casual in those days) with torn, tight blue jeans with a tiger-skin codpiece, and sex rings on his shoulder. He was lean, freckled and had a marvelous mane of red hair.

Bill had studied art education at UBC and had already demonstrated his passion for rendering architectural models. He made these small buildings with great, laborious, hand-modeled detail. He was particularly interested in Byzantium and Gothic cathedrals. Soon he experienced a great epiphany and began making plaster molds of his arches and columns, which sped up his process enormously. He also added glue and gold to his ceramics-gold paint, gold lustre, gold leaf-never too much gold for Bill. And glue saved a few pieces from the garbage. I think he also occasionally used fingernail polish-when appropriate. In his early art school exhibits at the Helen Pitt Gallery he acquired fans-including Doris and Jack Shadbolt. Under the swagger and often abrasive, attacking vocal "front," Bill was gentle and seemed to be a touch unsure of himself. He was also very kind and generous, although he preferred not to let others see his generosity. I will never forget when we enlarged our space to include a new ceramic studio; he took over the chore of mapping out individual student spaces. Because he and Jeannie Mah "worked small," he gave himself and Jeannie small workstations, and he gave others spaces two or three times as large.

Bill went on the first trip to Mexico, which I organized around 1976. He was one of those students who had never traveled much previously. That first trip was

the most extensive, and perhaps the best of all. We celebrated Bill's birthday in Oaxaca. Each student was required to spend a week doing independent research. Bill chose to go to Puebla, where he looked at the talavera majolica traditions, which the Spanish had brought to Mexico. (Jeannie Mah, Ron Kong, Sue Schnee, Daniel Tetrault, Suzie Birstein, Dona Nabata, Deborah Tibbel, Barb Gentle, Paul Calder, Monica Kothuber, Frank McFarlane, Bill Small and Tom Royle were also on that trip.)



Bill Rennie, *Where I Was Brought Up: 6949 Harris Road*, detail

Bill stayed an extra year (or two!) at the Emily Carr School of Art (now the Emily Carr Institute). In those days we were able to convince the administration that good students needed more time to develop their ideas and skills. Bill always took critiques seriously and challenged any overemphasis on "expressive form" over "content." While sarcastic, he could make begrudgingly useful points about other students' work. I still remember a small series he made of self-portraits as architectural containers-with every eyelash in fine detail. He was aware of

the Robert Arneson series of self-portraits as clown, Elvis, Roman citizen, etc. He could be self-mocking and self-deprecating, and often showed his acerbic wit. He continued to glorify architecture as well as himself in his work, and I often thought he was fantasizing about a better life as a prince or priest from another, more golden time.

After school, Bill managed to survive as a studio artist. Some of his best works from this time incorporated his astringent humour—such as his addition of a classical Greek façade to the Western Front building, his rendition of the Georgia Medical (pre-Paul Merrick) building imploding, and his Corn Palaces. He managed to distill specific visual details of places that were important to him and then add his wit.

A major show of his work and that of another ceramic sculptor, Valerie Pugh, was at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in 1981. For this show Bill produced

an enormous quantity of architectural models that worked together as an installation.

In 2004 Bill produced *Where I Was Brought Up: 6949 Harris Road* for the Hot Clay exhibit in his hometown of Surrey. This piece has the nostalgia of a children's fable (think Hansel and Gretel) with its rendering of a dark, scary forest looming over a small private dwelling. As well, the piece celebrates the grandeur of the BC forest. Of course, it also illustrates Bill's obsession with excessive detail and his careful, accurate representation. This piece is an epic icon that resonates with visual pleasure and genuine feeling for a place.

I have great affection for Bill and great respect and admiration for his work. Somehow he has not yet received the attention or accolades that he so richly deserves.



Bill Rennie, *Where I Was Brought Up: 6949 Harris Road*, detail

Bill Rennie - A Thinker and A Fighter

By Jeannie Mah, 2007

Bill Rennie and I met at the Vancouver School of Art in 1978. We had both just finished a B.Ed. in art education (both of our degrees would remain unused); we had then wandered, he to Nelson, I to Europe. After this, we descended upon the Vancouver School of Art, then at its downtown location. Many of us that year were "older" students. Our paths had been divergent, we had travelled, and we had then made a decision to return to school. We were keen, we were happy to have a studio, we were ready to make art! We worked long and late hours, we could not believe that a school should close at midnight (the best working hours!), and we bonded during our studio time. Our whole class was a close one, and over all these years, our friendships have remained solid.

Many of us were outspoken, individualistic, hard working and taciturn, but no one so much as Bill Rennie. While we were, with baby steps, exploring ceramics and trying "to find ourselves" (as we said in the 1970s), Bill already knew his artistic direction. As I learned from the *Hot Clay* exhibit at the Surrey Art Gallery in 2004, he had known his direction as a child, so it is no wonder that he was producing such strong work as an art student. This was very inspiring. In a way, one's cohort is as influential as the art school chosen, and the mix of personalities and the knowledge of classmates becomes our foundation as much as instruction received and books read. Bill's work ethic made us all work harder; and the assurance of his work made us question ourselves more. I feel doubly lucky to have him as a good and loyal friend.

Right out of art school, Bill had a major exhibit at the Victoria Art Gallery with Valerie Pugh. Clay Sculpture

was a wonderful show! Bill used the gallery space to create the illusion of buildings that stretched towards infinity. This sparked my own imagination, and slowly, 20 years later, infected my own thinking and made me aware that a space may be manipulated for my own purposes.

Bill's imagination is infectious. When I visit the Assyrian Gates at the British Museum or the Louvre, the immaculately curled beards on the men remind me of Bill's *Face/Facade*, with the brain cavity filled with columned buildings-the perfect self-portrait. He is often on my mind as I travel; at times, I feel that I am travelling for him. As he scours an old edition of *National Geographic* for details of buildings, I roam the lost ruins of Byzantine Mystra for him! Why else would I be on the Peloponnese? Without Bill opening my eyes to the existence of these small Byzantine chapels, my trip through Greece would have been less rich. However, Bill himself is content to work in his studio and let his imagination wander, travelling in a way that is somehow slower, more intimate, and evocative of lost time. Instead of leaving his studio to travel, Bill explores by thinking, imagining, studying details, and absorbing history from books.

Fellow student Dona Nabata says that Bill's work is somehow seen from a bird's-eye view, always from afar, as if in a dream. We soar over the buildings, our imaginations engaged, and as we observe from oblique angles, with cinematic sweeps of the eye, we are carried, via Bill's imagination, into a space between the historical and the future, towards ruins and transfiguration.

Greek Orthodox Byzantine chapels and Buddhist temples, the Milan Cathedral and the fantastic turreted wonder of St. Basil's in Moscow, as well as the many hybrid buildings of Bill's imagination-many of which morph into tableware, such as the superb

Coliseum bowls-all are made with details that drip with history. More than mere models, the buildings sweep up the history and decay around them. They ooze with atmosphere.



Bill Rennie, *Where I Was Brought Up: 6494 Harris Road*, detail

Bill Rennie is Byzantine Bill, he is the Rennie-sance, he is the Bill of Babylon! His head is full of buildings. His architectural imaginings are beyond whimsy, his attention to detail beyond obsessive. *The Pan Hellenic Pyramid* (1980) is a Byzantine skyscraper of exaggerated height. At eight feet, it stretches upwards as if towards infinity. A Roman ruin, perhaps the Ruins of Timgad, with a forest of crumbling pillars, stretches outwards, as if forever. The play with perspective and the emphatic yet crumbling repetition elongates the work within the gallery space. These works are impressive. While the works are in miniature, their heightened imaginings command intellectual space. Because his subject is "ruins," he sometimes pushes the clay to a point just short of material collapse. This abusive and abject aesthetic

collides with gold-leafed fragments of grandeur and power-to conjure up decaying civilization and lost glory, perfectly enunciated.

He is at his most provocative, and the most "bang-on," when critiquing the *contemporary* culture in which he lives. In *The National Gallery of the Avant-Garde*, Bill applies the false front of a classical Greek temple to the already tacked on architectural detail of a "western front" of the Western Front building to say that the avant-garde can oh-so-quickly become the institutionalized mainstream. The Western Front bought this piece. In his heightened cynicism (or as he says, "realism!") Bill believes that the Front bought the piece to get it out of circulation (Paula Gustafson, *Georgia Straight*, June 19-26, 1997), but I believe that the Fronters really liked the work, and that they have a grudging respect for him. *The Real Estate Hustle* (1995) and *The Implosion of Cathedral Place* (1992) both comment on the destruction and reconfiguration of local historical buildings-works that make it clear Bill is not shy about pointing a finger at the culprits behind the flow of capital that controls and destroys our urban spaces.

Bill is a thinker and a fighter, and the causes he supports are just. The "engaged" or activist artist, dedicated not only to his or her own work but working for the good of fellow artists, is a rare breed in our time. Along with others, Bill worked hard to create a true artist live-work space, one where artists can actually afford to live. CORE, where he lives, is a rare example of affordable living in a Vancouver with an uncontrollable real estate market. *The Real Estate Hustle* is an important work because the struggle with city hall and developers took over his life for a while. It was worth the fight, and the small but workable urban artist apartments of CORE thrive in their bohemian and eccentric spirit. I say "bravo!"

The myth of the isolated artist in a garret almost gives us permission to be self-centred, but this myth is exploded at CORE, and social consciousness and communal vision is much admired. It does take time out of our own production, but Prairie girl that I am, I find it encouraging to know that others also believe “it is not too late to make a better world” (T.C. Douglas).

We have had unforgettable moments! Sally Michener took us to Mexico for a field trip (ah, the 1970s!): folk pottery, Mayan ruins, markets, museums—we were let loose to explore an entire country. I will never forget Palenque at sunrise, or the excellent collection of pots in the Rufino Tamayo Museum of Pre-Hispanic Art in Oaxaca, or the earthquake in the middle of the night on the day before the Pope was to arrive in Mexico City—when four of us bonded as we called to each other from each corner of the immense hotel room we shared.

Another magical moment was in Sechelt Art Gallery. We were helping Bill to install his exhibition, when, out of the rain, Joni Mitchell walked in. Good Canadians that we are, we “gave her her space” by not rushing over, and by trying not to recognize her, but her murmured comment about *The Hanging Gardens of Babylon* thrilled us. She understood the work!

The most admirable thing about Bill is that he has taken the democratization of art to heart. U.S. galleries have told me, “You are not making work for your friends, so raise the prices!” Not Bill. He wants to sell to his friends, even his poorest friends. Of course, this means more work and less money for him. Bill, a cynic? No! An absolute idealist? Yes!

6949 Harris Road North Surrey

Bill Rennie, *Artist's Statement*, 2007

Actually, there is no 6949 - it's twelve houses now; no Harris Road - it is there, but it's got a numbered name; no North Surrey, no 2 1/2 acre lots for any normal people like us [because of taxes]. Even the hill just before the house is miniscule. I've changed, but the old house is gone. And you just remember the good old times - it's like they stole it.

One day, I remember seeing a model by Rodney Clark of some obscure French poet's home at the Vancouver Art Gallery. It had to be Art; so I decided to make a model of my family home - not of some highfalutin French poet - it was the '80s, and French poets were "the Semiotic Rage" - but of my old home at 6949. I drew a model of the lot with scenes of each area with names of spots in the right places: tall firs with a few fallen behemoths, massive huckleberry patches on giant logs, vine maples with bright masses of vines, the old saw mill - now excavated and taken away by Father, a cedar grove covered over with a bed of fallen needles, a rolled aspen grove with mowed grass, all of this joined by obscure doorways off a wandering path. In between were boggy, marsh-like walls. In the front one third of the lot, everything was squared - more easy and more like what I do - houses, sheds, rows of corn, raspberry and strawberries - all to be miniaturized. It's like the lot was one-third full of "built and ordered." The back was a mysterious growth--deep inside the masses of trees and leaves, obscure areas covered over by yet more trees and leaves. Just a memory: "Forests were the power of metaphors for the interior world of the imagination."

The more I worked on this, the more indignation I felt for the loss. Now it's big Monsterhouses on tiny lots, with 7.3 not-too-massive trees. But what do kids

do? Hide inside watching video games and taken to "organized sports events." My upbringing was much different--playing in the back.

After two years, at age six and seven, playing "kick the can," the neighbourhood kids - caught in flagrante delicto in the bush in back (the parents never went there)--were never allowed to visit each other's property. This defined my life to the size of the lot, the other property should be seen as matchsticks - fields and neighbours the family did not get along with, and the rest of the kids were like distant cousins. Well, seven was the time to build in the back.

First it was castles with mud on hollowed stumps, then filled with water 'til they broke open. Much larger cities on the tops of old stumps, eaten out by insects and perfect as gothic monuments to place on newer pitch-covered stumps. They burned real well. Whole stumps covered with castles made of old tar paper blocks torn and mixed. The tar paper also burnt real well, leaving a skeleton of the castle. Damming the ditch and putting a water wheel on it ('til I was accused of flooding the garage.) I suppose this was like Star Wars - flooding and burning the cities. There were people here, but just running and panicking. I suppose if this were today, I'd build stuff in my room and burn it 'til the smoke alarm went off.

Thank God it didn't come down to that.

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