

Cliff Eyland
Killam Library Art Gallery, Halifax
7 November-7 December, 1985

Cliff Eyland's exhibition at the Dalhousie University library seems calculated almost to avoid detection. The plain 3x5 in. black and white postcard announcing the show identifies the location as "Library/Art Gallery". The colour-keyed diagrams in the lobby of the Killam, however, do not indicate the presence of an art gallery. An inquiry at the information desk produces a blank stare. It is finally determined that the "gallery" consists of a stretch of wall on one side of the periodical reading room. Boxy low armchairs face one another along the wall, every second one occupied by a student curled in the foetal position, alternately sleeping or reading. To peer at the tiny images posted on the wall, one must lean bodily across the students. Only after one has spent some minutes in concentrated staring do the students appear to notice that there is something on the wall.

Untitled and unframed, Eyland's eight images are the size of small postcards, also 3x5 in. Spaced evenly across the off-white wall, they might almost, from a distance, be mistaken for light switches. Indeed, the artist has spaced them in such a way that two thermostats at either end serve as visual bookends. Six are painted on fibreboard, while two on the extreme right are pencil sketches on paper, mounted on the same material. The images refer to several different styles of painting. There is a formal abstract in dark earth tones, then an Expressionist splash of reds,

yellow and black against a pasty white, followed by what appears to be a smudged seascape.

At the fourth piece, a representational element emerges with sudden clarity, showing the hooded head of one of the bog-people dug up in Denmark, his skin a vivid green against the dark ochre background. This is followed by a man in a high wheelchair, executed in loose broad strokes of blue and brown, his face the white mask of a clown or death's head. The broad shoulders are mocked by the head lolling to one side, the feeble hands folded in his lap, one finger propped against the power switch. The sixth image introduces collage, with a tiny reproduction of a dollar bill set against a murky slate-coloured composition. The final two images are pencil drawings of unidentifiable objects, the last a box in diagrammatic perspective, suggesting a speaker cabinet or housing for stage lights.

There is a pessimistic humour in these images. Their diminutive size suggests such minor, ephemeral images as those on postcards or postage stamps. They question the self-importance of painting, the traditional vehicle of 'Great Art in the West' and, by extension, the values of that culture which it has embodied. The cryptic content of Eyland's pieces mocks our faith in the power of visual representation. We see details of atrocities which are not explained, or carefully executed diagrams of objects we cannot identify. The only human images are those of a corpse, an invalid, and the Queen frozen on a dollar bill. The tiny dimensions of the images induce a claustrophobic sense of confinement, as if they were little coffins. They suggest that representation, diminished and enfeebled, has become a means of embalming experience and transforming it into a commodity with a market value.

In shunning the grandeur of the large canvas, however, Cliff Eyland's dollhouse paintings take on the magical quality of medieval miniatures, suggesting a child's personal treasury of images. Appearing to eschew the public relevance of 'Great Art', they retain a sense of the private pleasures of representation.

Robin Metcalfe



Cliff Eyland Installation at Killam Library/Art Gallery 1985 "paintings", 3 x 5 in. each Courtesy the artist