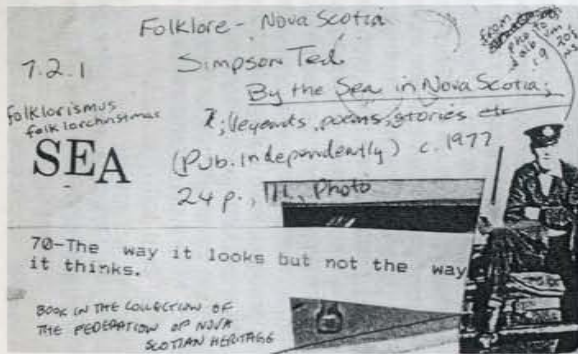
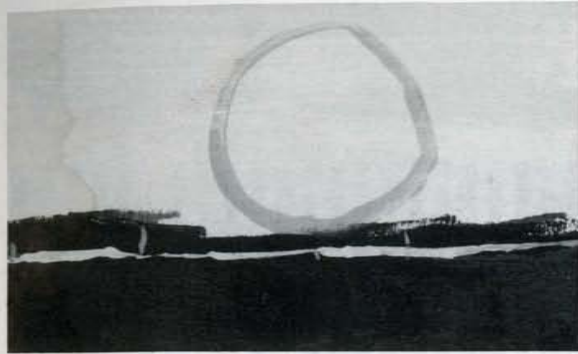


Robin Metcalfe

Eye Level Gallery, Halifax  
10-27 February 1988



Cliff Eyland, "By The Sea In ...", 1982-88, mixed medium, 2 panels, 3x5 in. each. Photo: J. O'Leary

If Cliff Eyland is not one of those people who marks up library books, he has obviously been tempted. In this exhibition, he displayed the results of continuing work in a very circumscribed and idiosyncratic medium: making marks, by painting and other means, on pieces of masonite the size of 3 x 5 in. file cards.

In this series, the association with library file cards is explicit. Eyland has appropriated the contents of the card index of the library of the Federation of Nova Scotia Heritage. The works are exhibited in pairs. One of each pair is in black-and-white, consisting principally of text and incorporating citations of books in the Federation's collection. These are embellished with wry, handwritten comments by Eyland that allude to the "daydream in the office, the doodling you do in bureaucratic jobs...": the subtle subversion we all practice from time to time in resistance to highly structured situations.

He also includes tidbits from a computer printout of cryptic, numbered aphorisms ("111 - Talk about particulars can evoke a belief in essences"), occasional photocopied images, and rubber stamp impressions of dinosaurs. The effect is of an abused library file card from an institution for the criminally artistic.

The second element of each pair is a miniature artwork of the sort that Eyland has been doing for several years now. These employ a wide range of styles and media, making reference to the whole gamut of 20th century artmaking, with particular debts to Pollock and Rauschenberg. It is as though one of the raging, expansive egos of classical Ab-Ex or Pop were confined in a cell with only tiny chips of masonite to work on. The results are startling, verging on ludicrous. Eyland has great fun deflating oversized institutions, whether those of modern art or those of historical mythmaking. If Western art since the Renaissance has functioned as a monument to the personality, Eyland is a lone graffitist scribbling something naughty on the plinth.

Eyland's Lilliputian artworks mimic the conventions of modern art. A mousetrap is drowned in caramel-coloured resin, daubed with red and yellow paint, and gilded on the edges. Some works comment directly on the contents of the card catalogue. Accompanying a reference to the Cole Harbour Heritage Farm Parkland, Eyland has created an assemblage including a plastic duck and animal crackers. Other pieces employ the subject index as an occasion for subtle parody of esoteric and self-referential academic artmaking.

The subject heading, "FURNITURE, Heritage Furniture" is illustrated by a photo of one of Eyland's own works, which incorporates a tiny chair smothered in paint. This is a comical reference to Eric Cameron's painted objects, themselves a commentary on the nature of artmaking. To this photo fresh paint has in turn been applied, turning it into art about art about art. One wonders whether this tiny work will sink first from being overloaded with theoretical meaning, or from being obliterated by a flood of paint.

Another association lurks behind Eyland's obsession with restricted dimensions. The relationship between image and text is like that between the two sides of a postcard: one an officially sanctioned "view", the other a confined space reserved for individual comment and private communication. By presenting his comments publicly, Eyland gives the viewer the sense of reading someone else's mail. This act of peeking implicates the viewer in the artist's transgression. A

kind of intimacy, such as that between the anonymous authors of graffiti and their surreptitious readers, is engendered by the physical size of the work and the necessity of standing very close to examine it.

In this series, the text is often more captivating than the image. Eyland's marginal notes are explicit about his political and social sentiments, and his scepticism about the official view of Nova Scotia cultural history. An illustration of Halifax's Historic Properties includes a little arrow pointing to "bubbling harbour sewage". A reference to Camp Aldershot elicits the terse and pointed comment, "Robots on welfare", followed by a sheepish apology: "(sorry Dad, I didn't mean you or your air force buddies, or grandad or uncles — all military working class)".

Other marginalia provide information and context. Beside the title of a book by Mary Sparling, Eyland notes that "Mary runs an art gallery at the Mount now." The final work in the series (viewed clockwise) is a reference to Canadian painter Robert Field who, as Eyland tells us, "painted miniatures & did photography" — thus linking the work in this exhibition to a national historical tradition.

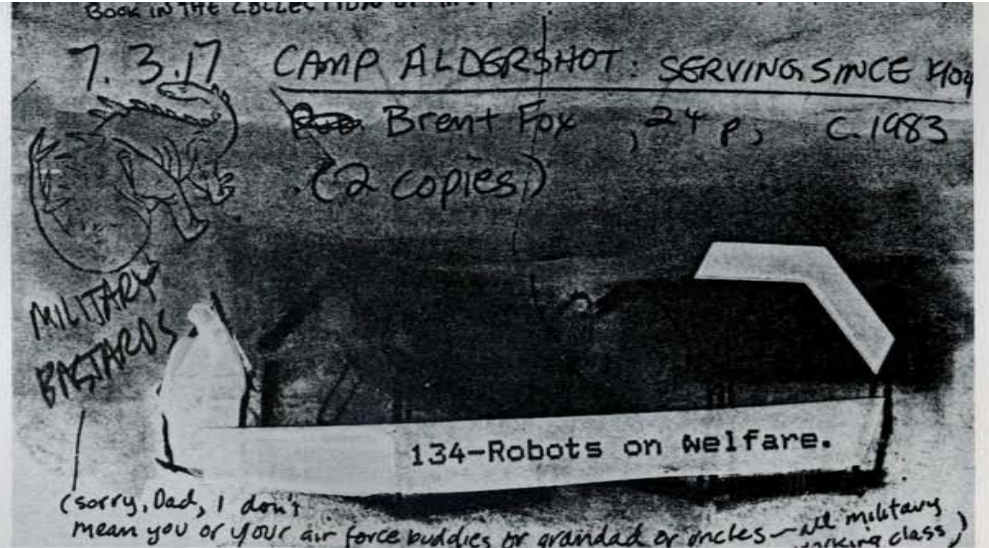
Eyland cannot resist puns, and there are some gems sprinkled through this series. A work on the Nova Scotia tartan calls forth visions of "tartan hordes". The artist's acerbic contempt for official thinking about culture is summarized in the pithy epigram, "TASTE MAKES WASTE." Eyland states his underlying ideological position in aphorism #109: "Do not give over any part of your thinking to professionals."

Eyland has created a small space for his art and filled it in a witty, literate, and diverting fashion. One wonders, however, if he is a bit too comfortable in his role as a critical Peeping Tom. These acts of sublimated vandalism may satisfy the viewer by confirming his or her own sense of alienation, but is Eyland, in his ironic self-deprecation, too modest in the tasks he sets himself? The point after all, as Marx said, is not simply to understand the world, but to change it.

Rick Salutin has commented, in *Marginal Notes*, that one can become too fond of acting on the periphery. As clever and insightful as Eyland's marginalia undoubtedly are, one wonders what he might achieve were he to turn his hand to writing the book.

Robin Metcalfe is an artist, writer, and editor living in Halifax.





FURNITURE ~~Collectors and Collecting~~  
New Brunswick - collectors and collecting ~~as a whole~~  
Catalogues

4.8.1. Finley, A. Gregg  
Heritage Furniture a catalogue.  
featuring selected heritage furniture  
from the collection of the New Brunswick  
Museum  
Pub. The New Brunswick Museum  
C. 1976  
63 p., Ill., Photo., English/French  
Bib. p. 60

BOOKS DESCRIBED ARE IN THE COLLECTION OF THE FEDERATION OF N.S. HERITAGE

Cliff Eyland, from the exhibition Ocean Playground, 1982-88, mixed medium, 2 panels, 3x5 in. each.



Cliff Eyland, from the exhibition Ocean Playground, 1982-88, mixed medium, 2 panels, 3x5 in. each.