

Cliff Eyland: The 100,000 Names of Art

Saint Mary's University Art Gallery,
Halifax

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I'm drawn to the economy of Cliff Eyland's work, and fascinated by the abundance and the freedom evident in it, despite its overt restrictions. But while Eyland so obviously and so easily seems to elude the predictability that the strict use of a 7.6 x 12.7 cm. surface dimension might suggest, perhaps his cleverness in doing so is entirely too successful a thing.

The 100,000 Names Of Art was composed of ninety-six separate works taken from the period roughly spanning the last decade: a virtual art cornucopia, as Eyland's interest and creative focus have ranged freely and widely across all of art history, specifically targeting and commenting upon an enormous range of movements and styles dating back to the cave paintings of Altamira, and encompassing the likes of Hogarth and Dufy.

And within it all: landscapes, portraits, drawings done on bare masonite, found objects (including a working pocket solar calculator), colour photocopy images several creative steps removed from the



Cliff Eyland. Cassette Tape, 1990, mixed media, 7.6 x 12.7 cm.

original Eyland painting upon which they were based, designs for novel new currencies, photo-based works, a painted reproduction of errors in a text by Derrida, and chopped and altered works – extracts of a kind – wrested from cheap, mass-produced paintings of the store-bought variety.

And, of course, there was that singular, overriding preoccupation with size to contend with, that rigorous, inflexible 7.6 x 12.7 cm. dimension. In a way, size couldn't help but end up being everything in this exhibition.

But what *need* to work on a larger scale – necessitating a so-very-different economy of things, a

studio space large enough to accommodate work of great size, a gallery and museum system structured similarly – when the 7.6 x 12.7 cm. rectangle can accomplish much the same in the end, when the long tradition of the miniature is there for the adding to? And anyway, after a while, our awareness of, and concern for, the size and scale of things evaporated as we became involved with the realities of the 7.6 x 12.7 cm. interior. In a proverbial nutshell, the novelty wore off, and the work stood clear and on its own. Right?

Eclectic and all-encompassing as *The 100,000 Names Of Art* was

(and it was, in a way, a kind of retrospective), it ended up coming across as a scattered hodge-podge of things, focused solely in terms of the fundamental concern with dimension. Judging, though, by some of the most recent work exhibited, a powerful and disturbing sequence of images entitled *My Brother Terry Wilded*, Eyland's work is in transition toward something far less conceptual, and far more intimate and yielding. These photo-based, heavily reworked images of Eyland's brother's badly beaten face – disturbing in that it's not quite clear if he's still alive – pack a hefty emotional punch. The work is intensely personal. You needn't know the work's point of origin, nor its place in the historical scheme of things, to know that Eyland here connected with something quite powerful and quite intimate.

And maybe it's the lack of intimacy in Eyland's earlier work that bothers me. With *My Brother Terry Wilded*, he at last seems truly comfortable working in miniature. The work, no longer nearly so conceptual in origin or intent, is far less self-conscious, and not nearly so preoccupied with its very miniatureness.

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