

A portrait of the artist as a young obsessive

IN PERSON

Since his 20s, Winnipeg artist Cliff Eyland has been making pile after pile of tiny file-card sized paintings, collages and drawings, because 'it seems like the only thing you can really do.'

AUG 15, 1998

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The Globe and Mail, Winnipeg

Fame, fortune, respect — exactly what most artists can expect *not* to get as rewards for their hard labour. So why do they do it? The standard answer is that some creative compulsion forces them to make art, whether they like it or not. I never used to buy that explanation, but talking to 33-year-old Winnipeg painter Cliff Eyland has gone some way to convincing me it may be the best there is.

A small room at the Winnipeg Art Gallery is stuffed with 245 of his works, and it turns out there are at least 5,000 more where they came from. Here's an artist whose art is really about his creative compulsion. "It's about making a painting, and moving on, and making another one — in a kind of mildly depressive existentialist mode," Eyland explained. "You wake up another day and what are you going to do? You're going to make some more paintings. It's a kind of habit — you're still questioning why you're doing it, but it seems like the only thing you can really do."

And long ago he decided to take his habit — almost addiction — and parlay it into his own particular form of art making. Ever since 1981, Eyland has been making pile after pile of tiny three-by-five file-card sized paintings, collages and drawings, and then arranging them to how chunks of this visual glut.

For his current WAG exhibition, for instance, he chose portraits as his theme, mining his stock for little people-pictures that seemed to resonate together on the gallery wall. Some drawings are quick, lifelike sketches, others barely recognizable doodles; paintings can be carefully rendered miniatures, or just ID cards stuck to board — the details don't seem to matter. It's not clear that any one image is even meant to give much pleasure, and you can't tell from these snippets whether Eyland truly has the skills and eye to paint a powerful, visually arresting picture. But the abundance, the variety, the lunatic obsessiveness of his practice carry the show. Eyland cares deeply about painting, and stands in for all the others who do the same.

This commitment to painting was hard won. Born in Nova Scotia, Eyland eventually gravitated back to Halifax and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in the early eighties, when fiddling with a brush and paints was definitely not the thing to do for many of its instructors. "I got into trouble with my conceptualist teachers, who had difficulty with why I would make paintings," said Eyland. Many NSCAD artists were interested in a radical rethinking of what art making could be all about, and simply couldn't understand why Eyland, a thoughtful fellow conceptualist, would stick so stubbornly to an outmoded, maybe even politically suspect, handicraft. His "very tradi-



Eyland in front of a sampling of his work: 'Every kind of taxonomical thing you can do with a bunch of same-sized pieces of paper or masonite I think has probably crossed my mind.'

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itional" process — "to make work every day, and then figure out what to do with it after you make it" — seemed almost radical, or at least weirdly wrong-headed, within the NSCAD context. But the young artist refused to budge (painters' muses seem even more mulish than most) and began his daily churn of picture making, averaging at least one a day for almost two decades now.

But making his art has been only half the challenge. He also has to find strategies for sorting and showing it. "Every kind of taxonomical thing you can do with a bunch

of same-sized pieces of paper or masonite I think has probably crossed my mind," he said.

At the moment, Eyland sorts his work into 28 flexible categories, from pictures of Raoul Wallenberg to pictures he thinks may look like Saskatoon (a city he's never seen). Sometimes, as with a 1997 Halifax exhibition of his diminutive abstractions, he simply invites a curator to put together a show from one of these groupings. (When applying for an exhibition, he tends not to send slides — he just stuffs the originals in a box and lets the recipient play with them.) But with his draw-

ings at least, he has often taken things into his own hands.

Pull a book out of the stacks at any one of a number of libraries — in Canada, the United States, even Britain — and a drawing may very well come tumbling out, Cliff Eyland's contribution to your day's visual pleasure. He said that he wants to give people an art experience when they're least expecting it — "anticipating someone's reaction when they find something, and their puzzlement" — but you get the feeling that it's also about sowing his favourite place, a library, with the seeds of his obsession.

The book project began quietly and illicitly — when, for instance, Eyland's drawings began to appear in books in the Margaret Laurence museum in her home town of Neepawa, Man., its keepers were not in the know. But now Eyland's gone official. Last year, with full publicity and the permission of the administrators, Eyland put 1,637 of his drawings into arbitrarily selected books in the library of the New School for Social Research in New York. Next year, thousands of his works will be falling out of the books in the E.P. Taylor research library in the basement of the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. The library's art-world patrons should enjoy the pictures — some may take them home to add to their collections — even if they may not know quite why they're there.

But then, neither does Eyland, really.

"It's kind of pointless, but nevertheless, you continue. You go on. . . . It's got more to do with Samuel Beckett and wondering why you'd do anything — why bother. But you do."

Cliff Eyland: ID Paintings continues at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, 300 Memorial Boulevard, until Sept. 6. Web site: www.wag.mb.ca