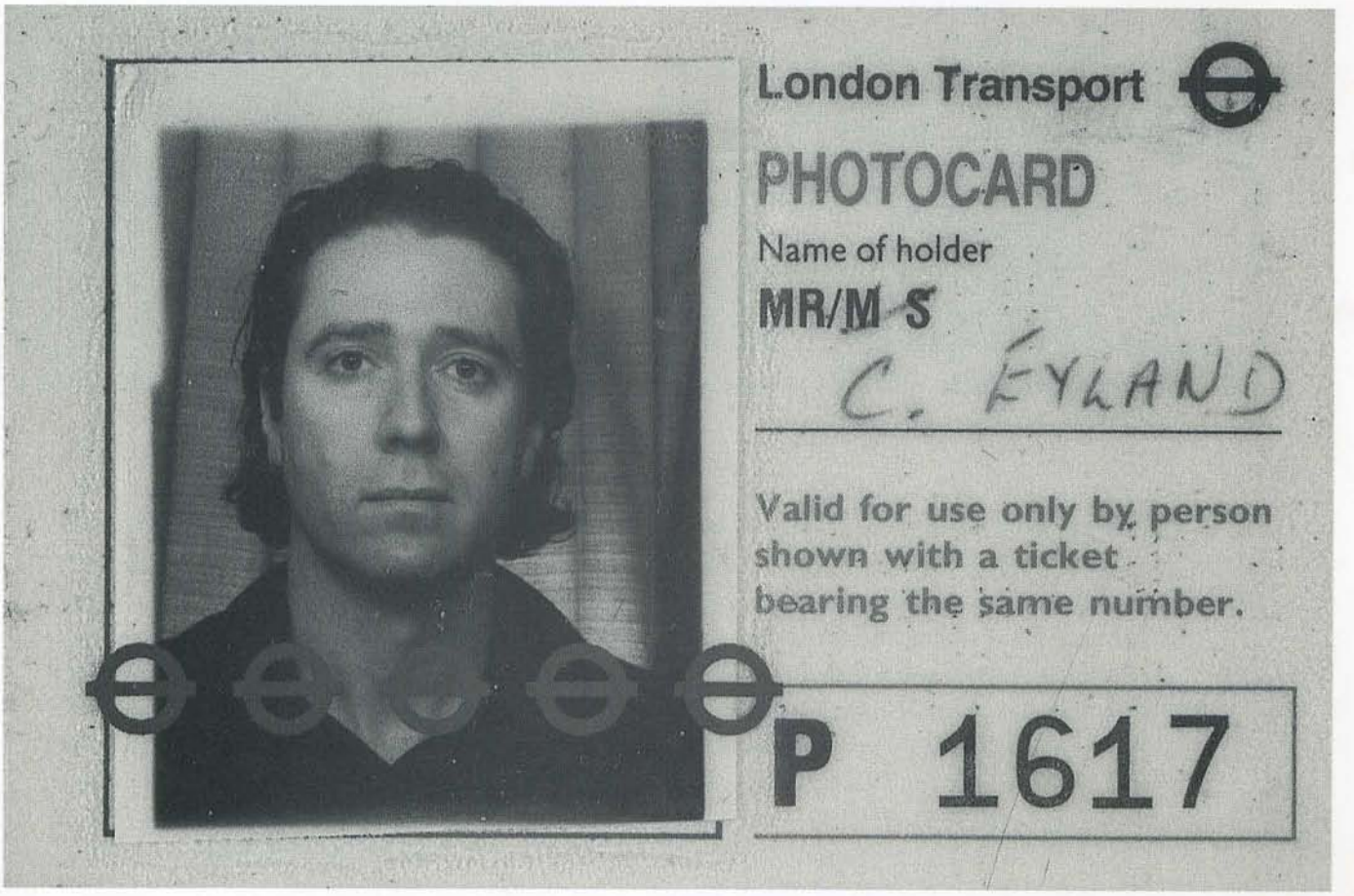
Cliff Eyland

JUNE 7 — SEPTEMBER 6, 1998

ID Paintings



WINNIPEG ART GALLERY

Cliff Eyland

"SYSTEM AND SENSIBILITY"

THE QUOTATION MARKS AROUND my title indicate that I previously used it over an article on Gerald Ferguson, published in Studio International in 1975.[1] Cliff Eyland refers to it in his interview with Ray Cronin in response to the question: "How do you reconcile the drawing and painting that you do with your conceptualist framework?"[2] Eyland responds: "The aesthetic/conceptual dichotomy... does not exist for me." He then goes on to suggest that my article on Ferguson "sums up in three words ...why conceptual art can even produce surrealist painting." It may be more informative to reexamine these three words in relation to the broader range of Eyland's art. To be productive the three words have to be heard differently, and this implies a different articulation of the terms, not just a shift of emphasis.

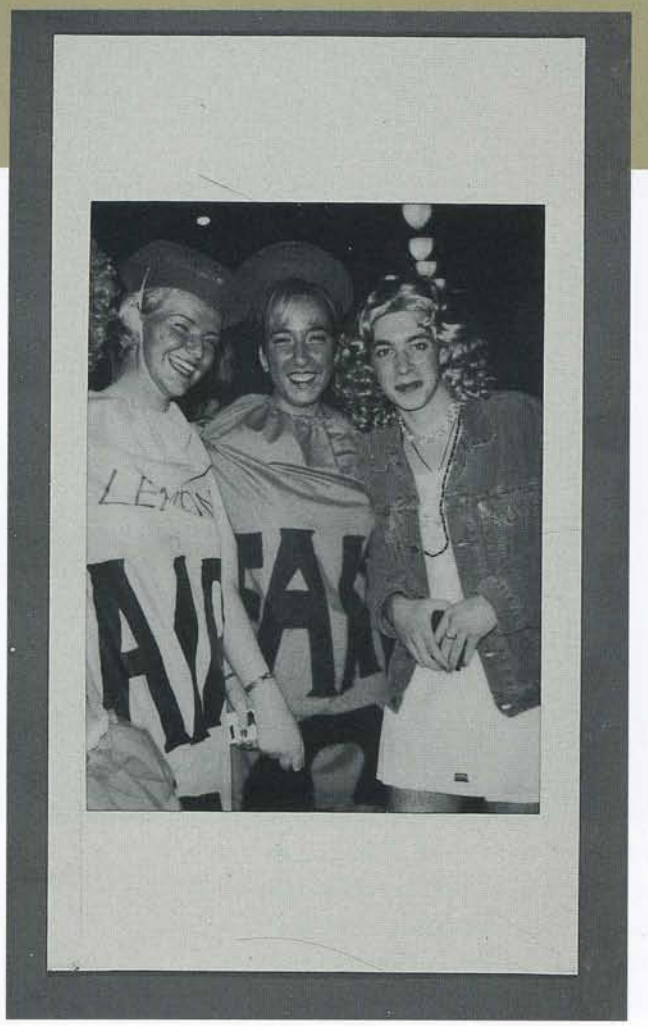
Ferguson's sensibility was (and is) of a kind that feels more at home with a systemic approach. Through a vast range of diverse projects, he allowed the logic of its basic systemic premise to determine every aspect of form and content. The resulting works manifest a terse expression of a mode of addressing — and to some extent avoiding — the problems of art and, by extension, the problems of life. For Ferguson, system is at once the sensibility and a means of guarding against the hazards of personal touch and taste, about which he has become only comparatively less squeamish with advancing years.

Eyland has never allowed such qualms to stand in his way. His accumulating body of thousands of small, file-card sized works includes a huge number of hand-painted and hand-drawn images. No attempt is made to conceal the evidence of the hand that made them or erase such traces of the personality that conceived them, imprints of which may be expected in works produced at speed. Much of the content is personal, relating to people and events in his private life. The totality presents a spectacle of teeming profusion. His own list of "File Card Exhibition Categories" produced for his "**Inventory**" exhibition at <SITE> Gallery earlier this year[3] identifies twenty-eight different types of work under the "File Card" rubric, twenty-one of which were represented. The present exhibition at the Winnipeg Art Gallery will be limited to the "ID" category, but it still encompasses "portrait drawings and paintings, photographic works, ID cards collaged into works, and depictions of imaginary and real people, including family members, Pam Perkins, Catherine Gallagher, Jane Sadler, Bruna Gushurst, Peter Wardrope and others."

If collaged elements and appropriated images coexist with those produced by more traditional means, they do not in any way detract from the sense of the artist's personal involvement. From one point of view, his art admits everything and admits to everything, though, from another, easy acceptance may be seen as a way of dismissing everything. It all depends on where you start, and with Eyland there are really only two possibilities.

If you find yourself engaging with the aesthetic experience of particular paintings and drawings, everything else follows as a necessary concomitant of making this sort of art, given the kind of artist he is. On this approach it is all a matter of sensibility. If, alternatively, you find your interest comes to focus on the things he does with these paintings and drawings, on the way he uses them to test the concept of art — more particularly, in his case, to test the place of art — you may reach the conclusion it is all a matter of system. As such, the specific form and content of paintings, drawings, collages, and the rest are necessary to enable him to test empirically his musings on the organization of the particular kinds of knowledge we identify as works of art.

System and sensibility are for Eyland alternative ways of responding to everything he has done and contin-



ues to do. Up to a certain point his art is like the duck/rabbit illusion: you can see it at one moment as a duck (a small silhouette of a duck did actually figure very prominently in one of his exhibitions),[4] and a split second later as a rabbit, but you can never see it as both at once. The point at which the parallel breaks down is where you turn the page of the book and immediately tell yourself: this is the duck/rabbit illusion. Such an understanding requires intellectual distance and placing Eyland's art at a distance automatically puts your understanding within the domain of system. The aesthetic and the conceptual are radically different from each other: the conceptual concerns an articulate intellectual grasp (which does not by any means have to be rational or logical), while the aesthetic (in the fullest sense) involves a sensate, emotional, inarticulate, empathetic engagement at the level of the biological rather than the social. The fact of Eyland's work may itself prove the point that aesthetic and conceptual modes can coexist within the same art manifestations; to this extent, there is no dichotomy, but the duality in his art is irreducible.

In the opening paragraph of the piece I wrote on Ferguson more than twenty years ago, I referred to a notion that was current among my instructors at university twenty years earlier: "deferring the aesthetic decision." Implicit in the notion is the assumption that what finally counts in a work of art is its aesthetic impact. The question is how to produce art that is formally satisfying while resonating with the authentic feel of lived experience. Concentrating one's immediate attention somewhere else, as Ferguson does, may be one kind of answer, but it is not Eyland's way. He makes no attempt to defer the aesthetic decision; I would suggest, however, that he does need to defend it. For it needs to be defended against the self-consciousness that goes with all the things Eyland is (teacher, critic, curator) when he is not actually applying paint to small pieces of masonite or making drawings on equally small pieces of card. The problem to which I am alluding is that of academic art through the ages or — perhaps more precisely — the problem of the academic as artist.

Producing works at speed, sometimes as many as

a hundred in a day, is a way of guarding against the possibility of self-consciousness; the fact that they are small is a way of guarding against feelings of self-importance that could be equally inhibiting. They are all the same size because he does not want to interrupt the flow of creative juices by stopping to think about format; instead, he just reaches for the next card or chunk of masonite off the shelf. He puts them into the pockets of library books to be left or taken away by anyone who finds them; assembles them in hand-made catalogues to be sold for a few dollars; uses them to caption the works of other artists; hands them over to curators to be arranged in more or less eccentric configurations of their own devising. These are all means of ensuring sensibility is not affected by the encroachment of preciousness, which in this case means that the aesthetic impact of his work should not be compromised either by the aura of excessive cost or by the fussy innuendo of excessive solicitude.

Eyland is blessed with a remarkable facility as a draughtsman and an equally impressive creative intelligence with the capacity for fantastic invention (there is no need to invoke nineteenth century theories of psychic automatism or twentieth century surrealist practices); he thinks and draws at speed. But he is also possessed of an acute critical intelligence that alerts him to the pitfalls of virtuosity. He might have responded by directing his talents towards more exacting and demanding individual works that would extend his capacities beyond what he could easily accomplish, but he went the other way, pushing himself by taking fluency to its limit. This was undoubtedly risky, but his achievement is the more original and distinctive as a result. I would encourage visitors to the WAG exhibition to take the time to respond to individual works aesthetically, especially the paintings and drawings. I can understand why he could not go so far as to encourage this himself, admitting he "do[es] not get anxious if someone does not grasp the bigger project;"[5] and, on a more affirmative note, Eyland adds: "The images that matter for me lately are the ones I create myself without appropriating material or even using models."[6]

"Grasp[ing] the bigger project" necessarily means switching to the conceptual mode, to "system." From the conceptual/systemic standpoint, the drawings, paintings, collages and the rest, regardless of theme, treatment, or expressive content, are all just more works of art; they are generic works intended to allow the artist, after the manner of Joseph Kosuth's theories, to question the concept of art and offer a new definition of it. That boards and cards have any markings on them at all is merely for the sake of identifying them as art. They are tokens of the art condition used experimentally to test the boundaries of art, and have no intrinsic value beyond their effectiveness as tokens. This is why the artist can allow himself to dash off as many as a hundred in a day, because it simply does not matter how they look as long as they look like art. If many of them resemble work from an age that emphasized the aesthetic response, this is because such art is more readily identified as "art" than conceptual productions like Joseph Kosuth's ***Any Five Foot Sheet of Glass to Lean against any Wall.*** Even then, their resemblance to "aesthetic" art is undermined by connotations of the filing card format. Filing cards contain information, not aesthetic experience; so, the works are presented as tokens of art information.

To a very large extent Kosuth's kind of conceptual art derives from the precedent of Marcel Duchamp's readymades. The twist that Eyland adds comes from favouring the "reciprocal readymade," whose possibility Duchamp mooted ("Use a Rembrandt as an ironing board!"),[7] but never developed himself. Granted that Eyland's use of his own drawings and paintings is less extreme, taking art no further from the gallery than to the library, and often the art library at that, the shift to a context of things verbal is also Duchampian, and it is not just a matter of placing art more readily at the service of the mind. Criteria of success in art may depend more on the place it finds in verbal texts than on gallery walls. According to Duchamp's own account, the ultimate test of an artist's success would seem to be that "finally, posterity includes him in the primers of art history."[8] But does physically inserting the work in a book enshrine it in the sanctity of the text? If the work is demeaned by being abandoned, is it not also hinting at the possibility of aggrandizement by the context of its abandonment? In general, the weight of probability seems to favour lessening of worth. This diminution

of significance extends to the works of art history when Eyland cuts up the illustrations in H.H. Arnason's ***History of Modern Art*** and consigns them to the card index of the art library; the work is reduced to the status of documentation of itself in a context of bibliographic classification.

As a curator of art, Eyland has the opportunity to deal with actual works by other artists, consigning them to settings in the library where they may easily escape attention, or matching them with his own works, which then assume the role of captions. Since the works of the other artists are selected on the basis of their resemblance to the caption pieces,[9] the exercise is mutually demeaning. But it may be a necessary corrective to the overly strident rhetoric in and about much contemporary art criticism today. Eyland sees the library and the art gallery as public places for private contemplation, and reducing the level of hyperbole may contribute to the contemplative mood. Smallness comes into its own at the level of ideas as well as aesthetic experience, but they remain radically distinct.

Eric Cameron, 1998

ENDNOTES

1. Eric Cameron, "System and Sensibility: The Art of Gerald Ferguson", *Studio International*, CLXXXIX, 974, March/April, 1975, 124-128.

2. Ray Cronin, "A Reasoned Compulsion: an interview with Cliff Eyland by Ray Cronin", *C Magazine*, May-August, 1997, 22-26.

3. Cliff Eyland, *Inventory*, <SITE> Gallery, Winnipeg, January 9-31, 1998.

4. *Cliff Eyland*, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, January 3-20, 1984. Charlotte Townsend Gault begins her review with a reference to his "little painting of a duck". See: Charlotte Townsend-Gault, "Cliff Eyland", *Vanguard*, March, 1984, 48-49.

5. Ray Cronin, op. cit. 25.

6. *Ibid*, 26.

7. Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades'," *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 142.

8. Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act", *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 138.

9. For detail see: Terry Graff, "The Green Fuse: Taking in *The 1994 Great Garden of the Gulf Annual Juried Exhibition*", *Arts Atlantic*, 49, Spring/Summer, 1994, 38.

EYLAND/INDEX/PAINT

LEARNING IN DEPTH ABOUT Cliff Eyland's work began for me by exploring the matter(s) to which he refers with his adoption of the concept of 'ID'. My first impressions seemed to lie in an idea of the possibilities afforded when identification becomes objectified (as painting) rather than its more common subjectification (as person). Several of the IDs in Eyland's work have been reduced to a 3 x 5" format, the size of a common file card. File cards, traditionally used in library or office-like settings, were perhaps a 'pre-technological' way of readily systematizing and recording negotiated items or events. Within the annals of art history, painting has also acted quite prominently as a system for recording or chronologizing events. Humankind's historical imageries of religion, aristocracy (the political), medicine, geography, and war, among others, have been traditionally archived through the act of painting. I presume that most every viewer of Eyland's work is 'initiated' into this well-established relationship between the file card as informational abbreviation (index) and the act of painting. Many of his ID card/paintings seem to carry with them the potential to reveal the psychological underpinnings of each volunteer which is depicted. "Everybody becomes a voluntary participant in creating diversity without a loss of identity", Marshall McLuhan once remarked.[1] This led me to think of how each volunteer's commitment to Eyland's process of 'participation' in the event affected the outcome of the event itself. It then came to me that the act of participation on the behalf of the identified becomes an enabling 'hinge' between what may be defined as a portrait or what might be defined as an identification card (ID).

It seems that most often that whenever we are required to have our own identification created, the purpose is almost always utilitarian. With keeping this in mind, I recalled some of the instances when I acquired my own ID's (passport in particular). My participation in each event was usually somewhat less than pleasant. All include either deadlines which had to be met, bureaucracy, over excitement, or the impending feeling that the photograph might not properly represent me. The act of painting portraits (and photographic portraiture) is most often repetitiously submersed in a second person sentimentality, and garnished with the forethought of the activity at hand. Since I have never had my portrait painted, I can only recall the experience of sitting before a portrait camera. Other than family and school portraits, I had an assignment in art school in which the class used a photo-booth to take a series of self-portraits. The black and white photos were later painted upon, then duplicated using paint on canvas. This was an activity which altered the visual characteristics of myself (the photograph) and, as a direct result, presented a set of altered conclusions (the painting) which no longer adequately represented the portrait. In the process, some things were lost, but something was also gained: a transgressing of the mirrored image of the self. In the words of Arthur Schopenhauer: "The individual, as individual, cannot know it; in order to conceive it he (she) must strip himself (herself) of all will, of all individuality, and raise himself (herself) to the state of pure knowing subject."[2] I gathered from Schopenhauer that one real image of a person can only render a finite set of potential realizations. The more the portrait is abstracted from the initial facsimile, the more avenues and possibilities of interpretation open to the viewer (perhaps even to the maker as well).

Certain aspects of the painted portrait seem to morph the persona into something which does not democratically represent the referent. In other words, during the transaction between the painter and the poser, certain aspects of the personality shift - and necessarily at the expense of the personality in the painting. A protrayee does not possess the ability to modify or control the portrait during the sitting. The photographed portrait intern, may in theory be representing the real; for the photographed moment always seems to deposit an image which suggests something 'genuine'. The camera often offers itself as a tool for sobering (a) reality. Seemingly, a photograph as a process for recording a person's portrait should lessen the risk of losing an identified identity. Historically, we have a tendency to believe or 'trust' photographs (specifically portraits) mainly because of our need for 'memories'. According to David Tomas: "Memory and identity are often rooted in the same images, objects of locals.... Thus, one after another, images can appear in which an identity and an artistic practice are progressively entwined across space and time."[3]

A temporal wash seems to exist between Eyland's portraits as painting/photographs and the ID portraits. They insinuate the idea of chronologizing the personality as an event, or the personality/moment as a Happening. Many of the Happenings in the 1960s emphasized the notion of art as event. One of Claes Oldenburg's Happenings, ***Fotodeath*** (***Circus*** is the primary title),

performed six times in February 1961, is perhaps an accurate example of rendering personalities as events rather than as personalized likenesses; no beginnings and no endings, just moments at hand. ***Fotodeath*** contained multi-stages and multi-scenes which made reference to ordinary Americans and the complexities of their lives at that time. Many of the persons and scenes in the Happening were simultaneously washed together within the event itself. Eyland's portraits do something similar; they vacillate between the subjective and the objective. At a certain point, the important aspects of each personality in the portraits becomes part of a fractional collective. It's not that Eyland is trying to homogenize them, for each personality retains its uniqueness; yet some of the importance of the singular individual becomes diluted by the plurality. As I looked at several of the portraits together, a decentralization seemed to take place. Not one was capable of maintaining the appearance of a portrait, but rather, an object which signifies a personality. On the basis of the claim that "if we wish to understand our social and cultural world we must examine the network of relations which endow objects and events with meaning,"[4] it was almost unavoidable that the ID objectified the self to the point at which nothing remained of individualism but empirical data. Although the actual identity of the referent is treated so reductively on an identification card, the possessor's personality still manages to be imbued upon it.

The sphere of the private becomes all to evidently exposed when it is placed among a multiple personality, public environment. Eyland's portraits bring together multiples of personalities: "In a subtle way, this loss of public space occurs contemporaneously with the loss of private space. The one is no longer a spectacle, the other no longer a secret. Their distinctive opposition, the clear difference of an exterior and an interior exactly described the domestic scene of objects, with its rules of play and limits...".[5] Eyland's ID works explore the paradox of personal and public selves.

I frequently entertained the possibility of describing Eyland's ID paintings in the Freudian psychoanalytic fashion as Id; that is, "the one of the three divisions of the psyche in psychoanalytic theory that is completely unconscious and is the source of psychic energy derived from instinctual needs and drives."[6] I am not implying that Eyland is at all interested in Freudian psychodynamics, but his interest in portrait painting (and photographic replication) suggests a substantial exploration of the persona, as well as an interesting compulsion to taxonomize it. The consistent size format of each file card has the ability to concurrently refer to its dimensions as well as to what it is disguising. The possibility that the file cards provide physical dimensions in which Eyland navigates and records personalities may perhaps, in my view, express or satisfy his instinctual needs. His 'portrait-cards' disclose the fragmentation of many personalities that seem to speak only indirectly of their identities: "in the id, which is capable of being inherited, are harbored residues of the existence of countless egos...".[7] By placing the personalities into a multiple format, Eyland is in a sense severing the distinguishing residues from the portraits in the show.

Just before I started researching Eyland's work, I met with him to learn firsthand about his ideas and practices. After a thoroughly enlightening talk and a look at some of the works he was preparing for the show, I finished my wine, and pulled on my winter boots to leave. It was at this juncture when he handed me a coloured photocopy work he had completed in order for me to familiarize myself with what would be in the show. The piece was a picture of his brother Terry. Apparently, poor Terry had suffered some sort of ferocious street gang attack and was physically brutalized (his leather jacket was stolen as well). The coloured photocopy (3 x 5") really shows how savagely Terry was attacked. Eyland manipulated the photocopy, giving Terry a sort of 'multi-coloured facial'. I have lived with Terry's misfortune on my yellow dining room wall for sometime....

Douglas W. Lewis

ENDNOTES

1. Marshall McLuhan, in ***Who Was Marshall McLuhan?***, ed. Frank Zingrone, Wayne Constantineau and Eric McLuhan. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1995, 16.

2. Arthur Schopenhauer, "Art, Will, and Idea." in ***Perspectives in Aesthetics***, ed. Peyton E. Richter. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1982, 191.

3. David Tomas, "Thresholds of Identity." in ***Chemical Skins***, Oakville: Gairloch Gallery, 1994, 28.

4. Honi Fern Haber, ***Beyond Postmodern Politics***. New York: Routledge, 1994, 11.

5. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication." in ***The Anti-Aesthetic***, ed. Hal Foster. Seattle: Bay Press, 1983, 130.

6. ***Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary***, rev. ed. (1989), s.v. "id."

7. Jacques Lacan, in ***Lacan***, ed. Malcolm Bowie. London: Fontana Press, a Division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1991, 20.

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Cliff Eyland is an artist, painter, independent curator and critic who has exhibited and published widely throughout Canada. He studied art and philosophy at Holland College School of Visual Arts, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island and Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick. He received his B.F.A. at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1982. Since 1981, he has made paintings, drawings and notes in an index or library card format, 3" x 5". Since moving to Winnipeg in 1994, Eyland has organized his old works and made new work for exhibition sets which are sorted according to an "unfixed list of 28 categories". Since 1994, Eyland's paintings have been shown in solo exhibitions across Canada and at the New School for Social Research in New York City where he began an ongoing installation at the Raymond Fogelman Library in 1997. In addition to his extensive exhibition record, he teaches at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design during the summer, and has curated such exhibitions as ***Rethinking the rural in contemporary Newfoundland art***, Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador; ***Harold Town***, Gallery 111, Winnipeg; ***Harry Symons***, Plug In, Inc. Winnipeg, 1997 and ***Immense/Ordered/Deranged***, Plug In, Inc., 1996 among others. His writings appear in numerous publications and periodicals in Canada.

LIST OF WORKS

The exhibition consists of small format paintings, each 3" x 5" installed floor to ceiling in Gallery 2 of the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

The assistance of the Manitoba Arts Council and the Volunteer Committee to the Winnipeg Art Gallery is gratefully acknowledged.

The Manitoba Studio Series is an ongoing survey of contemporary practice in this province. It focuses on work by both emerging and established artists. The aim of the Series is to encourage active dialogue between the artists and the public. To facilitate dialogue the essays in the Series are written by Manitoba and other Canadian writers familiar with contemporary art and the issues surrounding it.

Curated by Shirley Madill
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