

'I can't not draw. I just can't,' says Winnipeg artist Cliff Eyland, who's been known to produce more than 100 works in a single day. As is clear from the images previewed here, he has found the perfect form for his artistic chaos — the three-by-five-inch file card.

ROBERT ENRIGHT
Special to The Globe and Mail, Winnipeg

POSTCARDS





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n the past 20 years, painting has had a rough ride. It was declared dead, and then when it became a Lazarus art, its barely warmed body was subjected to all manner of abuse from all persuasions of visual and performing artists. It was in this charnel house of debate that Cliff Eyland began the serious work of turning himself into a painter.

In the early 1980s, Eyland was a student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, an art school that had a deserved reputation as one of the most radical in North America. Conceptual art, in which ideas were more important than objects and the rigour of theory was more prized than the making of marks, was the official religion. In this critical atmosphere, the act of making a painting was apostasy.

Eyland, now 45, was caught in the middle of what amounted to an art war. "In 1981, when neo-expressionism came in," he remembers, "I thought of conceptual art as this old thing. It wasn't very fashionable but I was interested in it. I had always been a painter, so the debate for me was how to deal with the critiques of painting from the perspective of a practitioner."

If painting was heroic, Eyland would be low key; if painters worked in a studio, he would make his art everywhere; if paintings were big, he would work small — on three-by-five-inch filing cards, to be exact. If a single painting was a commitment that demanded time and high seriousness, he would make a promiscuous number of works quickly, almost indifferently.

And if paintings hung in art galleries, he would insert his drawings — sometimes surreptitiously — into library books and card catalogues. Eyland became a sort of generous subversive, infiltrating the system with gifts that people could either take away or simply leave alone. He was like a figure out of Jorge Luis Borges, an "imperfect librarian" inquiring into "the formless and chaotic nature of almost all books."

What may on the surface look like casual, incidental work has been taken seriously — Eyland has had shows at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Confederation Art Gallery in Charlottetown, the New School for Social Research in New York, and (currently) at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. He shows commercially at Toronto's Leo Kamen Gallery, but also continues to exhibit at artist-run spaces and to carry out "book interventions" in public libraries.

All of this activity is made possible by Eyland's prodigious output: He has been known to produce more than 100 works in a single day. "I can't *not* draw. I just can't," he admits. "It's a psychological thing which must be linked to some neurosis. That's quite clear."

What wasn't as clear in the 1980s was how he should proceed. Among the conceptual painters who were admired at the time — like Sol LeWitt and On Kawara — there was a distrust of loaded imagery, so Eyland characteristically looked for a space outside the prevailing practice. "There was a certain kind of puritanism at NSCAD," he says. "It favoured puritanical imagery and was no less hung up about issues around sexuality." Eyland's visual cornucopia included then, as it does today, a fair number of nudes in imaginative couplings. "I was against this heterosexual, male thing too. However, there was a problem about being sympathetic to feminism, understanding the issues, and yet having sexual impulses and wanting to express them in art. It didn't go away."

Nor has it gone away. Any new body of work invariably includes naked figures — men and women, together and alone.

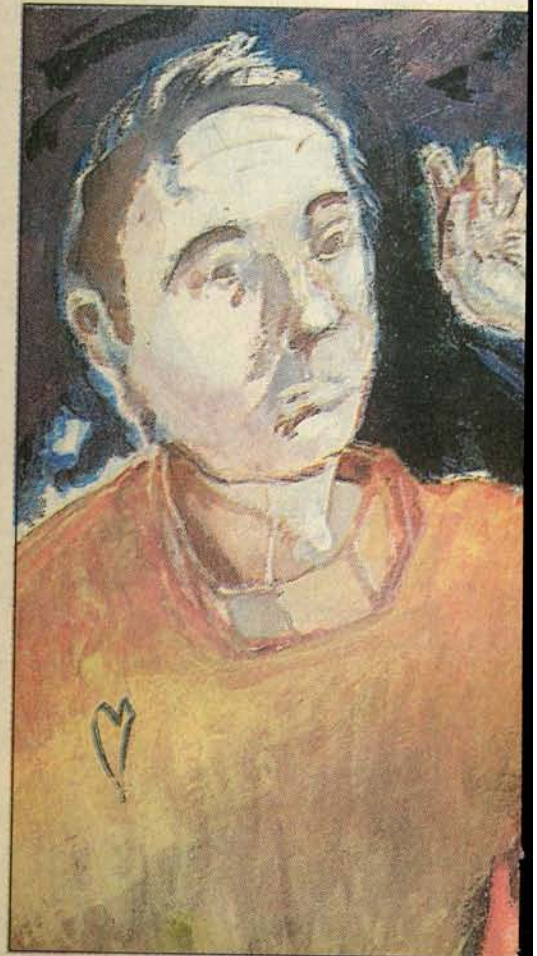


"POSTCARDS
FROM THE
EDGE"

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GLOBE &
MAIL
(TORONTO)

8 JAN
2000
R8-R9



ORDERING CHAOS

Cliff Eyland makes his art works in 28 "categories," which, he admits, often overlap. "I also reserve the right to ignore any rules I make for myself," he says. They are as follows:

1. Abstract paintings.

2. Wildlife paintings: animals, monsters and robots.

3. Landscape paintings: based on place names or painted from life.

4. ID: portraits, photographic works, ID cards collaged into works; of imaginary or real people.

5. Wallenberg: chosen with PEI poet Joseph Sherman for exhibition with his poems about Raoul Wallenberg.

6. Labels: works used as "labels" (with or without text) in exhibitions by other artists.

7. Francis/Giotto: based on St. Francis and on paintings by Giotto.

8. Expo/Borduas: Expo '67 pavilion stamps gathered at age 13 form the basis of paintings that allude to works by Paul Emile Borduas, also seen at Expo.

9. Drawings: made in various sizes, on masonite or paper.

10. Reproductions: includes reproductions (any size) retouched with paint, and colour or black-and-white photocopies that can be used as the basis of new paintings.

11. Photographs: includes snapshots, found photographs, formal set ups and, since 1995, Polaroid Captiva photographs put into a three-by-five-inch format, sometimes used with other materials.

12. Figure paintings.

13. Library inserts: works secretly put into book pockets and/or library books.

14. Saskatoon: paintings about a city that I have yet to (and perhaps never will) visit.

15. Objects: sculptural works, usually paintings that have become encrusted.

16. Architectural: includes works about architecture made during and after my years as a curator at the Technical University of Nova Scotia's school of architecture (1985-1994).

17. Music/Film: recorded and unrecorded music, film and video.

18. Sexual works.

19. Military works: includes pictures of imaginary fighter aircraft and other military things related to my childhood on Canadian air force bases.

20. Other people's file cards: that is, works given to me over the years, as jokes.

21. Pre-1981: earlier works that I cut into file card-sized pieces or reproduce in order to make new works.

22. Cambridge: wall labels about art, science, and Cambridge, England, where I lived in 1992.

23. Belfast pictures: works about Northern Ireland.

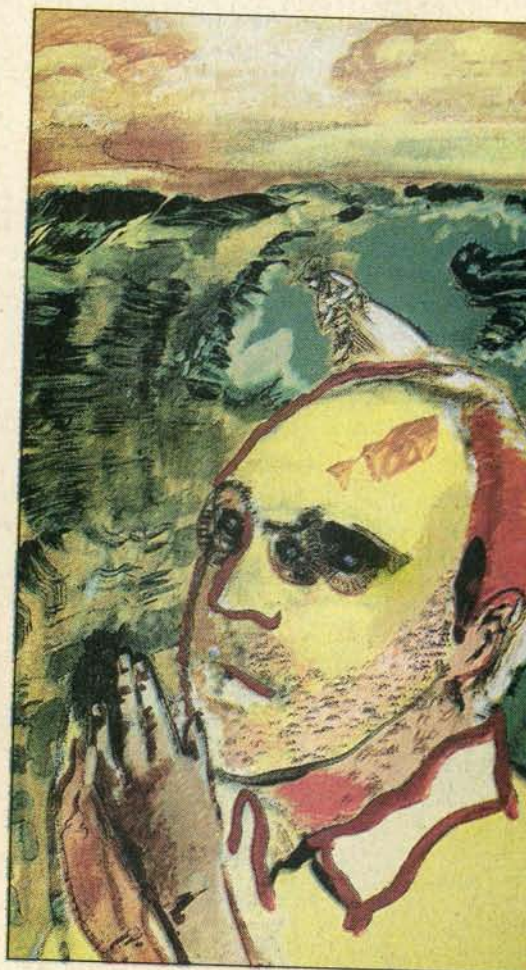
24. Rolodex: addresses collected on a Rolodex beginning in 1997.

25. Framed paintings.

26. Playing cards (as yet not produced).

27. Trading cards (as yet not produced).

28. Critical writing: curatorial essays or critical reviews, eventually to be edited into file-card books.



First column: LK/G&M 38 (VISA), 1999; LK/G&M 23 (airplane), 1999;
Second column: LK 193, 1999; LK/G&M 50 (abstract), 1999; LK 137,
1999; LK/G&M 19 (figure), 1999.
Third column: LK/G&M 58 (landscape), 1999; LK/G&M 14 (all occasion
figure), 1999; LK/G&M 1 (Allan MacDonald), 1999.

FROM THE



Fourth column: LK/G&M 4 (Noam Gowick), 1999; LK/G&M 35 (abstract), 1999; LK/G&M 31 (figures), 1999; LK/G&M 45 (Star Trek: Ensign volunteers to go down to the surface), 1999.

Fifth column: LK/G&M 28 (two women), 1999; LK/G&M 20 (landscape), 1999.

Sixth column: LK/G&M 47 (landscape), 1999; LK/G&M 15 (figures/beach), 1999; LK/G&M 59 (tree), 1999; LK240, 1999.



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