



All works are Untitled, 2001, ink on paper, 3" x 5".

Essay: Chris Reid, Curator

Design & Layout: Lei Anne Sharratt

Printing: Leech Printing Ltd., Brandon

The Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba  
receives financial assistance from  
the City of Brandon; Manitoba Culture, Heritage  
and Tourism; the Manitoba Arts Council  
and The Canada Council for the Arts.



© Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, 2001

638 Princess Ave · Brandon · MB · Canada · R7A 0P3

204-727-1036 · agsm@mb.sympatico.ca

**CLIFF EYLAND**

**F I L E  
C A R D  
S O R T**



OCTOBER 18 TO  
NOVEMBER 24, 2001

ART GALLERY  
OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA

# Compulsive Conception

## The artistic practice of Cliff Eyland

The first time that Lei Anne Sharratt, the gallery's preparator and I met with Cliff Eyland he had arrived at the coffee shop before us. Armed with a stack of 3"x5" cards and a large selection of markers held together with a thick rubber band he was already drawing. At the end of our meeting he handed each of us a couple of finished works saying "You can have these."

Cliff Eyland makes his art everyday and on some days he produces nearly 100 works. He is unable to not make things. His production is an obsession and all of his works are the size that library index cards were when they were in use.

Eyland began working in this miniature format in 1981 when he was a student at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Because of his general interest in them, Eyland had created several installations in the school library. Somewhere between making these works and studying art history, he began thinking about how art history is



documented and the ways in which library classifications are structured. He cut "Arneson's History of Modern Art" (one of the basic art history texts at the time) into file card sized pieces and inserted them amongst the cards in the college library's catalogue according to a very loose classification system of his own invention. This project worked well within NSCAD's conceptual focus at the time. The prevailing environment at the college was concerned with rethinking what art making was about and the validity of traditional modes of art making were being questioned. There was a feeling that all possible aspects of a media like painting had been explored therefore leaving little or no room for discovery and expression.

Yet Eyland had what could be described as a compulsion to paint and after the file card project he began to create 3"x5" surfaces on which to paint. Perhaps he did this out of convenience. Perhaps it was because of the intimacy of the format. Or maybe he did it because the small size gave him the potential to produce a finished product quickly and distribute his work easily yet personally.

Over the years, the consistent format has permitted

Eyland to pursue themes, media and styles spontaneously, while his skill and mastery of technique allows each work to exist as a finished work.

Eyland's massive output of paintings, drawings, collages and photographs are influenced by a diverse array of artists including de Chirico, Constable, Hoffman and Borduas and he explores themes as wide ranging as landscape, music/film and military. He loosely organizes the work into a personal taxonomy of 28 occasionally overlapping categories that, along with the limited format, lends itself to modes of presentation that make reference to early conceptual works.<sup>1</sup> By exhibiting the work in galleries and using traditional media such as paint, and pen and ink, he identifies himself with the established art hierarchy. At the same time, Eyland works against this system and the commodification of the art object by freely giving the work away or by placing it in non-art contexts such as the library where people can find it unexpectedly. The "label" category which consists of Eyland's works that have been used by other artists as labels in their exhibitions and the "critical writing" category which consists of curatorial essays and critical reviews edited to file-card size allow him

to push boundaries and definitions even further. As a result of his method of working Eyland has walked a line between the painting processes that he loves and his conceptual background and moved neatly into a post-modern artistic practice that allows for fluid responsive evolution.

Eyland says “Jorge Luis Borges’ stories *The Library of Babel* and Funes *The Memorious* had a bearing on my original impulse to make file-card-sized paintings in 1981. But if I once thought of myself as a librarian painter – maybe one of Borges’ *Librarians of Babel* – I now aspire to Funes’ atomized vision of the world, in which things represent each other in a precise way.... I try to make a whole image as I paint, a painting that can exist on its own.”

*Chris Reid, Curator*

1. Eyland cites artists like On Kawara who documented the passage of time over a 30 year period by painting the passing dates in white letters and numbers on monochrome backgrounds and Daniel Buren who reduced his paintings to uniform commercially printed stripes to emphasize context over form as influences.

