

Brian Saby ~ The Claustrophobic Cacophony of City Life

Dada is a state of mind . . . Dada applies to everything,
and yet it is nothing, it is the point where the yes
and the no and all opposites meet, not solemnly in
the castles of human philosophies, but very simply
at street corners, like dogs and grasshoppers.

— Tristan Tzara, Lecture on Dada, 1924

SPRINGING up following the First World War, the nihilistic anti-art movement of Dada, literally a nonsensical or infantile term, disdaining conventional art practices, strove to articulate what they saw as the fundamental loss of meaning of European culture.

Decades later, using similar methods of collage, juxtaposing the plethora of civic debris, London artist, **Brian Saby**, currently showing at Thielsen Galleries on Adelaide Street, explores the nature of the urban jungle. If Dada is a state of mind, then the same could be said for *The City*, the title of Saby's exhibition, a collection of funky mixed media canvases that illustrate the claustrophobic cacophony of city life.

Employing vivid colour combinations that are often shriekingly disharmonious, Saby uses garish colour to assault the mind and the senses. Like the colours of the world advertising campaign by clothing manufacturer, Benetton, Saby's colour sense is international, crossing the boundaries of good taste. Like the neon lights of a city that compete for our attention, the bright orange, pink, red, blue and green of many works becomes the subject, an intense, elemental drama of vibrating, tonal relationships.

Saby chooses two forms of presentation, a softer one primarily executed in watercolour, and an angular, rectilinear and crisp delineation of shapes that recalls the experimentations of twentieth century abstract formalists like Barnett Newman. In the first case, in Saby's work, *Elmocambo #2*, an acrylic, watercolour and collage on paper, the blocks of saturated watercolour coalesce, mitigating the discordance of the strong colour. In contrast though, in several works, like *Reds*, Saby's use of simplified and pure shapes, and his contrast of flat complementary colours with their hard edges clarifies and distils

the pictorial language into its intrinsic components.

What unifies the exhibition, apart from the colour, is Saby's compositional structure, repeated in each of the works. Architectural in its nature, the H shape is reminiscent of the concrete ready-made units in apartment construction.

With rigid boundaries, this compartmentalization of space is definitive of urban living, a radical delineation of personal and public boundaries. Like an optical illusion, the shape appears and disappears, falling back and then pressing to the surface in a constant interchange of stimuli.

Like the Dadaists, Saby uses collage, playing off images, colours and forms with one another, placing subway tickets, posters, television images, and beer labels on top of one another, layering the fragments of our cultural mosaic like stratum of industrial waste. The materials bring with them a history, and recontextualized, represent ideas independent of their original meaning. Signs, often torn, their messages lost in the swirl of frenetic logos and images, are reduced to disassociated syllabic newsbites that, coupled with the international languages Saby introduces, contribute to the hallucinatory mixture of sense and nonsense.

Asian letters, taken from texts, figure largely as objects, their foreign and enigmatic nature denying any kind of logical interpretation. International, like a



BRIAN SABY: APPLE COLLAGE (detail), 1996,
mixed media, 24.5" x 20"

colour and detail contributing to a strong sense of the often dizzying energy of the city. Urban landscapes, their mass of detail pressing in on our collective consciousness, they represent a world where the peripheral takes centre stage, where to focus on the whole is to be consumed by it, and so we look to the minutiae of daily existence for salvation.

Saby's works are both visceral and conceptual, disorienting and mesmerizing, sites where contradictory elements converge readily, like Tzara's dogs and grasshoppers, to form an alliance of the senses that binds life and art irrevocably together.

BRIAN SABY is showing at Thielsen Galleries, 1038 Adelaide StN., until November 9, 434-7681.

metropolitan city, the languages and images included, rather than forming a coherent narrative, instead augment the raucous nature of the city, the voices jarring in their dissonance.

Playful and self-referential, Saby's own images appear in larger works, details magnified to take on a more central role, a constant remembering of his own artistic past. What's interesting as well is his citation and appropriation of the works of other artists from many periods of art's history like Pablo Picasso and David Bolduc, a collection of signs – like a web – that contributes to the sense of the artwork as text. Nodding to the Dada camp, his *Portrait of Kurt*, a collage recalling Dada member Kurt Schwitters' *Merz Pictures*, collages that revelled in the possibilities of urban debris, Saby foregrounds art as construct, a compilation of the past and present that undermines the notion of originality.

Yet despite the frenzied and illogical nature of Saby's works, they're not without sense, their meaning cumulative, with each