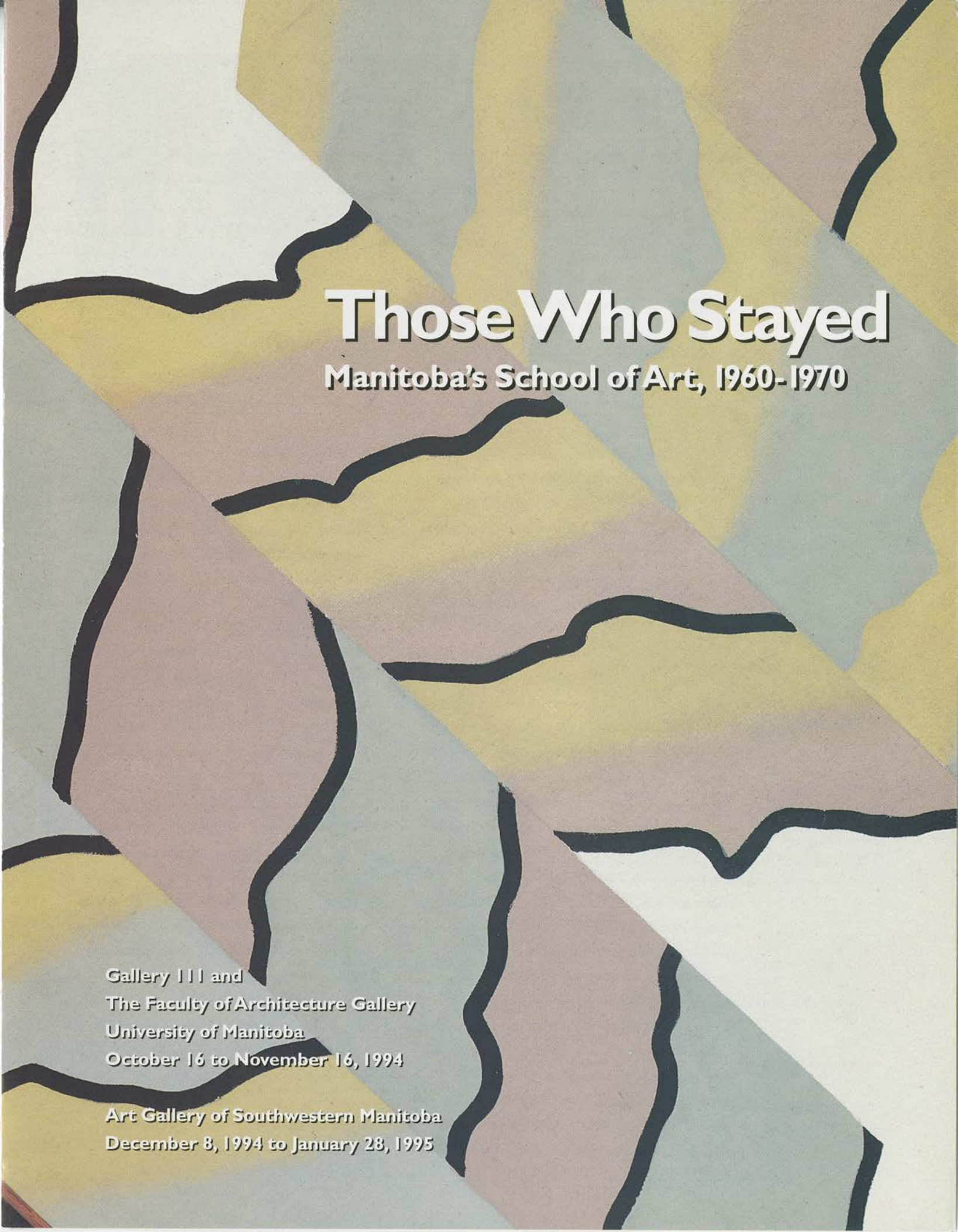


Those Who Stayed

Manitoba's School of Art, 1960-1970

Gallery 111 and
The Faculty of Architecture Gallery
University of Manitoba
October 16 to November 16, 1994

Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba
December 8, 1994 to January 28, 1995

Those Who Stayed

Manitoba's School of Art, 1960-1970

The Winnipeg School of Art, founded in 1913, was the first in Western Canada. In 1950, affiliation with the University of Manitoba brought new faculty, re-defined goals, and a B.F.A. degree.[1] It was the most progressive art school in Canada.[2]

During the 1960s two incidents, both related to student work, foretold or echoed events that occurred in larger centres. The first, in 1960, involved a neo-dada exhibition at a coffee house by a second year student, Dieter Rechenberg. As described by one reviewer, "Old bed sheets serve as a base for the works with tape measures, old socks, rag scraps and cigar burns for variety."[3] Although I have been unable to locate photographic documentation of the work, from a few titles we might imagine its look: *Ask of Stains the Proof Or Which Twin Uses Toni, The Bard's Incestuous Sheets Preserved for Posterity,* and *Burnt Offering 1* and *2*. His teacher, Mashel Teitelbaum, sang his praises to the press, describing him as "a prolific, tremendous artist, untiring and a powerhouse of ideas and activity."[4] Richard Williams, Director of the School, disagreed. "As I know him, he has modest talent as an artist.... [The exhibition] is a weak and misguided effort. It is 40 years too late."[5] Teitelbaum countered: "The exhibition and the artist has [sic] youth, novelty and vigour."[6] The neo-dada spirit, manifested in New York a decade earlier, was slow to develop in Canada. This Winnipeg exhibition preceded a (now) famous neo-dada show at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto by a year.

The School of Art in the Old Law Courts Building in downtown Winnipeg.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA.

The second incident involved the issue of censorship. As part of his thesis exhibition in 1965, Russell Wimbush built a life-size coffin in which there were plaster casts of parts of his body, various objects and stencilled text. When the lid was opened an ersatz penis–a piece of curved wood with a flashing light on the end–popped up. The work was shown without incident at the University's Exhibition Centre and at the Yellow Door Gallery. When it was shown in the window of The Experiment, a poster shop and gallery (some refer to it as a head shop) in then-emerging Osborne Village, a resident complained. The owners of the shop were charged; they did "Expose Obscene Thing, Exhibit Disgusting Object, and Exhibit Indecent Show." Today the transcript of evidence presented in January 1968 before Magistrate I. Rice seems hilarious. At the time, however, the charge was serious. The case was dismissed after four days of hearings. During the same period Dorothy Cameron was being prosecuted for exhibiting "obscene" work at her Here and Now Gallery in Toronto.

The relationship between the School and the University was tightened during the 1960s and has proved to be a mixed blessing. In 1965 the School was moved from its cramped quarters in the Old Law Courts Building in downtown Winnipeg to a 1.3 million dollar building on campus.[7] A member of the Faculty of Architecture described the building in the *Winnipeg Free Press* as "extremely mediocre." He went on to say, "It would seem that every important conceptual design decision by the architect has resulted in the negation of any architectural form or space growing from the ... functions occurring within the building."[8]

The atmosphere of the Old Law Courts Building has been described as "cosy"[9] and one that fostered the sense of "a family thing, a cohesive unit,"[10] the new building, however, was "sterile."[11] Ivan Eyre recalled that in the old building he and his wife Brenda "had an experience when we heard celestial music at four o'clock in the afternoon. We didn't hear that in the new building. There are disadvantages to new things."[12] Stephen Jackson said that on campus "We had little rooms with people partitioned off into 12 small areas. We could paint big paintings only with a struggle."[13]

The new School of Art on the Uniersity of Manitoba campus.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA.

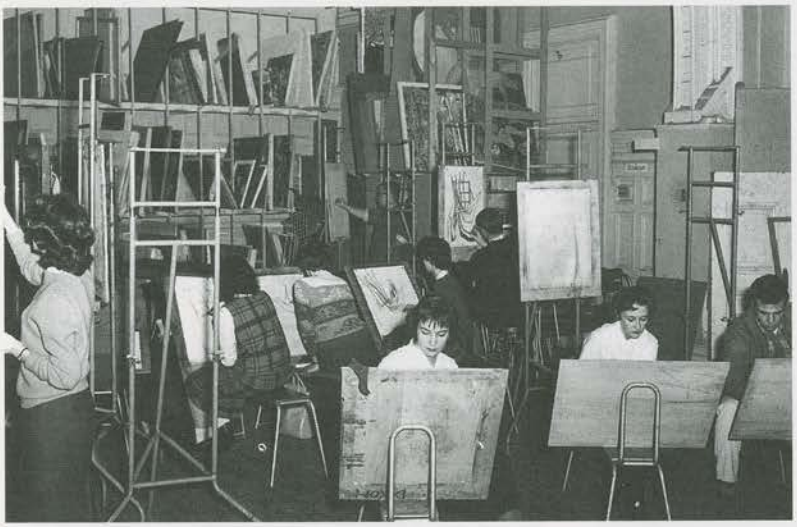
In addition to the physical nature of the new building, the School lost certain amenities the downtown location provided. When it was across the street from the Winnipeg Art Gallery several teachers took their classes there regularly. Both teachers and students remember meeting in cafes and bars to talk about art. Further, the old location was a meeting place for people. Not only did the Winnipeg Sketch Club meet there, it also "provided a centre for alternative entertainment. It was full of poets and musicians who would just hang around because there wasn't that much else available downtown."[14] Bill Lobchuk remembers missing the snowball fights he would have with prisoners and their guards as the prisoners were being walked from the Vaughan Street Detention Centre to the Law Courts Building.[15]

The new building did provide a new gallery, Gallery 1.1.1., one of the few "Class A" galleries in Western Canada in 1965. It was intended primarily to provide a small space for exhibitions of special interest to students in the School, with the previously established Exhibition Centre in the Elizabeth Dafoe Library continuing to serve as the main showcase for visual arts on campus. Nevertheless, within a year of the opening of Gallery 1.1.1., the Exhibition Centre was "converted into *temporary* office space *for the 1966-67 session.*"[16] It was never reestablished as an exhibition centre.

In retrospect, it seems that the improved facilities and expanded space were not a good trade for a reduced sense of community. Indeed, within a year the new building was too small to meet the needs of the School.[17]

Perhaps more problematic for the future development of the School was the delay in implementing a graduate programme. In the 1966/67 *President's Report* Richard Williams wrote that an outline for "a two-year course of studies leading to the Master of Fine Arts degree" had been forwarded to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and that it was "hoped that the course will be available to students in September 1968."[18] The next year he reported that the proposal had been approved by the Faculty of Graduate Studies but that "Implementation is likely to be delayed for at least another year... due to difficulties encountered in recruiting staff for graduate courses in Art History."[19] That problem was restated in the 1968/69 *President's Report*; in 1969/70 there was no reference to a graduate degree. Had a programme been implemented, Manitoba would have offered one of the first M.F.A. degrees in Canada. Today it remains one of the few provinces that has not developed graduate studies in the visual arts.

The strength of the School came from the sincerity and diversity of its faculty. While Don Reichert and Kenneth Lochhead both painted abstractions, their approaches to their work, and their advise to students, showed a range of possibilities in this developing vocabulary of painting. Ivan Eyre's idiosyncratic figurative work suggested another option. George Swinton, more the classic academic, referred often to art historical sources. And Richard



Students at the old School of Art downtown Winnipeg.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA.

Williams' introductions to art and to art theory and criticism gave students information and new ways to think about their field. Reichert, recalling the period, said that students "learned that nothing was black or white. Having respect for instructors with different opinions allowed them to develop their own value systems."[20]

A decade ago, when Christopher Varley organized a exhibition for the Edmonton Art Gallery titled *Winnipeg West: Painting and Sculpture in Western Canada, 1945-1970,* he saw Winnipeg as the weak link in the progression of modernism across the West. Even the title of one chapter in his catalogue–"What's Wrong with Winnipeg"–alerts the reader. In it he writes that "Winnipeg has always projected a cloudy image to the rest of the country." In part, he blames the School of Art because its relationship "to the rest of the community was not as strong as it might have been," and reports that "many of its finest graduates left Winnipeg." Winnipeg "did not establish strong, ongoing traditions," he writes, concluding that "Winnipeg was a good city to leave."[21]

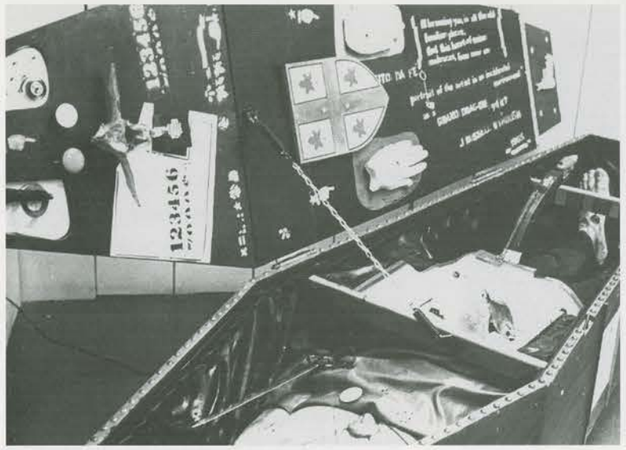
While some of Varley's criticisms are justified, they compel comment. Winnipeg's "cloudy image" arises for two reasons. First, unlike other cities, its artists have never developed a dominant style or preoccupation. While London (Ontario), for example, became well known for its Regionalism during the 1960s, or Edmonton has been recognized for its brand of Modernism, Winnipeg has been a city in which pluralism reigns. In this exhibition there are examples of surreal and whimsical figurative painting, hard edge and painterly abstraction, pop and conceptual art, and sophisticated work in ceramics. Second, and more important, in the absence of a leader or spokesperson, Winnipeg's pluralism has not attracted the attention of critics or curators from larger centres, leaving to individual artists their own self-promotion. It remains difficult even to have exhibitions reviewed in the "national" (i.e. Toronto) periodicals and press.

Before 1965, the School formed the centre from which Winnipeg's art developed. Although its immediate relationship to the rest of the community was weakened by the move to campus in 1965, the fact remains that its faculty and graduates have had a major influence on the development of galleries in the city–both commercial and artist-run; and there is no prominent artist in Winnipeg who has not had some relationship with the School.

Certainly *some* of the finest graduates of the School have developed their careers in other cities. From the 1960s, one thinks immediately of Joe Fafard, Colin Campbell, and Ron Gabe (a.k.a. Felix Partz of General Idea). But while no city retains all of its graduates, a surprising number have remained here.

In 1990 I curated an exhibition for the Winnipeg Art Gallery titled *Update: Winnipeg Artists, 1950s/1990.* It included old and new work by 17 artists who had been associated with the School of Art in the 1950s and who still maintain a practice here. The current exhibition has work by an additional 21 teachers and students of the School in the 1960s who have remained in Winnipeg.[22] For these artists Winnipeg has been a good city in which to stay.

Robert McKaskell
CURATOR



Acknowledgements

The artists who have shared their thoughts and recollections with me have made this exhibition possible. I also thank Dale Amundson for his support, Donalda Johnson for her attention to detail, Sheila Spence for photography, Karen Busby for locating the transcript of the obscenity trial, James Nanowin for assistance with research and the Manitoba Arts Council for funding.

Frank Reimer Design

Cover photograph by Sheila Spence

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25

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Russell Wimbush, *Coffin,* mixed media, 1965

PHOTO BY FRED JEWELL, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER, *WINNIPEG TRIBUNE.*

NOTES

1. The other, Mount Allison University, offered a more limited programme.

2. For information on the earlier history of the School see Marilyn Baker *The Winnipeg School of Art: The Early Years* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1984), and Ann Cameron, *Art in Winnipeg, 1955 to 1959* (Winnipeg: Gallery 1.1.1., 1982.

3. John Watson, "Dirty Linen Unwashed in Public," *Winnipeg Free Press,* December 21, 1960.

4. "Creative Urge Smoulders And So Does His Canvas," *Winnipeg Tribune,* December 20, 1960.

5. Quoted in Watson.

6. Also quoted in Watson. Teitelbaum's contract for teaching was terminated ten days after the article appeared, on December 31, with three months pay. Williams (interviewed April 12, 1994) maintains that it was not because of this incident. Two items in the University Archives are of interest. One is a resolution signed by members of the teaching staff of the School, dated December 29, in which they criticise Teitelbaum's teaching, his "negative and nihilistic attitude towards studies" and his unwillingness "to orient himself to the objectives of the School." They agree to absorb his teaching load without pay. This was a condition the University's President, Hugh H. Saunderson, had placed on the School when asked by Williams "shortly before Christmas" to dismiss Teitelbaum. Saunderson's record of the incident is given in a letter to the Board of Governors dated January 5, 1961. Both documents are in UA 26, Box 3, Folder 17. The incident is also reported in Gene Telpner, "U Drops Dirty Linen Art Backer," *Winnipeg Free Press,* January 2, 1961, " 'Gag' Cost Him His Job," *Toronto Star,* January 11, 1962, and Hugo McPherson, "Mashel Teitelbaum: The Artist in Opposition," *Canadian Art,* Issue 85 (May/June, 1963), pp. 168–171.

7. The price of the building was reported to be $1,321,707 in the *Winnipeg Tribune* (Vince Leah, "Creative art flowers despite warped floors and poor light", April 17, 1965). In other articles it was given as $900,000 ("Art, Music Buildings Soon At U," *Winnipeg Free Press,* June 26, 1964).

8. Theodore Matoff, "U architecture–'failure in leadership'," *Winnipeg Free Press,* Dec. 12, 1964.

9. This word was used by Don Reichert (interviewed April 8, 1994) and George Swinton (interviewed April 26, 1994).

10. Dale Amundson, interviewed April 20, 1994.

11. George Swinton. He went on to say "We had all the equipment we wanted but it lacked atmosphere. It was easy to set up still lifes and models in the old school, but became difficult in the new because everything was so sober."

12. Interviewed April 18, 1994.

13. Interviewed July 5, 1994.

14. Jeff Funnell, interviewed April 24, 1994.

15. Interviewed June 19, 1994.

16. Memo from W. J. Condo, Vice President and Comptroller, to Dean J. A. Russell, Faculty of Architecture, January 10th, 1966. UA 26, Box 29, Folder 1. Italics mine.

17. In the *1966/67 President's Report* Richard Williams wrote "... the new building was filled to capacity.... We look forward to the early relocation of the Department of Interior Design which will permit not only an increase of enrolment in reasonable proportion to demand but also the addition of equipment and facilities needed even now for support of a modern curriculum in Fine Arts." (P. 191).

18. P. 190.

19. P. 165.

20. Interview.

21. Christopher Varley, *Winnipeg West: Painting and Sculpture in Western Canada, 1945 - 1970* (Edmonton: The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1983), pp. 11-18 passim.

22. Works by Eyre, Reichert, Saper, Swinton and Williams were included in *Update.*

Note: UA refers to the Department of Archives and Special Collections, University of Manitoba Libraries.

LIST OF WORKS

Note: All measurements are in centimeters and are listed height x width x depth (if applicable).

Achtemichuk, Bob
1948–
Student 1965–70

Chernavitch, Kenneth
1946–
Student 1965–69

Czernecki, Steve
1946–
Student 1964–68

pot 1967
earthenware
47 x 35 diam.
Collection of Kenneth Chernavitch

Amundson, Dale
1940–
Student 1958–63
Staff 1975–

Untitled, 1963
oil on canvas
82 x 66.5
Collection of the Artist

Archambeau, Robert
1933–
Staff 1968–91

raku bowl, c.1969
earthenware
12.7 x 20.3 diam.
Private Collection

raku bowl, c. 1969
earthenware
12 x 17.5 diam.
Collection of the Artist

Bone, Jerry
1934–
Student 1964–67

The Sun, Atom and the Creation of Light, 1967
oil on canvas
800 x 1620
Collection of the Artist

Bruce, Robert D.
1911–1981
Staff 1955–78

Ophelia, 1965
ink graphic on paper
36.5 x 43.5
Collection of Robert C. Bruce

Caslor, Brad
1947–
Student 1966–70

Three drawings, 1969–70
watercolour, crayon, pencil crayon on paper
59 x 44.5 each
Collection of the Artist

Rocket, 1969
earthenware sculpture
32 x 18 diam.
Collection of the Artist

Eyre, Ivan
1935–
Student 1953–57
Staff 1959–93

Deep Purple II, 1969
acrylic on canvas
157.5 x 157.5
Collection of the Artist

Ladykin, 1965
plaster, steel, paper, oil paint graphite, crayon and red chalk
50.8 on base 30.4 x 38
Collection of the Artist

Funnell, Jeff
1941–
Student 1963–67
Staff 1974–

Square Sunshine, 1967
acrylic on canvas
178 x 152
Collection of Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Fine Art Collection/ Ministere des Affairs et du Commerce International Programme des beaux–arts

Howorth, Ted
1948–
Staff 1987–

Untitled, 1966
ink on paper
58.5 x 75
Collection of the Artist

Jackson, Stephen
1946–
Student 1963–1967

St. James, 1966
acrylic on canvas
122 x 122
Collection of the Artist

Jordan, Jim
1945–
Student 1962–66, 1967–68

Still Life With Saw, 1964
oil on canvas
81.3 x 101.7
Collection of Mrs. M. Gravel

Lobchuk, Bill
1942–
Student 1961–66, 1972–73

The King George Hotel, Men's Parlour Only, 1965
oil on canvas
78.3 x 86.4
Collection of the Artist

Long, Kathy
1947–
Student 1965–74

The Dream, 1969
pencil on paper
34.5 x 26
Collection of the Artist

Our Room at Schallers' 1970
oil stick on paper
23 x 20
Collection of the Artist

Marcoe, Leonard
Student 1966–70

Come into my Garden, 1969
silkscreen print on mylar
44cm x 28cm
Collection of the Artist

Olito, Michael
1942–
Student 1966–69

Bull, 1966
wire
32 x 72 x 23
Collection of the Artist

Pig's Head, 1969
oil on canvas
152 x 134.5
Collection of the Artist

Pokrant, Luther
1947–
Student 1965–69

Rusurrection with the Aid of Human Hands, 1969
oil on canvas
122 x 81.3
Collection of Patricia and Terry Berg

Proch, Don
1944–
Student 1961–65, 1973–74

Untitled
ceramic and steel
50.8 x 38.1
Collection of the Artist

Pura, Bill
1948–
Student 1966–70
Staff 1973–

Untitled, 1969
oil on canvas
37.3 x 58
Collection of the Artist

Death and the Maiden, 1969
graphite on paper
26.5 x 30
Collection of the Artist

Reichert, Don
1932–
Student 1950–56
Staff 1964–88

Odd Pair, 1967
polyurethane foam, plexiglass, 3 threads, and 3 cigarettes in a metal container
84 x 67 x 13
83.5 x 63 x 15
Collection of the Artist

Saper, Arnold
1933–
Student 1955–61
Staff 1966–

Floating Figure, 1967
print
42 x 40
Collection of the Artist

Untitled, 1966
graphite on paper
46.5 x 45.5
Collection of the Artist

Scott, Charles
1937–
Staff 1964–73, 1982–

curry set, 1966
earthenware
casserole 23.5 x 26.5 diam.
condiment set various dimensions
Collection of Carl Nelson

Smith, Ann
1947–
Student 1965–69

Lovers in Summer, 1969
linocut print
31 x 34
Collection of the Artist

Sokulski, Marika Onufrijchuk
1945–
Student 1964–68, 1970–71

Landscape with Horse, 1968
acrylic on canvas
24.5 x 56.5
Collection of the Artist

Three Women, 1967
acrylic on canvas
38 x 61
Collection of the Artist

Swinton, George
1917–
Staff 1954–74

All Canadians Reported Safe, 1964
acrylic on newsprint
70.4 x 39.4
Collection of the Artist

Birth of a Prairie River, 1960
oil on canvas
81.5 x 122
Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery

Werner, Charlotte Alicyn
1944–
Student 1961–65
Staff 1974–

Untitled, 1964–65
oil on canvas
86.4 x 66.7
Collection of the Artist

Williams, Richard
1921–
Staff 1954–1987

Sisters, 1965–67
oil pastel on paper
66 x 50.8
Collection of the Artist

Bridesmaid, 1964
plaster
33 x 39.4 x 21.6
Collection of the Artist

Stephen Jackson, *St.James,* 1966. (Detail)