

Ann Smith
Visions & Shadows

Gallery 1.1.1
School of Art
University of Manitoba

March 5 - March 22, 1984





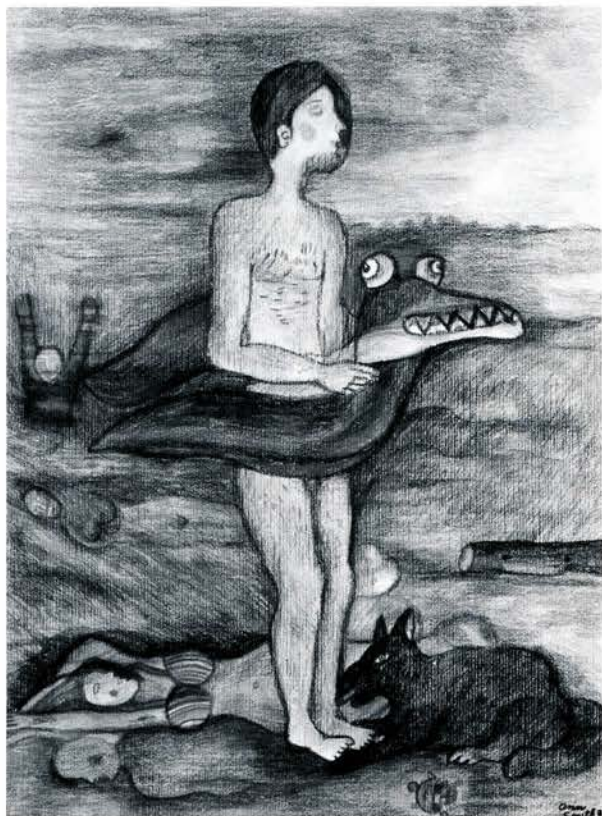
Happy Meadow Scene, 1983

Photo: Sheila Spence

The Art of Ann Smith

Ann Smith's art consists of a seemingly infinite expansion of a few simple themes: the circus, the park, farm animals, the objects of childhood reappear, often with interchangeable motifs, in endless variation. Although the vision is simple in its scope, the expressive means develop and evolve into ever more subtly realized configurations. These images are suggestive of a precariously maintained world of innocence, an inner space of oneness and freedom. It seems, on the surface, a realm of fantasy, of reminiscence, of dream, a translation of the child's imagination into an adult confabulation of escape from reality. But a vision of escape is not art. Unreal, in a sense, as these evocations are, it is by means of an integrity of wonder in the

reconstitution of an inner and deeply experienced imaginative domain that its meaning becomes apparent. For one thing, this world is not as blithely serene as it may seem on the surface. Its constitution is, in fact, a feat as precariously balanced as the imaged performances of the acrobats, dancers, trapezists, and jugglers that are its inhabitants. This is not, after all, a domain of pure innocence at all. It subsists on the abyss's edge between dream, longing, apprehension and realization. It is reminiscent of the robust exuberance of Chagall but often tempered by the intrusion of an uncanny sense of impending disaster or, in some paintings, of a delicate morbidity. Perhaps the word morbidity is too strong, but there is a



Boy with Inflatable Monster, 1983

Photo: Sheila Spence

kind of uneasy strangeness hovering on the fringes of the gay scenario not in all, but in some of the artist's works. Around the corner lurks some impending apparition, a formless menace, a darkness that will engulf suddenly the menagerie of animals, exhibitionists and lovers.

This narrow range is tightly woven. In the smaller watercolours, executed on hand made paper, the texture of line and colour is enhanced by the surface roughness and a granulated light from the paper imparts its scintillation. In some of the pastels, on the other hand, the layers are so thick as to negate any such breathing airiness and the effect is of a glowing incrustation of pigment, an intensity of impacted embers. Lightness of linear form is replaced by a weight of contrast in coloration.

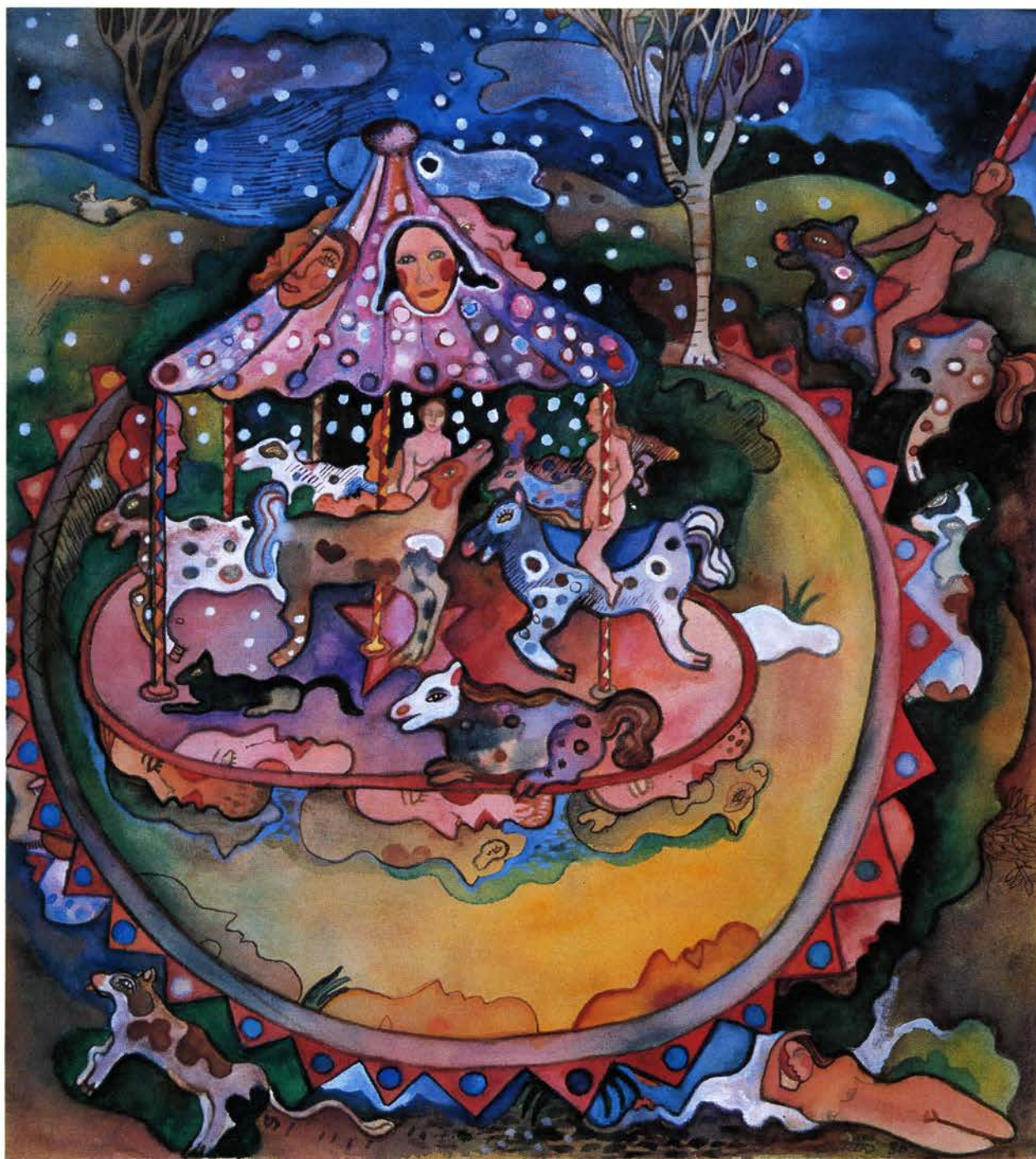
Just lately the artist has turned to acrylic and a larger scale on canvas. The challenge of the new format, far from intimidating her has apparently encouraged a thoughtful and carefully worked out structure supported by the seemingly effortless realization of colour relationships that is instinctive with her. The vision sustains the formalist elements as in the earlier works and the artist does not have to squander immense effort trying to establish a contrived originality. There is no sense of desperation about the impact that

such a scale would seem to demand. She simply follows her bent and adapts to the new situation. Her work has, as formerly, the unmistakable authenticity of an imagination that is rooted in life itself: that is the paradox of her art. The fantasy of the evoked dream world relates in the most concise way to its creator's intimate experience. One feels, and the artist herself has intimated as much to me in conversation, that the content, the recurrent motifs of an interior vision, all stem from actuality, from incidents and relationships, are derived from specific situations, occurrences and preoccupations. This is the source of the vision and it imparts a freshness and vitality that is unique to her.

Does this suggest an art that is primarily naive? To a degree, yes. All art is derived from the depths of our inner life. The trick is to relate it to the objective world of our cultural communality. Some twentieth century artists — Chagall, Balthus, Bacon, Kurelek — like Smith, forge their originality primarily from an intense awareness of immediate feelings and response to a stimulus that corresponds to an inner kind of spirituality. For these, art expresses, above all else, a relationship between themselves as individuals and the outer world of people and events. I would not gainsay this response to other very different artists, those of a more self-consciously aesthetic bent, but the emphasis with them is elsewhere. Here, there is an expressiveness that is not immediately perceived to be derived from art itself. With Smith, and her like, existence precedes essence, so to speak. They are no less concerned with aesthetic effect than anyone else, but they do not seem self-conscious concerning their means of expression. They do not go through the changes and contortions of a Picasso or find refuge in the esthetic abstraction of a Mondrian. I am not making a value judgement in this distinction, merely noting a significant divergence that reestablishes a human concern and not simply a formalist one. Such artists do not fit neatly into any category devised by critics and art historians. The idea of the 'naive' artist often merely denotes a referential framework in the content of the work that is independent of formalist attributes. To me it often indicates not a style or subject matter but involvement in the mainstream of life.

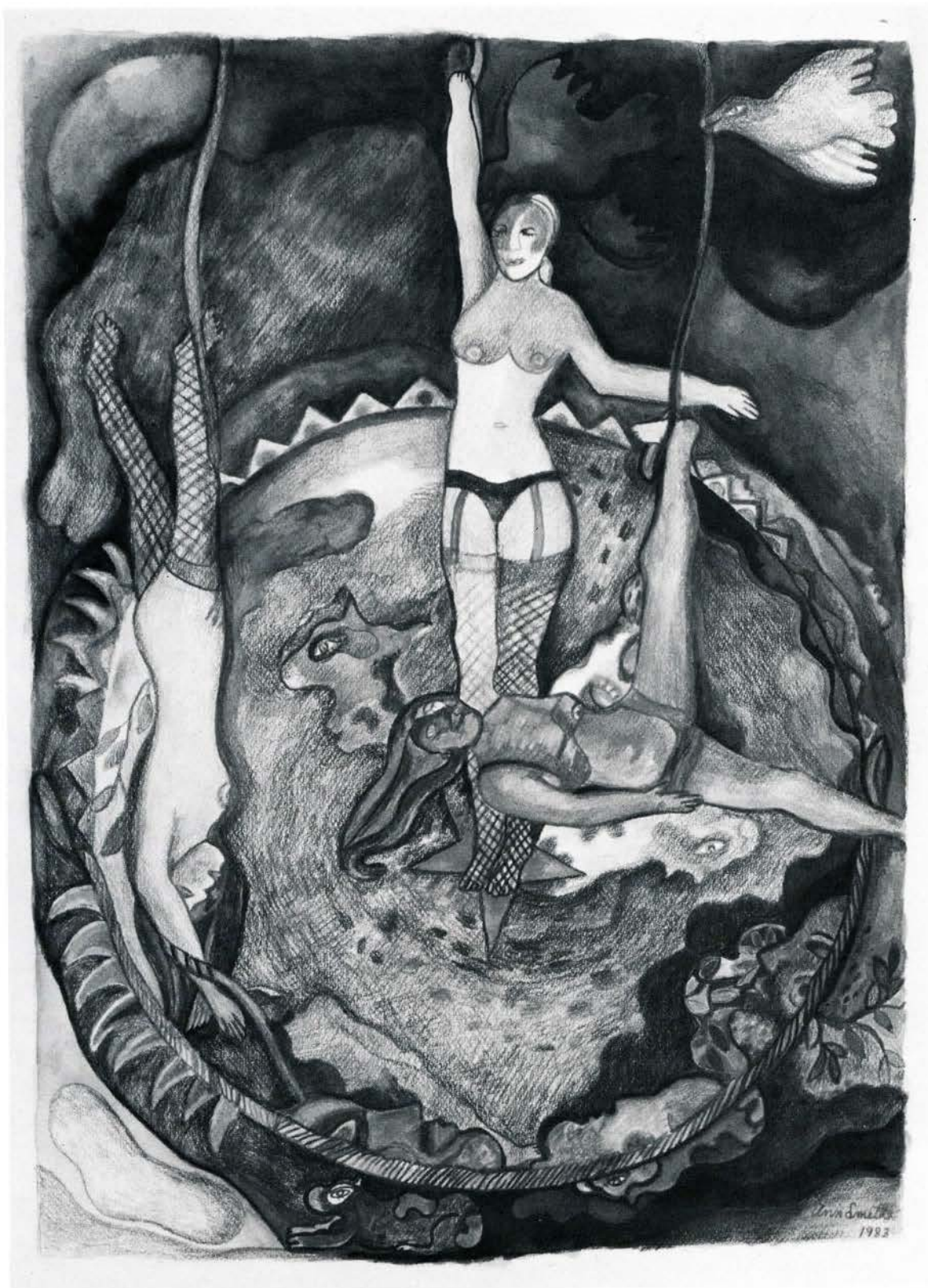
The essence of art is vision and in the art of Ann Smith this is accessible in an immediate way to almost anybody. At the same time the depth and subtlety of her artistry lies very deep and does not immediately reveal itself. It communicates, via a finely tuned aesthetic resonance, an intensely human world. Yet this communication, even in its most pleasing and reassuring aspects, is the outcome of struggle and conflict.

Arthur Adamson



Distant Merry-Go-Round, 1982-83

Photo: Sheila Spence



Folies Bergere Acrobats, 1983

Photo: Sheila Spence



Floating in Limbo, 1983

Photo: Sheila Spence



Floating in Limbo #2, 1983

Photo: Sheila Spence



A Dark Cloud Descending, 1983

Photo: Sheila Spence



Seagull's World, 1983

Photo: Sheila Spence

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

I was born in Vancouver, B.C., on December 10, 1946, on a cold winter's day. My mother claims I looked displeased with her and disgusted with my surroundings the moment I was born. My older sister on the contrary was quite a placid baby so the difference was notable.

We moved to Winnipeg in 1948. Both my parents had lived in B.C. all their lives and didn't want to leave but my father was offered a better job in Winnipeg. The adjustment from Vancouver to this city wasn't a smooth one. Our clothes weren't warm enough and after attending the annual Santa Claus Parade in November my sister caught a mild case of pneumonia. We rented the top part of a duplex on Bannatyne Street. The owners downstairs complained about the slightest noise so we had to tip-toe around. The family cat "Cozy" had to be smuggled in as no pets were allowed. After several moves we settled down and began to enjoy our South of Portage home, still rented but more comfortable.

My adjustment to school attendance was not a smooth one either. I had a lot of personal freedom as a young child and enjoyed playing in the park at

the end of Ethelbert Street and organizing games for younger children. At school my natural enthusiasm and energy were greatly curbed. I hated sitting still and was so animated I was constantly reprimanded. The first several years of school were times of misery. My personality changed from outgoing to introversion. About this time I began seeing art as an escape from everyday drudgery. There was some concern when I started to draw rabbits in pretty dresses (both were of great interest to me at the time). I could not be persuaded to draw people so this caused some concern. Anyway I did get some positive attention for my love of drawing by the third grade and was given a test to complete for children who show exceptional creative ability. My art at this time was a sacred place that could not be trodden upon by the adult enemy and I always felt a strong intrusion artistically. School got better for a few years and then relapsed into a place of misery again. My mother who harboured a creative mind, was always encouraging. In her family there was a sympathy towards the visual arts. Several rich aunts had painted china by hand and her cousin, who show-



Creatures and Figures In The Sunset, 1983

Photo: Sheila Spence

ed precocious talent, had graduated with a B.A. and then a diploma from the Ontario College of Art.

I attended several other schools in Winnipeg and continued drawing on the side. Most summers we took a trip to Vancouver by train and I brought along a pulp scrap book and crayons and recorded the different scenes as we passed by. This was great training for the memory. Junior high school art classes were also diversified and stimulating. By grade nine I won a scholarship to an Art in the Park program and spent a happy summer painting and drawing in the city's park with the late Prof. Eliasson.

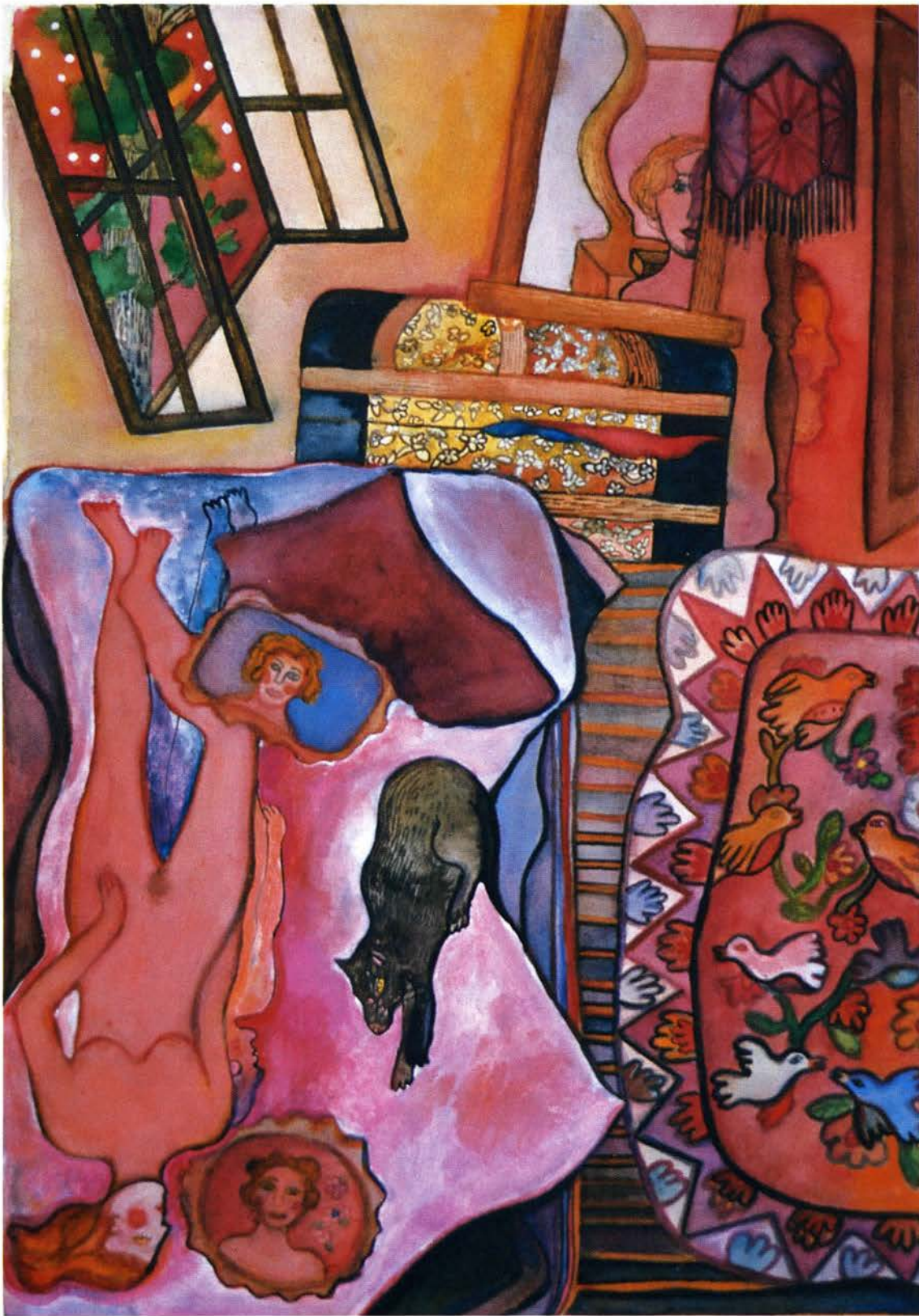
By high school I had begun to lose interest as the grade ten art course consisted of drawing plaster busts in pencil and painting in oils from post cards of the mountains. After grade twelve a friend encouraged me to study fine arts. As a University degree was a mandatory item in my family and I had no other pressing ambition, I decided to comply.

After a slow start I really started to enjoy my first year drawing classes with Ivan Eyre. I was really looking for a religious calling or a "raison d'être" and drawing fulfilled this. I felt so peaceful sometimes while absorbed in a drawing. Ivan Eyre was a teacher who really lived through his art and a strong role model. Others were supportive too, and George Swinton impressed me very much as a humanist.

I had started art school when I was seventeen and felt pretty sheltered from the world. I worked part time at Manitoba Theatre Centre helping with sets and sewing in the costume department. I saw John Hirsch's production of Bertolt Brecht's "Three Penny Opera" and got smitten by the acting bug so I took a year off and studied acting at the Toronto Actor's Studio in Toronto. It was enjoyable but I hated the big city. Despite an interest by my teachers in my potential I came back to Winnipeg happy to escape unfriendly Toronto and finished my BFA honours degree in 1969. I then spent a year in Vancouver at UBC's Faculty of Education as an art major. This experience was quite a let down. We had seminars discussing the elusive quality of "good taste". I was bored and unhappy that year.

Since 1971 I have worked at my art mostly in painting but also in ceramics and printmaking. I have shown work in several one woman shows in Winnipeg and Toronto. I have received two major Manitoba Arts Council Grants and have work in many private collections, including the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, Ontario. For a period I could be described as an artist's artist and many other artists have purchased my work.

Ann Smith



Sleeping by an Open Window, 1982-83

Photo: Sheila Spence



Carousel with Angry Bull, 1983

Photo: Sheila Spence

Works in the Exhibition

1. *DESERTED CAROUSEL*, 1981
pencil crayon, 59 cm. x 49.5 cm.
2. *SPRING SCENE*, 1981
w/c ink on rice paper, 44.5 cm. x 40.7 cm.
3. *FLOATING FIGURE ON A WINTER'S NIGHT*, 1981
gouache watercolour, pen & ink, 48 cm. x 50.2 cm.
4. *UPSIDE DOWN VIEW*, 1981
watercolour pen & ink gouache, 21.6 cm. x 21.9 cm.
5. *SMALL WINTER SCENE*, 1981
watercolour brush & ink, 21.6 cm. x 21.9 cm.
6. *RESTING IN THE SUMMER*, 1982
watercolour brush and ink, 22.2 cm. x 21 cm.
7. *LOVERS IN THE SNOW*, 1981
21.9 cm. x 21 cm.
8. *PERFORMANCE IN AN OPEN SPACE*, 1984
acrylic on canvas, 152 cm. x 121.9 cm.
9. *SLEEPING BY AN OPEN WINDOW*, 1983
pen and ink, gouache water colour acrylic, 72.3 cm. x 53.1 cm.
10. *BOY WITH INFLATABLE MONSTER*, 1983
pencil crayon, 66.7 cm. x 48.8 cm.
11. *A DARK CLOUD DESCENDING*, 1983
watercolour, pen and ink, gouache, 72.4 cm. x 54 cm.
12. *FOLIES BERGERE ACROBATS*, 1983
pencil crayon, india ink, watercolour 76.2 cm. x 57 cm.
13. *CREATURES AND FIGURES IN THE SUNSET*, 1983
watercolour, gouache, pen and ink, 39 cm. x 57 cm.
14. *SEAGULL'S WORLD*, 1983
pencil crayon, 56.6 cm. x 76.5 cm.
15. *FLOATING IN LIMBO #2*, 1983
watercolour, pen & ink, 58.5 x 45 cm.
16. *DISTANT MERRY-GO-ROUND*, 1983
gouache acrylic, pen & ink watercolour on beige paper, 62.3 cm. x 56.5 cm.
17. *HAPPY MEADOW SCENE*, 1983
coloured ink pen & ink watercolour 45 cm. x 61 cm.
18. *NIGHT SCENE WITH FOREST CREATURES*, 1983
gouache pen & ink watercolour, 40.7 cm x 38 cm.
19. *CAROUSEL WITH ANGRY BULL*, 1983
pencil crayon on colored paper, 48 cm. x 61 cm.
20. *FLOATING IN LIMBO*, 1983
watercolour pen & ink on beige paper 58.2 cm. x 40 cm.
21. *SUPER WOMAN*, 1984
watercolour pen & ink, 57 cm. x 77 cm.



Night Scene with Forest Creatures, 1983

Photo: Sheila Spence

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Manitoba Arts Council for their financial support of this exhibition. Special thanks go to Arthur Adamson for his insightful essay on the art of Ann Smith.

Dale Amundson, Director
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