

STEPHEN PHELPS  
Recent Works

Gallery 1.1.1.  
School of Art  
University of Manitoba

November 26-December 19, 1984



Fig. 9

# STEPHEN PHELPS

by  
Stephen Phelps

Most of the so-called serious painting of the last few decades has been non-representational. The reason for this can be attributed to the dominance of draconian theories like Formalism, a theory that holds 'important' painting to be synonymous with the pursuit of purely formal elements, like line, colour, and composition.

Painting's obsession with these elements has yielded an art virtually incomprehensible without words. Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Pop, Neo-Expressionism, take your pick, all rely on wordy platitudes to keep them afloat, and all are variations on an overbearing theme that has tried to dictate a fixed route of march away from subject matter for two generations of painters.

The artist, or painter, who finds himself most at odds with contemporary art's dogmatic sensibilities is usually the lowly craftsman who can only grieve over the diminishing demands on good old fashioned painterly technique.

Sadly I am one of those. Though there is more to it than a pining for traditional pictorial devices.

My education as a painter went the usual route, blundering from great big expressionist dabs of paint at the end of a house brush to tiny micro-whisps of textures from a delicate number 2 Grumbacher. My gradual defection to recognizable images was not so much a reaction to the rhetorical overload of pipe-bearing instructors as an abiding insistence on greater visual legibility, and perhaps a bid for a wider audience.



Fig. 10

Also, I saw too many fellow students being sucked in by the potent lingo of modernist styles, regurgitated from one year to the next, and each of which had its own unique appeal. Abstract Expressionism offered a release from physical angst by demanding a lusty windup and follow through with each stroke. Minimalism gave the anorexic intellect licence to vaporize subject or content into a genteel haze; pop art, a chance for frustrated punsters to score witty points against crass commercialism; and finally, performance art, along with early video, an opportunity for the more militant exhibitionist to declare war on art's conventional confinements.

Somewhere in this creative clutter persisted the illustrator, a.k.a. figure painter. Some dabbled as well in drapery folds; others in landscapes. But all could expect to be treated with condescension by whatever avant-gardism was carrying the school flag that year. Because most of these gentle throwbacks would never matriculate beyond calendar artists, the few intent on mastering time worn techniques with new directions in mind were dismissed in one and the same breath.

It was understood that the serious artist was someone who plunged whole hog into exhibitionistic effects, and scrambled styles and obeyed some vague prescription dicta emanating always from New York — all in the desperate pursuit for "pertinent" art.

One of the most intriguing trends certainly was a form known as concept art, a theory that stressed process and documentation over the finished product. This had im-

plications for all painters. There was a rumour that concept art was going to bury painting once and for all. No more stuff to hang.

But painting survived and has entered the Eighties by looping back on that juncture where it tried briefly to dematerialize. Now we have anti-modernist art, the underside of the same bandwagon, and a hot ticket for emerging painters that goes under various labels — Neo-Expressionism, New Wave, and even Bad Painting.

Representational artists have no ally here. Recognizable images are invoked but treated in a deliberately sloppy way, guided by strict stylistic calculations. It is Yves St. Laurent run amok. Charged with low energy resentment, or high-flash ultra chic gestures, the latest fashion in painting is full of urgency and dazzle that strains to speak to our desperate times. It is no accident that it looks like badly recycled pop art with an obvious family resemblance to graffiti. It is painting once again being led by the nose, by fashion dictates, or harnessed to deterministic theories.

The representational artist has to be cynical before the claims of this New Wave to have constructed a radical new figuration for painting. A reasonable grasp of theory reveals that it is only the other side of the formalist doctrine. New Wave, Bad Painting, whatever, it has merely transacted a swing in the argument's pendulum — proof that symmetrical reversals go only as far as their model, and can never be radical new departures.

But how does this diatribe relate to my own work? It is my belief that the painter, representational or otherwise, ignores the theoretical discourse that informs contemporary painting at his own peril. The result: you have too many amateurs who pick styles for themselves as you would a coat; and too many serious talents that wind up throwing in the towel in the face of what is perceived to be an unintelligible parade of fashions.

That said, I believe the series of convulsions that describe modern painting are directly traceable to the dominance of technology and the daunting perfection of reproduction techniques that renders the painter's craft obsolete. Artists like to think of contemporary painting as a series of heroic, if vain, showdowns staged against the ideological weight of the market place. But this is only the sideshow. The main feature finds the painter/craftsman in a losing battle with the camera, computer and laser.

I like to count myself among those artists, representational artists, who are onto the struggle, but undaunted by it, and who boast an intransigent allegiance to the antique elements of painting.

My bias for strict legibility may peg me as an illustrator, but should not be taken for an appeal for a return to the comforting harmonies of traditional painting. There is more to it than reverence for old fashioned technical facility. Our classic pictorial devices, the mechanics of picture making, have served for centuries, too long to be thrown out with the bath water by the hit and run attacks of nihilistic theorists.

So, a nimble wrist, a knowledge of colour key, and of modelling techniques are obviously important to this painter.

Most of the studies in this show are inclined to confrontational poses, with an obvious fondness for the burlesque. I suppose the subject matter could be credibly described as quirkish. There is, in fact, an injection of feeling into every work that rides a deliberate seam between the sinister and the ridiculous.

I like to range well off the beaten path for my subjects, and enjoy thrusting them into familiar contexts, into traditional portrait or full figure formats. The challenge is to strike a sort of balance that through careful rendering manages to offset their "shock value" with something more endearing and enduring.

But these are not images transcribed verbatim by the eye from photos or nature. The point is that photography, for all its legerdemain could never capture them.

In the more recent work, I've broken away from sharp declarative compositions, resorting, in the Climbing Series, to a more lyrical use of figures and props. There are technical interests that bind them, however, chiefly reflected in the use of graphic devices like articulated line, contrasting chroma and the occasional application of muting sprays.

Finally, as gruelling as painting can be, it is the only process that could have brought these images into being. They are willed into existence through deliberate painstaking care; and if there is any magic here, it is the magic that affects all painters when the hand/eye skills involved seem to marshal themselves at an unconscious level. What in fact drives these particular images out into the light is best left unexamined. Suffice to say they are not guided by any system of ideas or by mystical longings. The first is better served by philosophies, the other by religion. The artist is only an entertainer, I believe. The ones to avoid in this game are the artists who take themselves too seriously.



Fig. 1

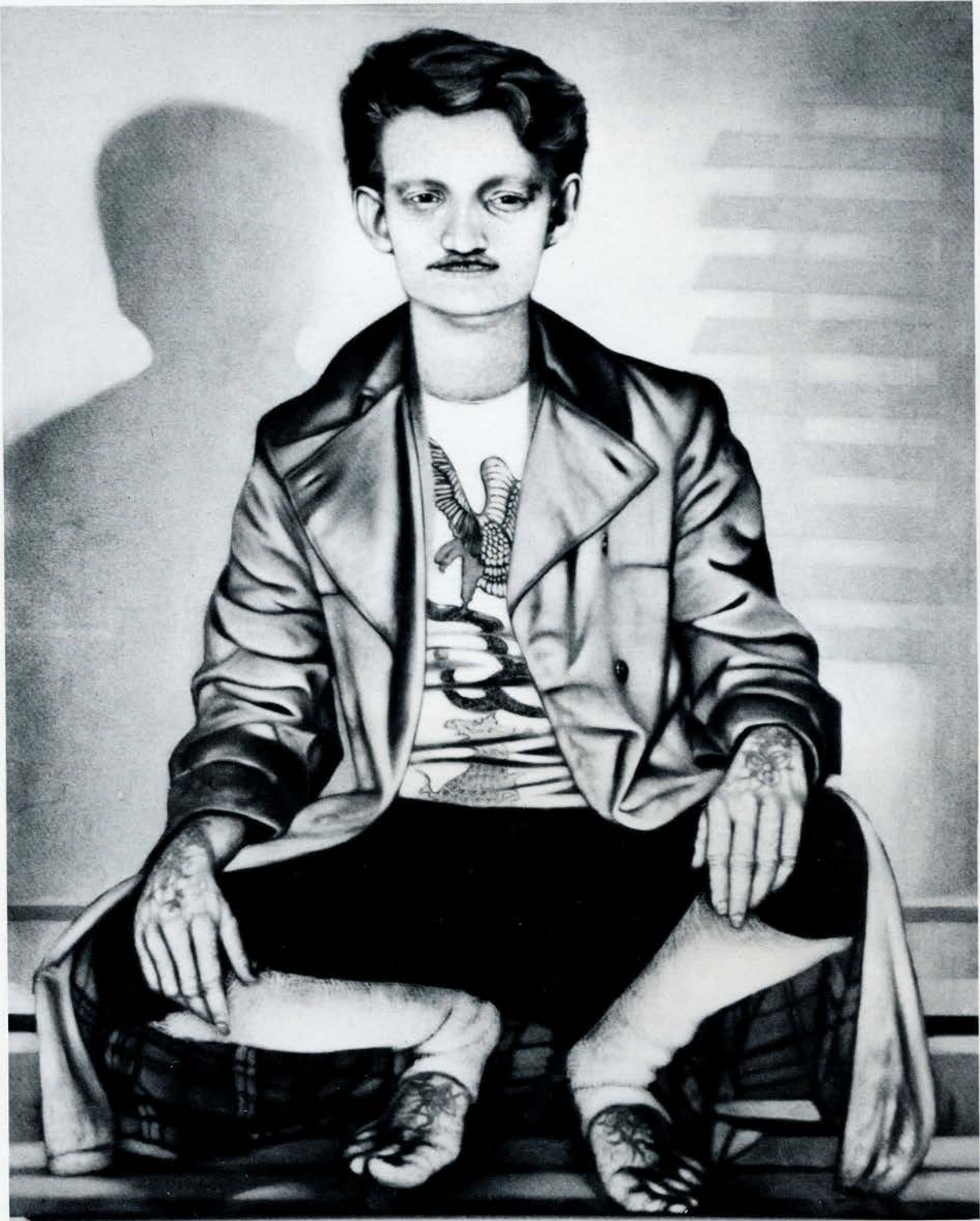


Fig. 6

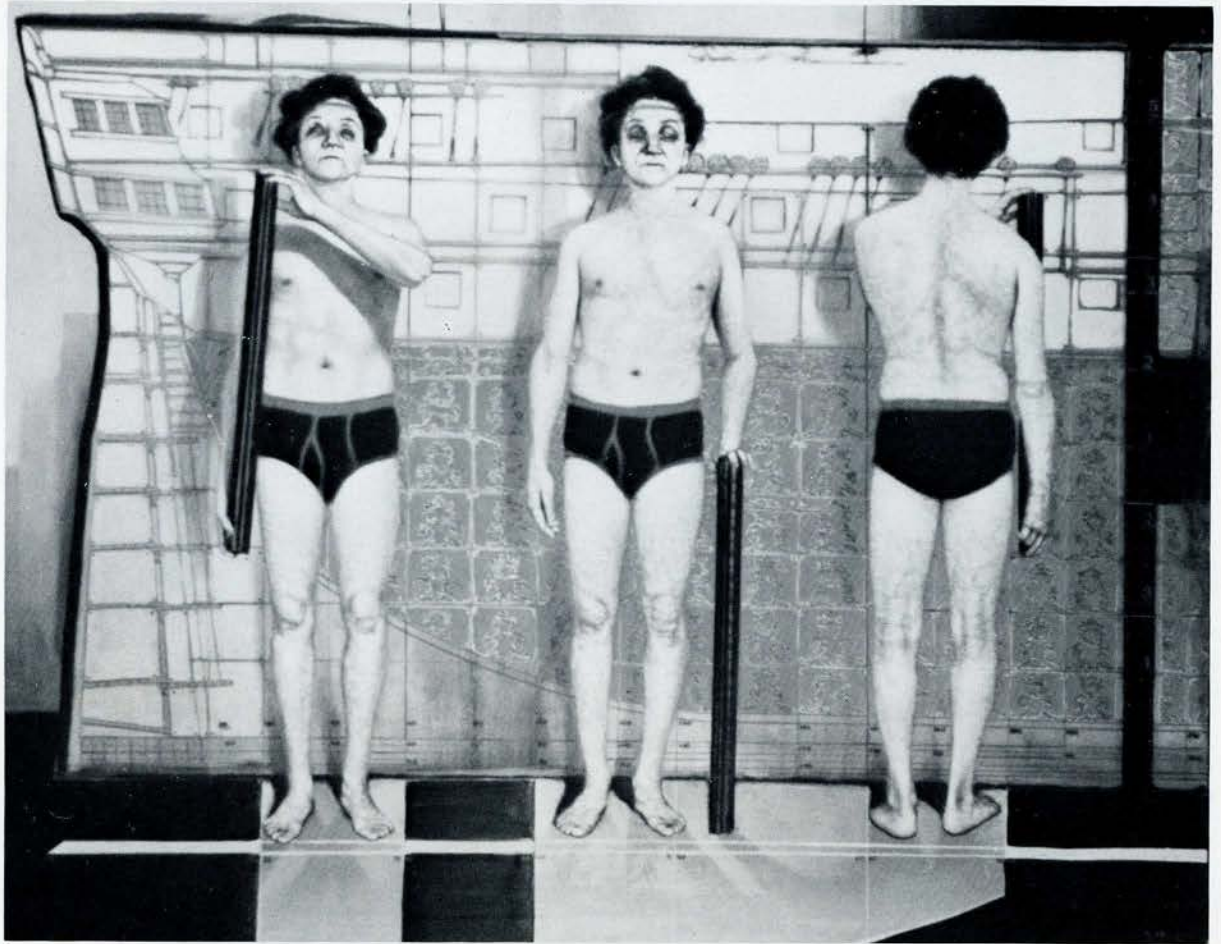


Fig. 7



Fig. 4





Fig. 3



Fig. 5



Fig. 8

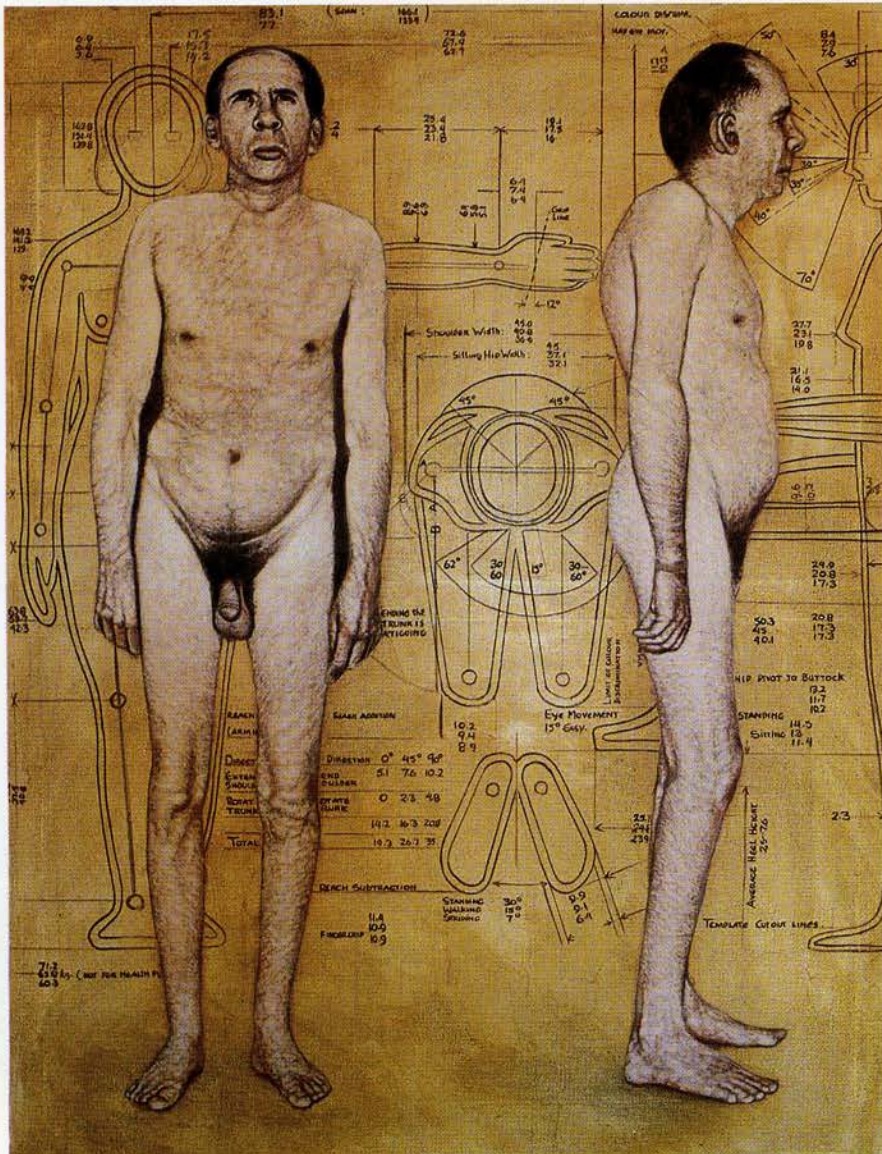


Fig. 2



Fig. 11

# STEPHEN PHELPS: BIOGRAPHY

BORN: 1949 Montreal, Quebec

## EDUCATION:

1977 - 79 M.F.A. (Scholarship,  
Teaching Assistantship)  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

1969 - 73 B.F.A. Honours  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

## ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS:

1980 ● Gallery Move, Vancouver, B.C.  
1979 ● Snelgrove Gallery, Saskatoon, Sask.  
● Shoestring Gallery, Saskatoon, Sask.

## GROUP SHOWS:

1983 ● Carnegia Center, Vancouver, B.C.  
1982 ● Arco Center for the Visual Arts,  
L.A., Cal.  
● Transamerica Pyramid Gallery  
San Francisco, California  
1981 ● Vancouver Art Gallery,  
Vancouver, B.C.  
1978 ● Mendel Art Gallery,  
Saskatoon, Sask.  
1976 ● Open Space Gallery, Victoria, B.C.

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

1. *Veronica*, 1982  
Acrylic on Canvas  
48" x 60"
2. *Civil Servant*, 1982  
Acrylic on Canvas  
36" x 48"
3. *Ascent I*, 1984  
Acrylic on Canvas  
42" x 54"
4. *Ascent II*, 1984  
Acrylic on Canvas  
42" x 54"
5. *Ascent III*, 1984  
Ink on paper  
19" x 24"
6. *Rehearsals*, 1983  
Acrylic on Canvas  
36" x 48"
7. *Maneuvers*, 1983  
Acrylic on Canvas  
42" x 54"
8. *Fertility Rehearsals*, 1979  
Acrylic on Canvas  
42" x 54"
9. *Shadow Figures I*, 1982  
Acrylic on Canvas  
36" x 36"
10. *Shadow Figures II*, 1982  
Acrylic on Canvas  
36" x 36"
11. *Beach Scene*, 1983  
Acrylic on Canvas  
36" x 48"
12. *Archemedes Principle*, 1979  
Acrylic on Canvas  
36" x 48"
13. *Ascent IV*, 1984  
Acrylic on Canvas  
42" x 54"
14. *The Hunt*, 1982  
Ink on Paper  
17" x 24"
15. *Aerial Assault*, 1982  
Ink on Paper  
20" x 30"
16. *Behind the Barn*, 1979  
Ink on Paper  
32" x 26"

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gallery 1.1.1. wishes to thank the Manitoba Arts Council for its financial assistance in the presentation of this exhibition and the publication of the exhibition catalogue.

## CREDITS

Exhibition curator: Dale Amundson  
Installation technician: Zared Mann  
Catalogue photos: Barry and Ken Smutlyo

© Gallery 1.1.1., Winnipeg, 1984.

