

# EVA FRITSCH

## P A I N T I N G S

The Bird's Hill Park  
Series

February 3-24, 1988

Gallery 1.1.1

School of Art

University of Manitoba



# EVA FRITSCH

# PAINTINGS

The Bird's Hill Park  
Series

Gallery 1.1.1 School of Art

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg, Canada



(Bob Talbot)

Black Widow, 1987



**E**VA FRITSCH has developed a substantial following over the past few years for her magic realist paintings of domestic scenes, serene visions of children at play and discovering the world. Fritsch works with a powerful, near *trompe l'oeil* technique in paintings so detailed and textured that it is hard to resist touching them. A child stands near a dock in luminous water, young girls share a swing against the background of a summer that looks like it will never end, children bundled up for a Winnipeg winter roll in impossibly real snow.

And yet the paintings are never simply realistic substitutions for a photograph. The head of a baby in a stroller, seen from above in a mother's eye view, stretches the picture plane so the canvas seems to bulge. Paintings that at first glance seem quiet and innocent, take on hints of hidden threat and danger when we look at them long enough. The backgrounds of the paintings are filled with rich detail that no human eye could ever see. A Fritsch painting looks serene and innocent, but it is never far from vertigo.

With this collection of paintings, Fritsch opens a new emotional and artistic space. The works are clearly autobiographical, an iconic narrative of her own emotional odyssey and an exploration and restructuring of her artistic vision and technique. They are characterized by a radically reduced palette, an abandoning of the figure and an exploration of the possibilities of combining realism and abstraction. Each of the paintings explores three colours. Except for the first in the series, each replaces the human figure with organic forms. The paintings move in a slow progression towards abstraction. The first painting in the series, *Leaf Me Alone*, puns on the notion of abandonment, being left alone, but it locates the figure in a natural context of trees and leaves, a prefiguring of the direction the series will take. The figure, pathetically and almost disproportionately small, moves across a thick carpet of leaves while the autumn forest leans over from the left. It is the last human figure in her work.

*Branching Out*, begins the search for a new emotional and artistic order. It is deliberately and coldly restrictive. Fritsch's palette is savagely reduced to whites, blues and browns. (There are never true blacks in Fritsch's palette, though the results she achieves will do nicely.) Here, both icon and texture are reduced, and the painting is made cold and withdrawn. The richly detailed backgrounds with which we have become familiar in Fritsch's work have vanished. The indeterminate blue of the sky, the undefined brown of the grass, refuse the eye entry into any background. The trees sit flat on the picture plane and deny any foreground. We see neither the tops nor the roots of the trees, but only the palpable black-on-white of trees in a world devoid of metaphor.

*Black Widow* begins tentatively to explore new possibilities. The background is as hostile to the eye as the background of *Branching Out*. The black tree, presumably the "black widow" of the title, seems brittle and vulnerable. It is pushed back from the picture plane by the phallic branch that pushes in front of it and the dark floating branch, unattached to any tree, that also contains it.

*Stick 'em Up* is an acknowledgement of defeat. The thin scarred branches reach for the sky like characters in a western movie. The background is still impenetrable, but the foreground, marginally detailed, begins to allow entry beyond the picture plane.

*Fox's Wedding* is an homage to and a parody of the *Monkey's Wedding*. The powerful phallic thrust of the central tree still dominates the slender trees beside it, and the image is deliberately erotic. But things have changed. This sky is infused with the angry purple of the sky before the storm. The foreground has become sharply detailed. The slanting light rounds out the picture, and the background, though still undefined, is much warmer than in the earlier works.

*The Scarlet Letter Brush-off* is the emotional climax of the series. The reference to Hawthorne is unmistakable. Suddenly, the background is clear, and claustrophobic. The scars left by dead branches become faces filled with pain, like gargoyles on a medieval church. The adulterous scarlet leaves dance across the surface of the painting, a powerfully intrusive presence that asks the viewer to re-read all the earlier paintings in the series.

*Present Crossing Past* marks an acceptance in the iconographic autobiography and a new shift in the artistic vehicle. Fritsch begins to explore the possibilities of variation in her deliberately limited palette. The rotting stumps are richly detailed, but they begin to move in the direction of abstraction. On the left, the hot browns of the stump suggest an anger that is undiminished, while on the other side of the cross at the centre of the composition new green shoots are beginning to grow. The dancing leaves still shimmer on the picture plane, but they have lost their scarlet colour.

*Final Break* is a painting of optimistic acceptance. The composition is unusual and risky. The powerful verticals of the stump on the right are weighted down by the heavy horizontals of the trunk that covers most of the top of the painting. On the left, the undetermined green balances the weight of the other elements with the elegant red lines and the yellow-green leaves of the dancing shrub, now moved into the background. A rich brown hot spot still burns in the vertical stump.

*Survivor* brings the series to a fitting conclusion. A slim birch is located among cedars. It is no longer white, having taken on the darker colours of the trees which surround it. The green mosses provide a coolness absent in any of the earlier works. The "surviving" birch is powerful and strongly rooted, confident in its own space. The background is now rich and dense.

Eva Fritsch's new work marks a powerful new phase in her development as an artist. It is marked by the sign of a true artist: that willingness to strip everything back to the essentials and come to grips with the emotional and artistic roots of the work.

*David Arnason*

*David Arnason is a Manitoba writer and professor.*





(Bob Talbot)

Fox's Wedding, 1987

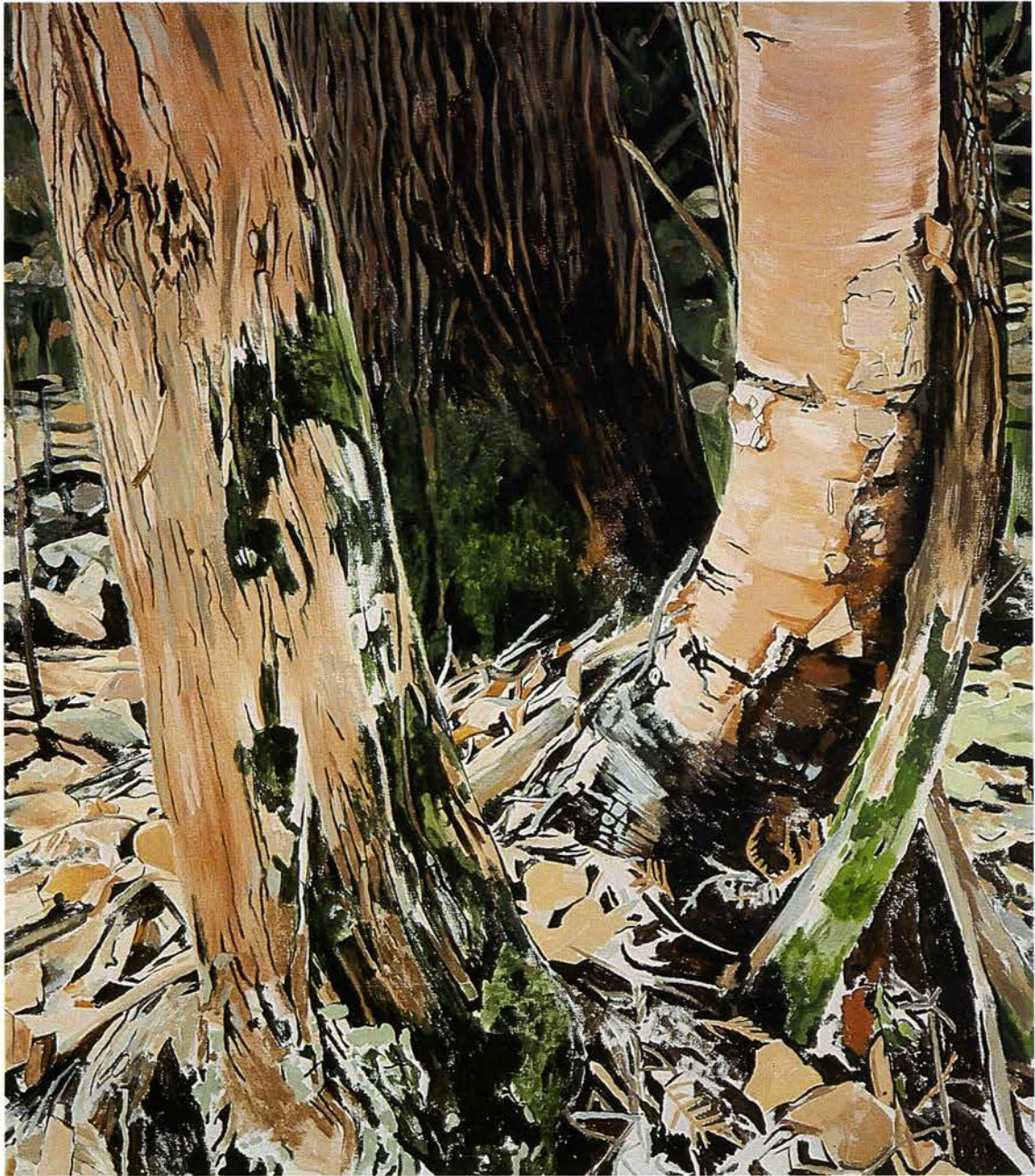




(Sheila Spence)

Present Crossing Past, 1987





(Sheila Spence)

Survivor, 1988 (in progress)





(Sheila Spence)

Stick 'em up, 1987





(Sheila Spence)

Branching Out, 1987

## List of Works

1. **Leaf Me Alone.** 1987. acrylic on canvas. 60" x 48". Provenance: Mr. Don Vernon, Winnipeg.
2. **Branching Out.** 1987. acrylic on canvas. 50" x 50".
3. **Black Widow.** 1987. acrylic on canvas. 50" x 55".
4. **Stick 'em Up.** 1987. acrylic on canvas. 50" x 55".
5. **Fox's Wedding.** 1987. acrylic on canvas. 45" x 55".
6. **The Scarlet Letter Brush-Off.** 1987. acrylic on canvas. 55" x 50".
7. **Present Crossing Past.** 1987. acrylic on canvas. 50" x 55".
8. **Final Break.** 1988. acrylic on canvas. 55" x 50".
9. **Survivor.** 1988. acrylic on canvas. 55" x 50".

## Credits:

**Exhibition Curator:** Grace E. Thomson  
**Catalogue Essay:** David Arnason  
**Photography:** Sheila Spence and Robert Talbot, University of Manitoba  
**Gallery Technician:** Thomas Wood  
**Catalogue Design:** Leo Simoens

## Biography

I was born old, and an introvert in tragically beautiful Sweden, home of the Bergmans. Being old I assumed responsibilities without question or complaint; it left me with little time for myself. I hid in the pastimes of loners: reading, sewing, knitting and only dabbled in art. Drawing was my forte but without praise and little time it never flourished. I returned briefly to my homeland in 1969, studying drawing and painting at Konstindustriskolan in Goetborg. I returned to the real world in Canada and finally registered at the University of Manitoba when I was twenty-five years old where I received my B.F.A. I was included in a five woman show at the University in 1977. A personal tragedy, however, put painting in the background at this time but I met with four of my peers for nearly two years to draw together. I started painting seriously again when it was nearly impossible to do so as my son approached his second birthday and continued to paint isolated and safe in the haven of marriage and motherhood. My work reflected the serenity at this time. The exhibition at Brian Melnychenko gallery in February 1987 was of paintings of my children. Another crisis forced my vision outdoors, and the current paintings are moving into the reality of abstractions.

*Eva Fritsch*



## Acknowledgements

*I wish to thank:*

Maria, who sat behind me through many lonely nights screaming "Get yourself a life" or "Put a bug in it"; Anita, who shared; Willy, who still visits; Olle, who wrote: Wanda, who said "Don't give up now"; Aganetha, who waits wistfully for my humour to show in my art; Mike who stood up for me; David, whose eyes light up when he sees my "stuff"; and Grace who encouraged me to apply for this show and gave me the incentive to work, and work intensely.

*Also:*

Doug Chatterton and Merlan Tapper of Art Supports for stretchers. Sheila Spence and Bob Talbot, photographers.





(Sheila Spence)

Scarlet Letter Brush Off, 1987



(Sheila Spence)



Final Break, 1988





