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Graham Metson

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## Graham Metson

**I**n his book *Revolt into Style*<sup>1</sup>, a textbook for students of England's post-war cultural revolution, George Melly described the ambivalence felt by the cutting-edge of London's art community towards American culture. Many reserved a cautious objectivity, but amongst young intellectuals who felt restricted by traditional mores there was also an intense fascination with America and with what was perceived, perhaps naively, as a free and classless society. America — the New World of jazz, comic books, huge flashy cars, cowboys and Indians, unlimited freedom — appeared infinitely more attractive than England's post-war austerity, and many young English artists felt compelled to go over and experience these things for themselves.

One such artist was Graham Metson, who chose to abandon a burgeoning career in London to arrive in true sixties fashion in New York driving a Rolls Royce. This was followed by five years of crisscrossing the United States, teaching at over a dozen colleges and universities, organizing events (Blood Networks was one) and performances, painting and exhibiting, all of which culminated in his accepting a teaching post at NSCAD in 1972. There, with his energy undiminished, but in a more established environment, closer possibly to his basically European sensibility, he was able to isolate and reflect on his experiences to date.

Various aspects of Metson's make-up — his romanticism, his restlessness, and his inability or unwillingness to totally relinquish his roots — were neatly encapsulated in an article by Karl MacKeeman<sup>2</sup>. MacKeeman, the first to tackle the Metson phenomenon, seemed to echo the thoughts of many in the Halifax art community confronted by this energetic artist. What was to be made of this person, his diversity, his seemingly random metamorphoses, and his apparent need to transcend the creative act itself in one extradimensional crescendo? Style followed on style as Metson delivered himself of a backlog of images and experience. Ambitious abstraction; religious and mythical themes; occult art, films; video; books about Alex Colville, World War II, the Halifax Explosion, and Folk Art; and a veritable blizzard of paintings, large and small. There are ambiguities inherent in the expatriate condition, and if Metson's art represents a search for self-completion his personal quest is inseparable from sentient experience.

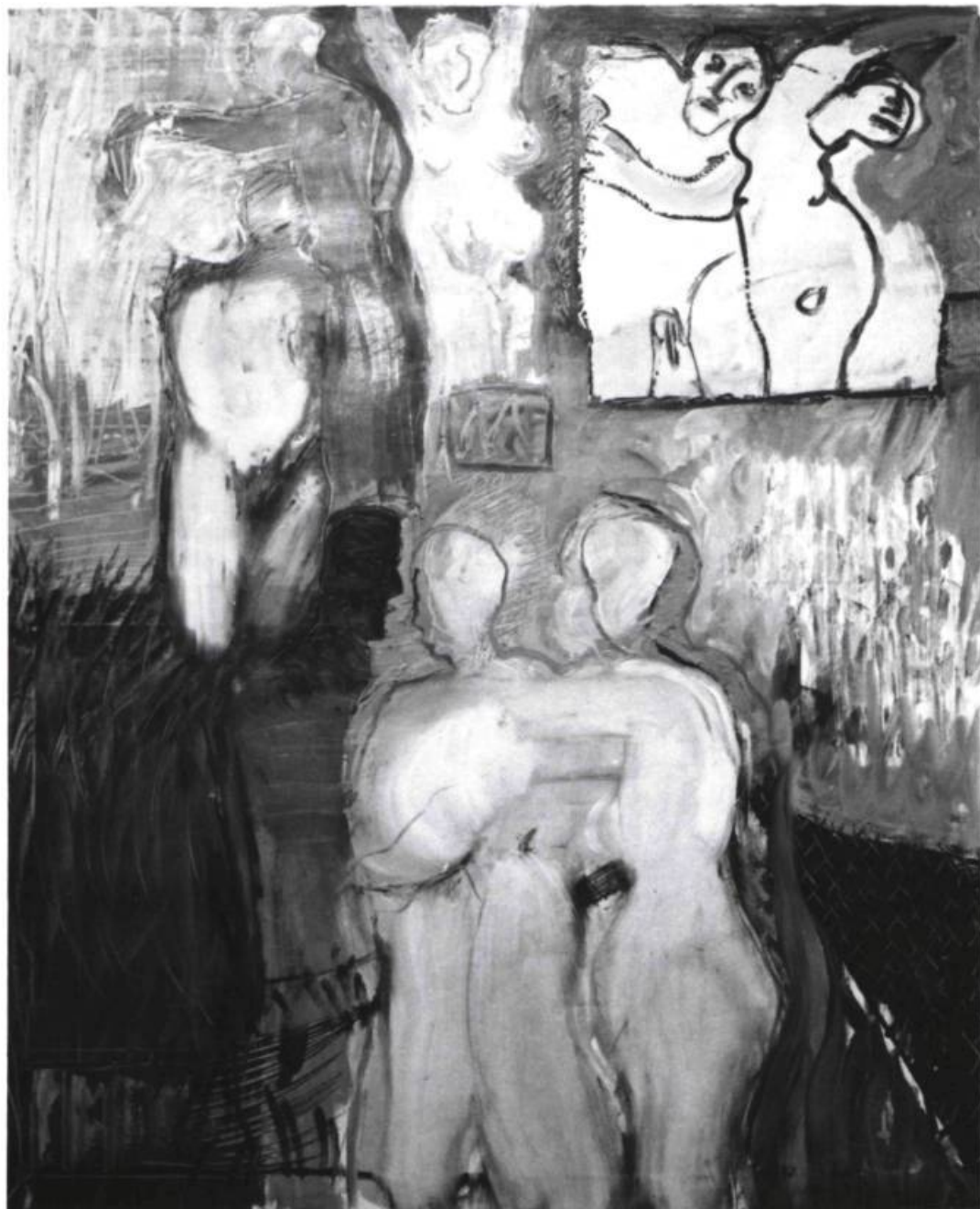
In a recent interview with Carol Fraser<sup>3</sup>, Metson described himself as being "totally addicted to the art process" and talked about making "one-off works which are highly charged objects." The best of his recent work comes close to being precisely that. For all their exuberance there is now a distinctive style, evidence of a certain restraint. They stand by themselves, charged, complete objects, as if the artist had made a pact, reluctantly perhaps, with the impossibility of embodying each and every aspect of his complex

philosophy in one monumental moment. Time doesn't seem to stand still for him, anymore than it does for anybody else, and his best works are documented moments, frozen flux, bridges between desire and attainment. Like Alex Colville, who he admires immensely, Metson is aware of the contradictions involved in any attempt to stop the clock.

It's clear now that the move to the tranquil Annapolis Valley and his involvement with the community there, pleasant though it was, could never have been final for an artist of Metson's temperament. There was a time, for instance, when the muted calm of the valley seemed to have drained some of the colour, if not the intensity, from his work. His figures appeared diluted, weakened by their struggle to reconcile themselves with their surroundings, and it wasn't until his return to Halifax in 1984, punctuated by a soul-searching multi-dimensional performance at the Memorial University of Newfoundland (presented out of context — or so many Metson-watchers thought at the time), that his work regained its former authority.

It is tempting to equate Metson's renewal with the current revival of figurative painting. Such a comparison would be easier if he had ever totally abandoned figuration. There have been brief flirtations with abstraction and performance, but as evidenced in two recent exhibitions — Open Space, Victoria, and Galerie Daniel, Montreal — the figure remains paramount in Metson's painting. Underlying draughtsmanship belies fashionable crudeness in these paintings, but the figures are always integrated with their grounds and one hesitates to use words like 'topical' and 'relevant' in relation to Metson's work. He is unpredictable, and perhaps as a result of his peripheral position in the art world, seems to be able to leap-frog current trends and fashions, absorbing only that which he deems truly significant, discarding the rest whilst somehow resisting the demands of the market place.

The cost of maintaining a relatively uncontaminated overview is, of course, high. Metson has complained from time to time of not getting enough attention, of being overlooked by curators, and of having his generosity questioned. The Canadian artist's lot writ large in fact, but now all of these things — the whole gamut from joy to despair — have been incorporated into his already multi-faceted work and have come to seem almost secondary to the work itself. The figure in his recent paintings has been noticeably strengthened, sometimes by harsh outlining, always by the painterly way in which it reacts with the field, as if the artist himself has finally come to terms with the bombardment of influences to which he has consistently exposed himself. Only the illusion of refuge is possible today, and that, only in terms of personal withdrawal (an option Metson has tried and found wanting). His work is rooted in the English romantic tradition even as he feels drawn to the new and undiscovered, and all that



Graham Metson, *Interior*, 1986. Oil on canvas; 66 x 54 po

has really changed is the scale and immediacy of available information, not the necessity to find a corresponding contemporary response. Catharsis for Metson means confrontation; not merely an assault on complacency, but a head-on confrontation with his own dilemma.

**Phillip Willey**

#### NOTES

1. George Melly, *Revolt into Style* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).
  2. Karl MacKeeman, *artmagazine*, May/June 1977.
  3. Carol Fraser, *Arts Atlantic*, Spring 1985.
- Also Susan Gibson (*Vanguard*, May 1985) and Ron Shuebrook, catalogue essay for St. Mary's University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1985.