

STEPHEN SCOTT

WORKS AFTER BERLIN



September 8 – 30, 2006
Gallery 78

A Constructed Balance

The current work of Stephen Scott presented at Fredericton's Gallery 78 in September 2006 presented us with new paintings and drawings executed during and after two extended visits to Berlin. Scott stayed in Germany on two different occasions in 2004 and in 2005 on the invitation of a German business man and art philanthropist who had seen his work on a visit to New Brunswick and generously provided him with living accommodations and studio space in the heart of Berlin during his two visits.

Scott's work since 2005 has been significantly impacted by this time abroad and presents us with a number of issues. Travel, when it is the stated subject of a body of work becomes an issue at the outset in discerning between interest in the life of the artist as a romantic construct and the impact of the travel as a significant element in the development of the artist's work. It presupposes that the viewer has some knowledge of the artist's work prior to the travel in question or it is provided to them. For this reason work that is presented as a result of a travel experience is usually presented in a later curatorial framework. Thematically, it is evaluated against the artist's entire body of work.

Travel has been a significant agent of change in North American art on numerous occasions. Exposure to the outside world has been a major factor in the evolution of Canadian painting in particular. Painters in the Group of Seven were influenced by Art Nouveau in Europe. The recruitment of visual artists by the Canadian Government to document events in Europe during World War Two was a seminal event in the development of landscape art in Canada after the Group of Seven. Painter Alex Colville invented what we now know as Magic Realism largely on the foundation of work completed during the war years which, it could be argued, has more in common with European Surrealism, than anything that exists intrinsically in the Atlantic Canadian air. Paul-Emile Borduas traveled to France and lived in New York, and with other Quebec artists, is said to have brought the language of modernism to Canadian Art. Travel can shape an artist's work but it can lead to the invention of a new visual idiom.

In Stephen Scott we have an established contemporary post war artist traveling to Germany and working in the "zeitgeist" of a Berlin without a wall; a Berlin in full economic explosion in a Germany still very much on the border of an East-West divide much larger than the wall that once separated them could ever define.

As it turns out, Scott's new paintings stand as eloquent metaphors for that zeitgeist in a tension found between evolving surface elements and reliance on well established structural strategies used by Scott in the compositions themselves. In particular, Scott's handling of urban landscapes express the impact of finding himself in a new environment and speaks with uncharacteristic emotion not to say expression, in contrast to his reliance on the control he has over the execution of figures. He relies less on his surgeon's knife and moves the paint around with expressive brushstrokes not often found in his work. Stephen Scott's new work adds visible emotion in his usually precise, cerebral, calculated painting; it is a constructed balance.

Has Scott found an affinity with German expressionism and contemporary German realism? He is an informed artist and certainly the references to German contemporary painting are evident. In a painting called "Accordion Player" the work of Gerhard Richter is not very far away. In the almost circular composition of dogs and bicycles, the composition is in such movement, it hints quite perceptibly at George Baselitz' upside down figures. It is not necessarily a conscious or stated reference but the handling of the dog contains knife strokes around the head and expressive brushwork in the hindquarter. It is just one example of that tension between a desire for expressiveness and reliance on established technique for rendering. It is perfectly balanced and it works. The painting becomes a mirror of confrontation between Scott and his desire to absorb new information and a metaphor for what he sees as metaphor for East and the West; a confrontation of new and old ideas. There is no clear line. There is no wall. It has been taken down. Only tension remains.

The painting of his friend Anna and her bicycle contains a railing that separates even more clearly these opposing elements. The figure is defined, confident, but stands against a landscape that is as much oil sketch as finished painting. In formal terms, the strategy works the same way as tonal perspective does. The foreground is solid and well defined against a vanishing backdrop that recedes to the horizon in a more ambiguous clarity.

Photography as a tool has also seems to play prominently in this body of work. Travel always imposes a sense of urgency on a visual artist and the facility of digital photography serves it selfishly. The quality of digital reproduction also has a tendency to accentuate shadows and to intensify colors and to reproduce what is observed in more three-dimensionality than film that flattens the image to a graphic observation. The colors have a tendency to be warmer as the eye is drawn to warm tones. Are we seeking the primordial fire? Color is certainly not arbitrary in Scott's work. His markings are specific and in these paintings, the viewer will take note of warm spots of orange and splashes of pink in contrast to Scott's almost idiomatic use of maroon. Some of his compositions are a passerby's observations, a railing here, a plinth there. Painting may still be a viable medium but more and more we all think a little bit like photographers.

As though to resist the connection Scott includes large drawings of some of the subject matter he paints. All are in graphite and are precise in their observations. Most, however, contain premeditated smudges that have the feel of a printer's ink as though Scott wanted to dispel the perfection of the drawing into a more expressive or emotional articulation of his observation. They feel like the 19th century observations by young English aristocrats on the Grand Tour were it not for the deftness of execution that reminds us of Albrecht Durer's etchings, not to say Rembrandt's drawings.

Much of Scott's work in landscape to date had been restricted to the Nashwaaksis river valley and its surrounding area north of Fredericton, New Brunswick. Traveling to Germany and making work based on the impact of such a trip could easily have been problematic in terms of Scott's position as a painter in Atlantic Canada. We expect Atlantic Canadian painters to paint Atlantic Canada. Scott is conscious of this and is careful in his repertoire. He fights the same battle as a musician who feels challenged by the idea of making a "completely different kind of album". An artist is always in danger of being rejected by an audience that wants more of the work it is normally accustomed to. Scott is consistent there and provides in this show a reliable display of his usual virtuosity.

Scott's painting has also taken a leap forward and reached a symbiosis of intention and meaning that takes the work beyond the contentious issues in painting that determine whether painting is meritorious of being called significant contemporary art or mere commercial picture making. Contemporary realism achieves the status of significant art when it succeeds in transposing the imagery contained in the work to the state of mythology. Like Alex Colville, or Christopher Pratt who depicts our sense of what Newfoundland looks like, Scott's painting is nearing the state of a very specific and personal visual idiom beyond that which resides in technical form. His technical skills are now able to resonate a personal view of the world. This becomes clear by juxtaposing his views of the Nashwaak Valley and his views of East and West Germany. From his studio in Nashwaak Village, Stephen Scott still channels emotional responses to Berlin as easily as the emotional responses he still has for his beloved Nashwaak Valley. It shows in the prodigious amount of work he has produced for this show.

In the quality of this new work Scott achieves, once again, a carefully constructed balance of execution and meaning that makes a loud statement about the viability of contemporary realist painting.

By Bob Barriault

Artist Statement

Berlin's mythology is a stage setting for imagining. For me and I think for anyone, the fascination of travel is of course the possibility for experiencing the tangible presence of history. How so Berlin? As in all German cities, the destruction of the War and the influence of the modern inhibits the ease of entry into this romantic quest. Still, the fascination exists. Perhaps my own particular experience of Berlin's prevailing mystique has provided me a less fragmented conduit to extensive musings of the passages of time and social and cultural change; perhaps there is a mystical dimension to be accounted for in the fact that my most important astrological transits fall across this area. How can one quantify either? In any case, my original quest was to explore the modern-day mythology of Germany's influence on the world of art. What I have found would be the subject for a book. To state it simply, the complex intermingling of social and economic history, the relationship between artistic presence and socioeconomic conditions is integral to whatever spot on the globe you examine. The uniqueness of Berlin's art is due partly to its post-war experience, its decades of isolation, its historic legacy, and its relationship of art and broader aspects of culture. What is uniquely German as a whole is the country's post-war reaction to classical associations, the counter-influence of Beuys on emerging American models, and the adoption of German (Brücke) expressionism as its genetic style. It hasn't been until recently that I have begun to truly assimilate the understanding that art cannot exist outside of its social functions, and to view North American art as less fully integrated. As with all my life experiences, the outcome of this one changes my perspective and how I evaluate of what I and others of my profession do.

It's at times when I feel my perceptions are the clearest that I appreciate my good fortune. The artist's life is full of uncertainties and sacrifice but at the same time provides opportunities for experience denied most. There is a charismatic quality to the ongoing progress of life which leads me to believe that much of what happens is due to more than chance.

When people hear of my friend Erich's untimely death often the response is to question how I will go to Germany now. What I will miss is the opportunity of the sharing with a truly rare individual of ideas, feelings and experiences across cultures and ages. One of the dynamics of Erich's generosity I think lay in the fact that he was aware of my own ethics and abilities, and his gifts were spontaneous and not monetary, but were gifts of opportunity for experience. He loved travel, history and uniqueness, and he liked to share this with others. At the point I met him, I think Erich was openly enjoying life to the full; living for experience and experiencing living. His charisma was evident in the expression of an active, but solid and untroubled core. He was a hard working businessman who was successful in part because of his ability to read, I think, the core of a person's nature, and to establish working relationships with similar-minded, honest and motivated people. As his enthusiasm for art was a developing aspect of his life, I feel fortunate to be among those whose experience he invited to share with him. I feel fortunate in not only

being given an opportunity to experience what I have briefly outlined above, but also in being a person whom Erich believed appreciated and could benefit from this gift.

The works in this group are really the beginnings of something, and I offer them with some humility. I recognize the difficulty in making about-changes, and I am uncertain that change for the sake of change is a solid heuristic. But there is a shift in expressive goals. In this instance, the romantic (idealistic) naturalist has been given a philosophical challenge. In trading my phenomenology of expressive discovery through recording the quotidian and familiar I am faced with the task of having to work through real (but remembered) sensation and impressions and find a balance in representation of these impressions of the Berlin myth with my own set of aesthetic values and operative goals. This is not a travel journal, and it is another step away from real(ism). It is an effort to expose core elements in a place I truly identify with. The images cycle from a more obvious examination of things and places to constructions based partly on imagination. There is a feeling in my mind of figures moving like characters on a stage. In which case all is projection and identification, like in a play and all imagining. I think the shift in subject matter will continue for awhile, and I think my further work will continue down a road toward more reductive and focused idealism.

I will be returning to Berlin to reconnect with this mission through this brief doorway.

Stephen Scott

September 2006

The following previously exhibited images are drawn from work done in the winter of 2003 – 2004 in Berlin.

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ostbahnhof

watercolour

13.5 X 20

2004



accordion player

oil /canvas

10 X 13"

2004



gipssttrasse

oil/panel

8.5 X 11

2003



girl at doorway

oil/canvas

9.5 X 12

2003



overpass, alexanderplatz

oil/panel

6.5 X 10

2003



flowerseller

oil/canvas

38 X 44

2003-2004



This species of European crow is found in Germany mainly east of the Elbe. It is somewhat tamer than our own and provides a lively presence in streets and parks.

two crows

oil/canvas

14 X 15

2005



karnival study

oil/panel

9.5 X 14

2004



The swan to me seems to be a vestige of medieval times. In 1230 German nobles founded Berlin on the western bank of, and on an island in the Spree (now Museum Insel). As Berlin grew it amalgamated the surrounding towns, hamlets and farmlands. Because of the river and tributaries which fed the lush farmlands, swans and other waterfowl would have been commonplace there and in the city's parks, and their presence remains. Even though Berlin is a large metropolis, one never completely loses the sense of it being surrounded by the Prussian landscape.

The swan is also a figure in mythology and in art history, and has a strong symbolic charge .

swan

oil/canvas

32 X 32

2004

The following images are drawn from works done in the summer of 2005, some of which are included in the current exhibition, and works done 2005 - 2006. The text excerpts are taken from Christopher Isherwood's "Goodbye to Berlin", (1939) which is a journal recording his life and social experiences while tutoring English and working on his first novel in Berlin in the years 1930 to 1932. The backdrop to the narration evokes the era during which the Nazis rose to power, but also documents life in Berlin in those years through the eyes of people from various walks of life.

I have included brief commentary which provide some background information on my own responses to the subjects of the paintings, and to my thoughts on real and imagined Berlin mythology.



“In the cold the town seems actually to contract, to dwindle to a small black dot, scarcely larger than hundreds of other dots, isolated and hard to find, on the enormous European map. Outside, in the night, beyond the last new-built blocks of concrete flats, where the streets end in frozen allotment-gardens, are the Prussian plains. You can feel them all around you... creeping in upon the city, like an immense waste of unhomely ocean- sprinkled with leafless copses and ice-lakes and tiny villages which are remembered only as the outlandish names of battlefields in half-forgotten wars.”

Looking east from the Mitte, into what was once the German Democratic Republic (DDR). What interested me was the flat landscape and horizon fading into hazy obscurity. The subject perhaps provided me a visual metaphor for feelings about the weighty and to my mind somewhat threatening soviet presence to the east. In the city itself its reminders exist in boxy and utilitarian residential and office buildings which clash somewhat with west German restoration and modern styles.

alexanderplatz

oil/canvas

15 X 20

2006



“But the real heart of Berlin is a small damp black wood- the Tiergarten. At this time of the year, the cold begins to drive the peasant boys out of their tiny unprotected villages into the city, to look for food, and work. But the city, which glowed so brightly and invitingly in the night sky above the plains, is cold and cruel and dead. Its warmth is an illusion, a mirage of the winter desert. It will not receive these boys. It has nothing to give. The cold drives them out of its streets, into the wood which is its cruel heart. And there they cower on benches, to starve and freeze, and dream of their far-away cottage stoves.”

The above description was discovered in Isherwood's novel after the picture was completed. I was surprised that the emotion that came through for me in depicting the subject was mirrored so closely in the author's own experience.

tiergarten

oil/canvas

38 X 44

2006



“Berlin is a city with two centers- the cluster of expensive hotels, bars, cinemas, shops round the Memorial Church, a sparkling nucleus of light, like a sham diamond, in the shabby twilight of the town; and the self-conscious civic centre of buildings round the Unter den Linden, carefully arranged. In grand international styles, copies of copies, they assert our dignity as a capital city- a parliament, a couple of museums, a State bank, a cathedral, an opera, a dozen embassies, a triumphal arch; nothing has been forgotten. And they are all so pompous, so very correct- all except the cathedral, which betrays in its architecture, a flash of that hysteria which flickers always behind every grave, grey Prussian façade.”

Looking west from the Mitte toward Charlottenburg. Located on the flat Brandenburg plain; the Berlin cityscape seems endless. This area is just west of Tiergarten. It was always a commercial district, as described above, and was the main hub during the occupation. The Berlin cityscape has an old world feeling mixed with the modern. Red tile, ocre and blue grey buildings, construction cranes and church steeples give it the feeling of palimpsest, of overwritten history and something just beneath the surface.

charlottenburg

oil/panel

11.75 X 16.5

2004



This subject was done in the summer of 2005, in the Hackeshermarkt. It is a plaza containing outdoor restaurants and shops, and is bordered by a stone raised s-bahn and terminal. It is a gathering place for buskers, tourists, and local people to enjoy the mild evenings. Historically, the rail line marked the location of a medieval wall, and in the late 18th century was also the boundary of the “barn district”, site of the first jewish settlement. The area of the city in which this is set is known as the “scheunenviertel”, otherwise, the Mitte.

night crowd

oil/panel

9 X 12

2005



This sketch captures some of the street qualities in a favorite area of town, at the head of an avenue named Kastanienallee. It was in the eastern sector, and is filled with young people, boutiques and donair bistros. I also uses some of the peachy and ochre colors of the buildings, reflecting the temperament of changes since 1989.

s-bahn at prenzlau

oil/panel

9 X 12

2005



“From my window, the deep solemn massive street. Cellar-shops where the lamps burn all day, under the shadow of top-heavy balconied facades, dirty plaster frontages embossed with scroll-work and heraldic devices. The whole district is like this: street leading into street of houses like shabby monumental safes crammed with the tarnished valuables and second-hand furniture of a bankrupt middle class.”

The Mitte is among the last sectors to undergo restoration since 1989. Trendy bars and shops are emerging in locations that once housed bakeries and small stores. Vestiges of old Berlin can be found in this area that was once closely inside the eastern sector. After the war, the boundary between East and West Berlin was drawn through the heart of the city. In 1961 the East German government encircled West Berlin with a fortified wall (the Berlin Wall) that traced the boundary. In the postwar redevelopment period, both East and West Berlin turned their backs on the wall and the area on either side of it, which remained a partially abandoned zone. The façade above was done in this zone, in the Gipsstrasse in the Mitte.

windows

oil/p anel

9 X 12

2005



One of the most engaging aspects of Berlin culture is the ease with which dogs are socially integrated. Germ-phobia doesn't seem to be as strong there. Dogs are accepted in streetcars, in café's, in subways, in shops, on the street, and as pets in apartments. They are usually quite well trained and well-behaved. Generally they are frowned upon in public parks, where children play.

The dog is a significant on a symbolic level I think, in that to Germans they reflect an identification drawn from an age-old hunting culture. The dog can be seen as an aggressive animal, but it also represents the acceptance of leadership roles, faithfulness, orderliness and the ability to form rules and laws.

dogs

oil/canvas

39 X 44

2006



In every gathering of street kids there are at least three dogs; so dogs represent community and friendship.

An interesting aside: it was not uncommon when walking with my bichon Bailey, to notice a large, pierced, chain-bedecked and bullet-headed teuton approaching, a wide smile forming on his unshaven face, and to have him bend down and rumple Bailey's ears and deliver a "what a nice little cuddly cute little doggie", and then continue on. At other times I witnessed lengthy and stern lectures to unruly whelps who were misbehaving in public. And in restaurants, with Bailey on the chair beside me: the waitress asking if my dog would like a bowl of water.

The shepherd is, of course, a strong representation of caninity.

german shepherd

oil/paper

14 X 19

2006



Anne grew up close by in the Mitte during the DDR years. Her strong emotions, idealism, humour and direct honesty made her a friend immediately. She provided a huge experience for me in terms of introductions to history and places in the eastern sector, and accounts of her experiences growing up there. She is one of the many Berlin people who are aware of being set within the amber of it's history; and able to communicate from this viewpoint. Anne will probably never leave the Mitte.

head of a..

mixed media/paper

18 X 20

2005



This portrait is of course a composite. The background is the trainyard at Warschauerplatze which was in the eastern sector, but close to the center of the city. It is meant to place the figure on an overhead bridge, with the view looking east. The railing is a fiction, and after the work was completed I realized that it was a metaphor for the wall. Anna likes all kinds of open spaces, places and odd bits of sculpture found in public gardens, which she revisits from time to time, to re-experience their charge. She told me her father was active through his church in getting people out of east Germany.

anna and bike

oil/canvas

48 X 56

2005-2006



Kreuzberg, located directly south of the Mitte, is a residential area known for its large Turkish immigrant community and its concentration of younger residents. It's gritty quality reflects the vibrant, ethnically divergent working-class and youthful street culture. There is an almost politically aggressive untidiness, and the area is considered more trendy than refurbishing areas such as the Mitte.

Isherwood's 30's description is still apt in describing young Berliners— "...the men in sailor's sweaters and stained baggy trousers, the girls in ill-fitting jumpers, skirts held visibly together with safety-pins and carelessly knotted gaudy gipsy scarves..."

The greyness in the above image captures some of the quality of the narrow crowded streets in this district, and the black edgy uniform figures the sharp-edged and non-conformist quality of the people.

kreuzberg

oil/canvas

14 X 16

2006



“...there had been a big Nazi meeting at the Sportpalast, and groups of men and boys were just coming away from it, in their brown or black uniforms. Walking along the pavement ahead of me were three S.A. men, they all carried Nazi banners on their shoulders, like rifles, rolled tight around the staves- the banner-staves had sharp metal points, shaped into arrow-heads.”

Although the above image is of marchers in a contemporary demonstration protesting welfare cuts, some visual parallels exist to the excerpt from 1932. The flags are workers banners and the demonstrators themselves are from the working class. Demonstration is a tradition in Europe, and in Germany are common, tolerated, and usually without violent confrontation.

demonstrators

oil/panel

12 X 15

2006



"But the real masters of Berlin are not the Police, or the Army, and certainly not the Nazis. The masters of Berlin are the workers- despite all the propaganda I've heard and read, all the demonstrations I've attended... Comparatively few of the hundreds of people in the streets round the Bülowplatz can have been organized communists, yet you had the feeling that every single one of them was united... Somebody began to sing the 'International', and, in a moment everyone had joined in- even the women with their babies, watching from top-storey windows."

workers

oil/canvas

32 X 40.5

2006



In the mid-1990s the largest age group in Berlin, which made up 19 percent of the population, consisted of people between the ages of 25 and 34. Today the population is at a lower level than that of prewar years. There is a youthful feeling to the city. It contains many more parks than previously existed, due to demolition, and these are places where the many young parents take their children to play and picnic.

young mother

oil/canvas

14 X 16

2006