

# Hamilton: A Co-op That Matters

by Barry Lord

'Lunch bucket artists of the world, unite!' The posters, printed over the familiar, homely shape of a worker's lunch pail, proclaimed this revolutionary message all over Hamilton last spring. The local radio stations and the *Hamilton Spectator* took up the cry, and when Mayor Vic Copps put on a hard-hat to open the show at the Hamilton Artists' Co-op Gallery, over fifty artists, housewives, children, grandmothers, and — yes, workers! — had answered the call. They each brought in to the tiny but vitally active gallery in the Italian-Portuguese immigrant area of old stores on Hamilton's James Street North their painted, fabricated, demolished, stuffed, soft, hard, transparent or transformed lunch boxes.

There was the lunch box used for years by a retired steel worker, decorated by his 85-year-old wife, Florence Millson, with a Great Lakes ore boat seen across Burlington Bay on the front, and the open hearth steel mill at Stelco blazing inside. There was the transparent plastic box crammed full with the steel wool that its maker, Mel Shimoda, uses every day to polish transformers in his job at the industrial porcelain factory. And there was "The Perfect Lunch Box," so naughtily painted by Donna Ibing with two nudes spreading their legs around the clasps that open the lid that this was the only box barred from the show's subsequent exhibitions at Hamilton City Hall and the Public Library. Incredibly enough, only about a quarter of the "Lunch Bucket Artists" who united for this show were known to the Co-op members as artists before the show.

The Lunch Bucket Show<sup>1</sup> is just one of the brilliantly relevant exhibitions and projects that the Hamilton Artists' Co-op Gallery has organized in Canada's largest industrial centre. Formed a year and a half ago by ten or twelve Hamiltonian artists fed up with the lack of exhibiting opportunities and the peculiarly intense isolation of an artist in this big steel city so close to Toronto that it has always had trouble developing its own cultural institutions, the Co-op began with only the determination and financial sacrifice of a few of its members.

The gallery's location was chosen not just for low rent, but for ideological reasons: as Co-op member Sam Robinson puts it, "We wanted people who don't



1 Artists Co-op Hamilton / photo: James Chambers

usually see galleries to have a chance to look at contemporary art," Bryce Kanbara explains. "To chase out the elitism that is often associated with art," he wrote in a fund-raising letter, "the Co-op has made its headquarters/gallery in a shop on James Street North in a neighbourhood featuring fish stores, meat markets, bakeries, espresso bars. Here, looking at art could be as routine as getting a hair-cut at the barber shop on the corner.

Kanbara is also Hamilton spokesman for Canadian Artists' Representation, and ensures that the Co-op supports CAR policies. Solo, duo or trio shows are available to all the members as they are ready, with fees paid for each exhibition and only a 10% commission on sales. Dues are just \$5.00 a year, and after an initial period as an Associate Member, any Hamilton area artist can become an active member, and can attend meetings, vote, and take a

## A Co-op That Matters/continued

turn at a solo show. The gallery gets by financially on a shoestring of personal donations and Ontario Arts Council grants, and is governed by its general meetings and an informal structure of steering committees, publicity and selection committees nominated by the membership.

It is in its group shows and special projects, however, that the Co-op has really distinguished itself as a storefront that matters to Hamilton. An initial series of "Potboilers" exhibitions was designed "to bring Hamilton artists out of the woodwork," as Kanbara says. Then they featured "The Pink and Clean Revue," for which they scrubbed and painted up their tired-old premises. The outstanding work in that show was Peggy McNiff's two-piece "Woman Object" set, consisting of two life-size stuffed satin and jersey female nude figures, both lounging on chairs, one perfect and pristine, while the other had a great red gash stitched up between its legs, with multiple breasts and six fetuses dangling on strings from its womb.

Photographer James Chambers, who comes from Hamilton but now works as head of the photography department at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, helped to bring the neighbours in by presenting a documentary photo show called simply "James Street North". In this quietly impressive group of pictures, he managed to record some of the people and places of this tough, stimulating street without the arch formalism that so many of his Rochester-influenced fellow artists bring to such subjects, and without exploiting the people of the area as mere specimens of the 'picturesque'. Particularly imbued with feeling for the humanity of the subjects are his shots of the cash register girl in the "European art gifts" store, and the black family in the laundromat across the street.

The Co-op then turned, with incisive justice, to produce a "Hamilton Supplement" to "Ontario Now", the government-funded survey that the Art Gallery of Hamilton was at the same time ponderously presenting with only one — count him, one — Hamilton artist. Co-op members saw their role, in the tradition of the Salons des Refusés, as giving the lie to this typically elitist misrepresentation of contemporary art that almost invariably tries to make out that next to nothing is happening



2 *Five Buckets* / Ruth Nabb's foam rubber lunch bucket, with foam sandwich, tablecloth and mirror; Bryce Kanbara's *Van Waggoner's Beach* lunch bucket, decorated with shells picked up on the beach; Vera Templeman Plat's soft fabric lunch bucket/ photo: James Chambers



3 *Trick or Treat* lunch bucket / Petra Zimmerman / photo: James Chambers



4 *Soft Bucket* / F. Kanbara, housewife / photo: James Chambers





here (whether "here" is Hamilton or wherever), while all the "quality" work is being produced elsewhere. The very existence of their show manifested, by contrast with the usual turgid and eclectic survey mounted by the official Gallery, that artists were alive and kicking hard in Hamilton.

By this time neighbours were beginning to peer in the windows at night, during the film shows and lectures that are part of the Co-op's evening programmes, and the gallery was ready to invite the mayor to open its "Lunch Bucket" show. The Co-op plugged into the local cable TV station, and presented a weekly series of twelve half-hour television shows that started with the gallery's exhibitions, but also followed Co-op members participating in one of Hamilton's rites of spring, the annual smelt



5 Artist James Chambers with his mannequin

fishing ritual on the shores of Lake Ontario. As part of the video transcription (which is now in the tape collection of the Canada Council), Co-op artists fried their smelts and gave them out free to James North residents who were less likely to get to the shoreline.

A "We Are Not a Crafts Shop" show gave a chance to the craftsmen members, while establishing the gallery's policy against providing just another crafts boutique outlet to the city. Then Co-op members went further in exploring their precise commercial status on the street, by presenting a "Black Velvet" show in open competition with the only other "gallery" in the area, a black velvet paintings store. The next venture is to be a pastry exhibition, to be prepared in cooperation with the European cake shop across the road.

The results of the Co-op are already impressive. Sadly, Mrs. Millson came to collect her husband's lunch box with the news that he had died while the show was on, and she wanted to take it home as a memento; but — at 85 — she has gone on to her first solo exhibition, at a nearby civic centre. Founding member Mel Shimoda has produced an entire exhibition in the steel wool material he is so familiar with at work. Cindy Hill Buchar has moved to northern Ontario, but made sure the Co-op had a group exhibit at the Northern Arts Festival in South Porcupine.

Co-op members have also been extending their concerns for the position of the

artist in Hamilton society by getting up a petition for more and better coverage of the visual arts in the *Spectator*, and by obliging local radio station CKOC to pay CAR fees for its widely promoted annual exhibition at the Art Gallery of Hamilton. In one of its simplest but certainly effective functions, the Co-op provided a job that allowed one of its members to get out of the nearby Barton Street jail on day-time passes, by working in the gallery during its open hours.

Undoubtedly the most important activity of the Co-op, however, is to be found in the informal conversations, critiques and arguments the members have had at the gallery about what art is, and why they are there. Sales of one or two works a month, at \$50 to \$300 each, are much less important than the opportunity to see and discuss each other's work, and discover how much they and the community around them have to say to each other. As Sam Robinson wrote in *Carot*, the CAR Ontario newsletter, "The cooperative is a focus for our aesthetic concerns. We are gradually learning to look carefully at and criticize the work of some of our closer friends. We have had to deal with the problems of selection of work, the problems of hanging shows, the problems of publicity (and its *raison d'être*, apathy), and not least of all, the problems of finances. And we have become friends with our fellow artists — a situation which didn't exist in Hamilton before."

Hamilton has long been a city of crucial importance to Canada's industrial economy. The artists of earlier generations, like William Blair Bruce in the nineteenth century, mostly fled the place; artists like the Group of Seven's J. E. H. Macdonald and Montreal's Albert H. Robinson, who developed their skills at the Hamilton Art School in the early years of this century, had to go elsewhere to maintain themselves as artists; those like Leonard Hutchinson who stayed through the 1930s to depict the struggles of Hamilton workers in the Depression have only recently — and barely — been acknowledged. The Co-op provides an exciting new prospect: that for the first time a vibrant, resident group of artists may not only produce important new work, but may even more significantly relate it to the lunch-bucket realities of the city. □