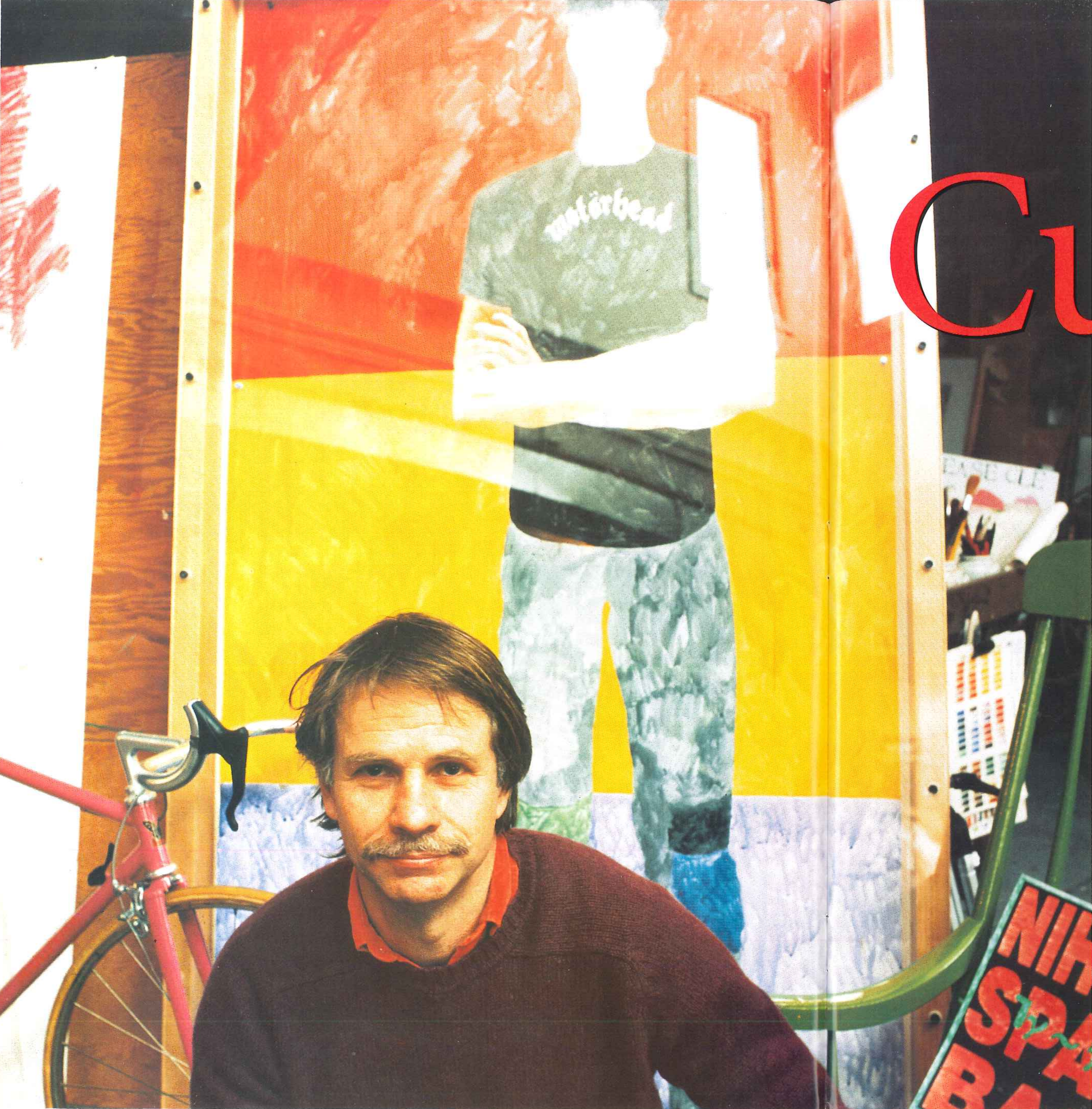

Portrait photo: Andre Nufer

by Douglas Fetherling

The Curnoe Story

A stubborn individualist, a fierce patriot, this London artist charted a passionate course.

The view through the big windows in Greg Curnoe's studio in the Riverview Heights section of London, Ontario, is familiar from a number of his paintings. There, across the Thames, sits Victoria Hospital. The same Victoria Hospital where Gregory Richard Curnoe was born in 1936. Where Jack Chambers died of leukemia in 1978, leaving Curnoe the senior artist in a city bubbling with creative activity. And where the ambulance took Curnoe's dead body on November 14, 1992, after he'd been struck by a pickup while riding on Highway 2 with his bicycle club, the London Centennial Wheelers.

Shortly after the accident—which almost seemed to tear the heart out of cultural London—the police called on Sheila Curnoe, returning her husband's Mariposa bike, now horribly twisted, and the helmet he'd been wearing. The two objects now lie together in one corner of the 40-by-40-foot studio, amid the artist's accumulated inventory, including some of the series of pictures of the very same bicycle—images so famous that another London painter, John Boyle, can remember seeing them hanging in restaurants in Scandinavia

Mariposa 10 Speed 1973
Watercolour over graphite on wove paper
40 x 71 in.
Collection: National Gallery of Canada
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and hearing them praised in Germany and France.

"The studio was separate from the house it was part of," Dennis Reid of the Art Gallery of Ontario, an old friend and Curnoe champion, explains. "Greg would go out the side door of the house every morning, walk about fifteen steps towards the river and spend the whole day in the studio." Now, since the accident, Sheila Curnoe has had a door cut between the studio and the rest of the dwelling (originally a lithography plant, built in 1903). She's done so to save time. When she's not travelling on estate business — for example, to see dealers in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver — she's spending four to six hours a day in the studio, working with a close circle of advisers that includes Reid and other old friends such as Frank Davey, the poet, critic and editor of the journal *Open Letter*, and Linda Davey, a lawyer.

Curnoe was not simply London's most famous artist but one of its most famous citizens — certainly one of its most frantically active and conspicuous personalities. His death was front-page news. His funeral drew such people as Michael Snow from Toronto and George Bowering from Vancouver. In fact, it attracted hundreds more than the A. Millard George Funeral Home in South London could hope to accommodate. David McFadden, the poet whose books *The Great Canadian Sonnet* and *Animal Spirits* were illustrated by his friend Curnoe, came up from Toronto with Stan Bevington, the founder of Coach House Press. "We were half an hour early but had to sit in one of the small side rooms and listen to the eulogies over the PA system," he says. Their experience was typical. After the service, hundreds of mourners filled Frank and Linda Davey's Victorian mansion for a kind of wake.

Soon there followed a sell-out memorial evening organized by Susan Musgrave, the writer-in-residence at the University of Western Ontario, and her husband, Stephen Reid. As well, there were a number of hastily hung Curnoe exhibitions: one at the National Gallery, of course, but another at the Forest City Gallery in London, the artist-run space Curnoe helped to start in 1973, and another at the London Regional Art and Historical Museums (LRAHM), an institution he had mostly feuded with since its founding in 1972. Nor was the attention triggered by his death quick to level off. "A juried show of Southwestern Ontario artists at the LRAHM included this portrait of Curnoe by Alan Dayton," says Doug Bale, the art writer of the London *Free Press*. "The artist had begun it in 1987 but finished it only after Greg's death. I imagine he had trouble getting Greg's eyes so splendidly right. Greg always looked directly at you. When he was mad at you, the eyes flamed."

For Sheila Curnoe, "All this idealizing of Greg that's going on is wonderful. He was constantly busy with everything. He was a genius or certainly a very, very talented person. But I shared his life for twenty-seven years, and it wasn't always easy." Much of her time with Curnoe was lived in the open. They met in 1964 and married in 1965, just at the zenith of the London excitement that was a perennial subject for the national and often the international press, and she regularly figured in his work. "So my life was always somewhat public," she says. "Now it *is* public." She adds bluntly, but more in sadness than in anger: "Some people who have opinions (about what she's doing) should keep them to themselves."

What is it that she's doing? "I'd like to see a memorial exhibit that could travel," she says. Galleries are already being contacted. Also, in the view of Frank Davey, who holds the Carl S. Klinck chair of Canadian literature at the University of Western Ontario, "There is urgent need of a *catalogue raisonné*, with scholarly descriptions. There are good records but they're incomplete, even though Greg took colour slides of almost everything he painted."

Sheila Curnoe has put Davey in charge of most of the literary remains, as people in the nineteenth century would have called them. These include two enormous manuscripts begun in 1991, totalling about eight hundred single-spaced pages, in which Curnoe researched the history of his house and street, as Davey says, "past Crown deed back to

View of Victoria Hospital, Second Series
1969–71
Mixed media on plywood
96 x 191 in.
Collection: National Gallery of Canada

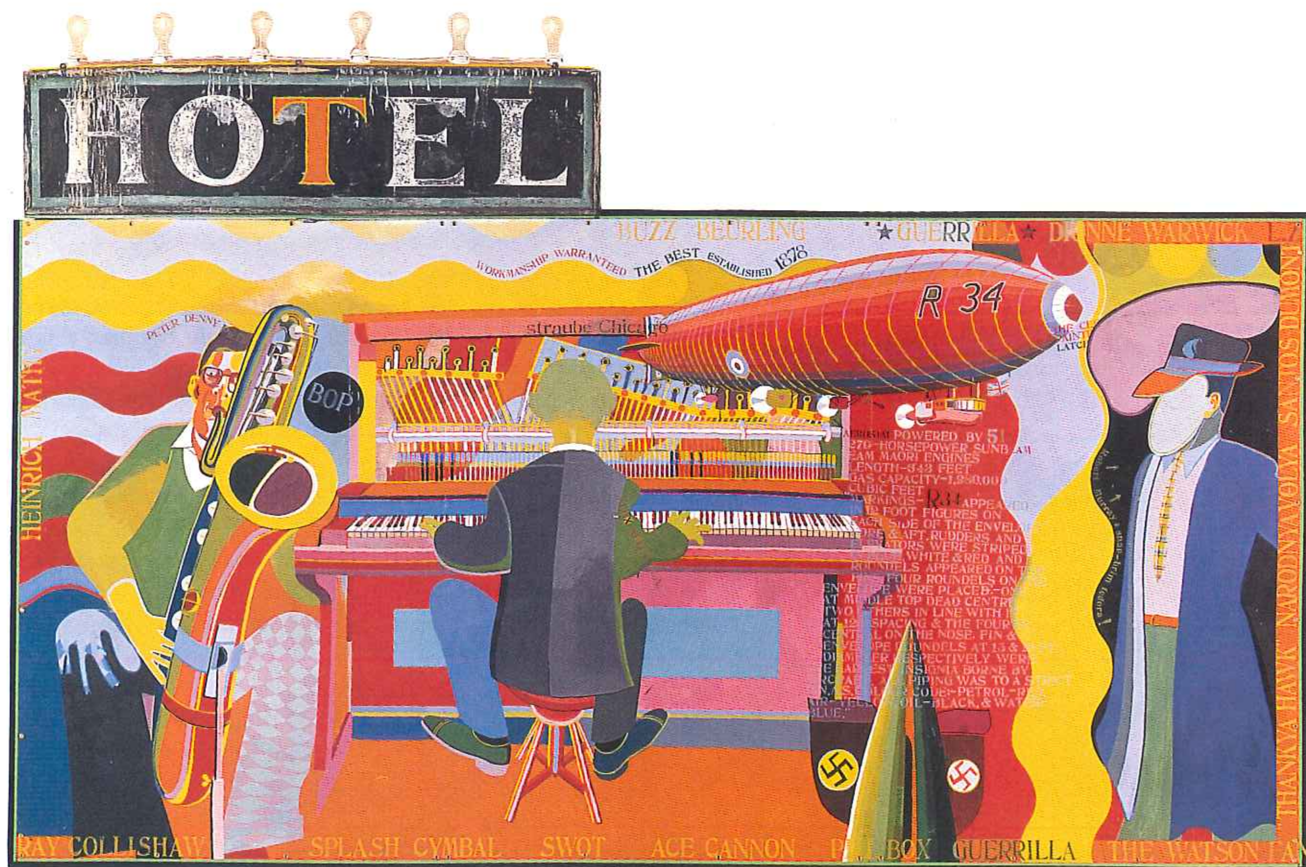
First Nations occupation and contextualized the information in terms of the street, recounting the changes going back to 5000 B.C." This is called *Deeds: Abstracts*. Part of it was the basis of a show at the Forest City Gallery shortly before his death. The second part, *Deeds: Nations*, "is an index to the pages concerning the First Nations between 1750 and 1810 and shows who was responsible for the treaty surrenders. His research indicates that there may have been professional treaty-signers who went along putting their marks on treaties with the white man for lands that didn't belong to them. This is terribly important research, and this part is going to be published by an archaeological group."

Besides a lot of miscellaneous essays and conference papers (which Reid is editing), Curnoe also left thirty years' worth of journals. He kept them, Davey says, "not in a systematic way but at times of excitement or depression or when he was enormously interested in documenting or conceptualizing. Meeting a curator, say, or a pioneer resident, or having a family disagreement, he would make a journal entry in an attempt to understand." The jottings fill a hundred notebooks, some of which include sketches and watercolours. Davey will edit them for publication by Coach House Press.

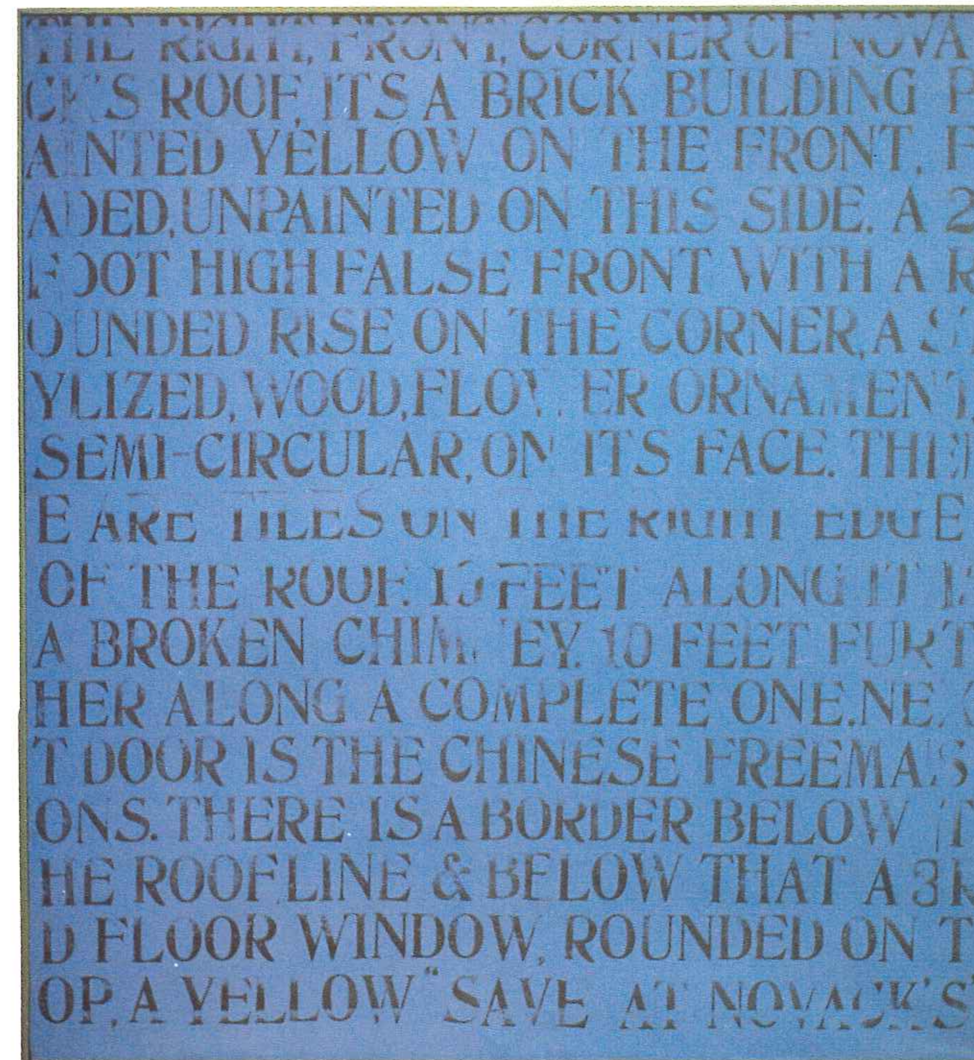
And, of course, there are major paintings going back to the early 1960s and hundreds and hundreds of smaller works and drawings from all periods. "In a situation like this," says Dennis Reid, "there are ways to sustain and even stimulate an artist's reputation over the years, but there are ways to blow it over a couple of years, too." Curnoe's closest friends are working together to help ensure the first outcome. Despite a downturn in the 1980s, they have a sound reputation to work with.

"Along with Michael Snow, he had one of the two most successful careers in postwar Canadian art," says John Boyle, whom Curnoe met and befriended in 1960, when Boyle had painted only a half-a-dozen pictures. "The National Gallery has a *huge* collection of his work, and he represented Canada in about all the international expos and biennials. But while he will be a very important figure in Canadian art history, he'll also be remembered for encouraging Royden and David Rabinowitch, Ron Martin, and one of the most important sculptors in the country, Murray Favro." In short, for creating the London scene, which was, in turn, so central to his own work and career, and not simply in the surface sense or in terms of publicity, but underneath, philosophically.

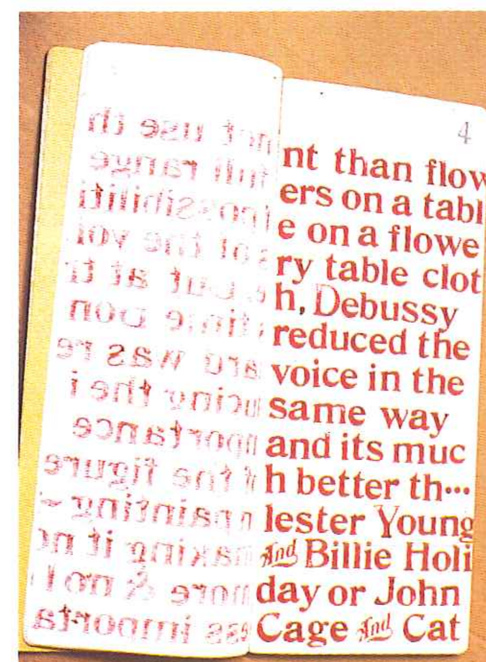
"For him, sense of place was essential, part of his



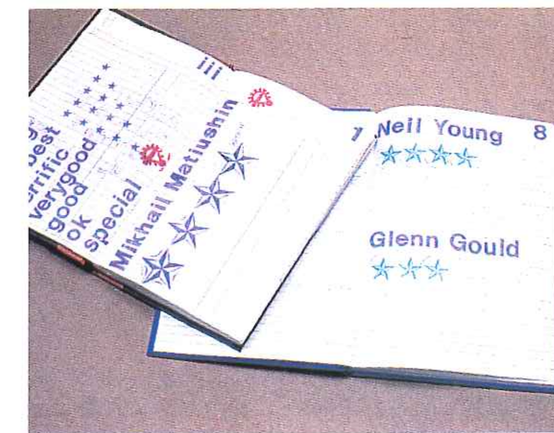
The Camouflaged Piano or French Roundels 1965–66
Oil on plywood, hotel sign with incandescent lights
98 x 147 x 11 in.
Collection: National Gallery of Canada



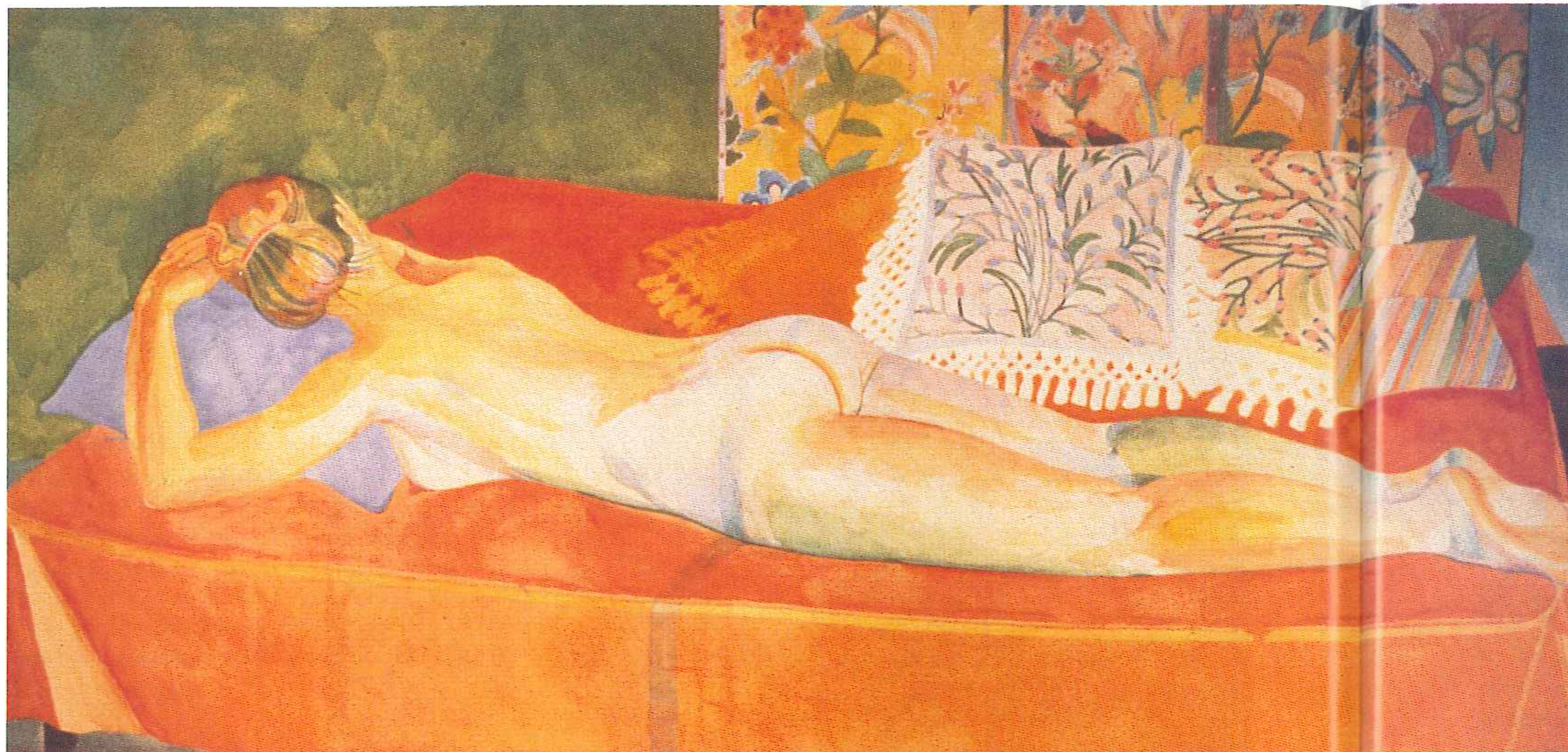
Left Front Centre Windows April 1967
Rubber stamp, ink and acrylic on canvas
48 x 40 in.
Courtesy: Estate of the artist



Blue Book #2 July–November 1, 1964
Stamp pad ink on paper
15 x 6 in.
Courtesy: Estate of the artist



About Paintings #2, About Musicians September 1988
Stamp pad ink on paper
8 x 5 in. and 8 x 6 in.
Courtesy: Estate of the artist

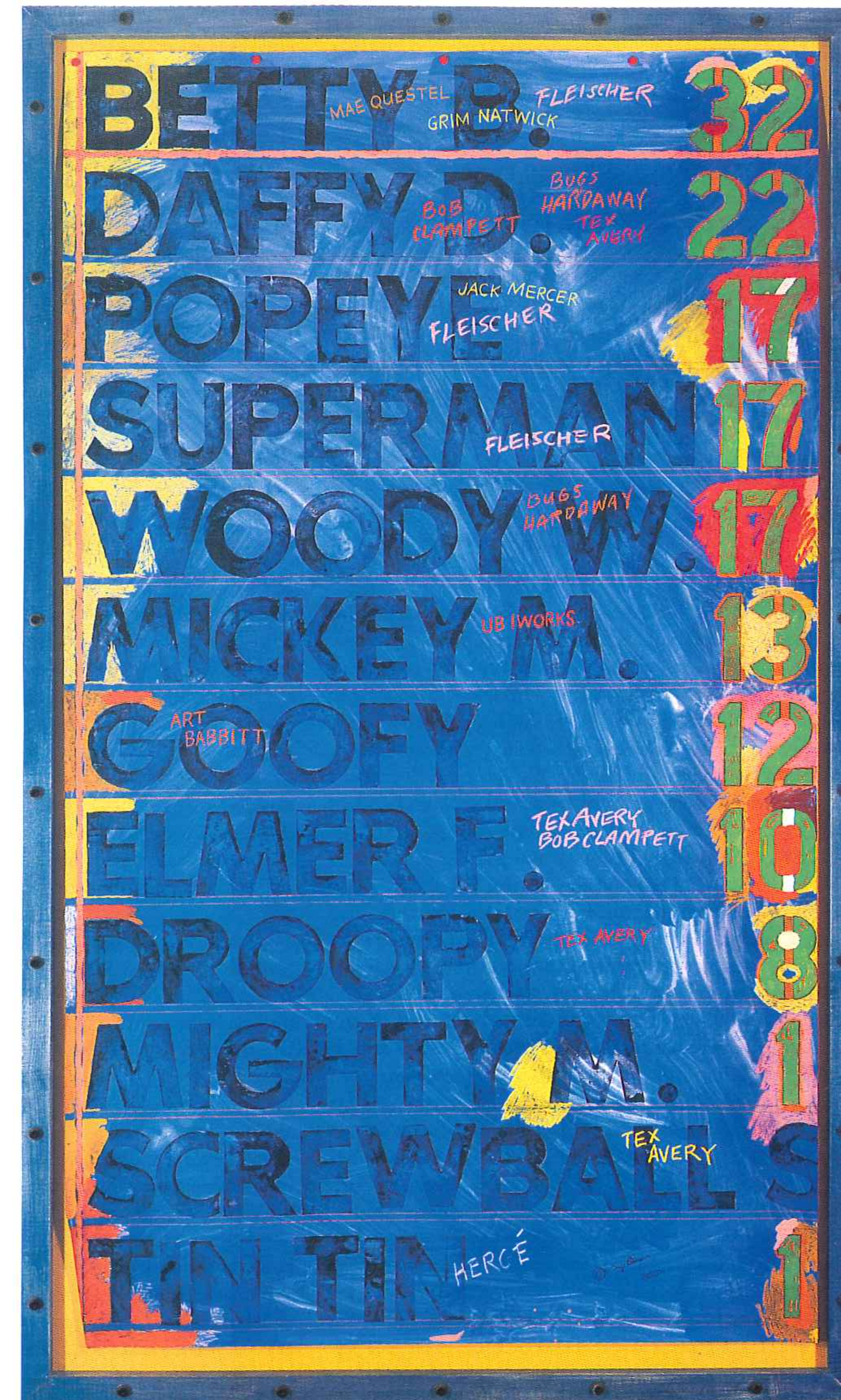


Van Dongen II July 16, 1979–December 18, 1980
Watercolour on paper
46 x 93 in.
Courtesy: Estate of the artist

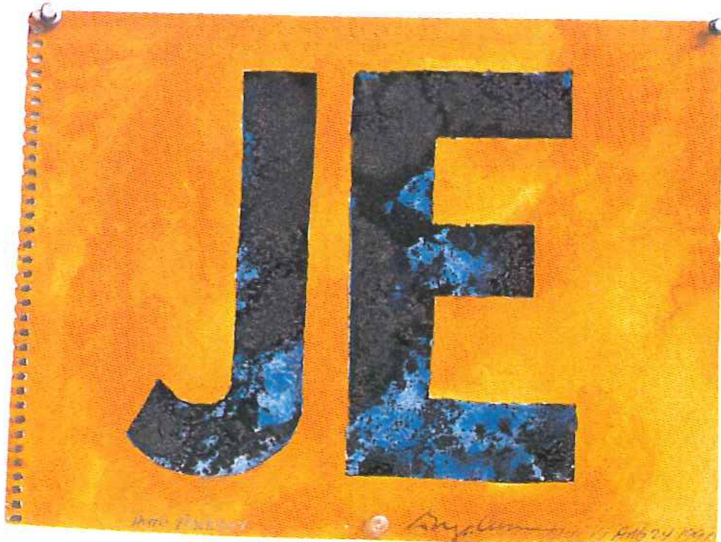
empiricism," says Christopher Dewdney, the London-born poet. "In all Greg's work, there is the awareness of 'This is my place.' That, he felt, was the only real subject. He felt that to compare what one was doing with other localities or styles was the worst provincialism. Such was the grammar of his experience: regional identity first, but conscious of what went on elsewhere." Dewdney remembers how, from the time he was about six, Chambers and Curnoe would come over to the Dewdney place for Sunday dinner, presided over by his mother, the pioneer art therapist, Irene Dewdney, and his father, Selwyn Dewdney, the archaeologist and novelist, a Canadian nationalist of the sort Curnoe would become.

Here would be one of the ironies of the reputation of Greg Curnoe, perhaps the most splendidly anti-American artist Canada has ever produced. His principles often cost him dearly, as when the federal government backed away from a commissioned work he'd done for Dorval airport, *Homage to the R-100*, claiming it would offend U.S. visitors (as he no doubt secretly hoped it would. The mural included anti-Vietnam references). Yet when he suddenly became famous, he was seen as a Pop artist in the American manner, a view which, for many people, only hardened later, in the 1960s, with his text works using rubber stamps. Of course, Curnoe's most thoughtful critics all disagree. "There was a slight Pop sensibility but nothing beneath the surface, only what you see," says Dewdney. "The rubber stamp works have to be viewed in this context: minimalist, vaguely concrete, with zero conceptual charge." Andy Patton and Janice Gurney, two of the many younger artists Curnoe supported and promoted, recall that when they got to know him in 1985 ("It was an incredible thing just to meet him," Patton says) he was "pissed off that it was his early work we were interested in." Later, he returned to stamp pads again. In fact, though Curnoe collaborated a lot with writers, one of the only recorded instances of him collaborating with another visual artist was the stamp pad text he added to a work of Gurney's, *The Last Tasmanians/ Badger, Manitoba*, that hung in a show at The Power Plant in Toronto this past winter. Patton holds that in the future Curnoe "will be assessed the same way he would have been by intelligent people ten years after he first came on the scene: i.e., clearly not really a Pop artist at all, but more diaristic and conceptual."

What a scene London must have been in the sixties. One of the key venues was always Curnoe's studio. Another was the York tavern, a beer parlour across from the railway yard where Curnoe persuaded the owners, Moe and Eddie Assaf, to permit jazz. Soon Curnoe and others — some artists, some not — were configured as the infamous (and still



Dessin Animé April 8, 1987–September 29, 1987
Watercolour, stamp pad ink, gouache, pastel, pencil crayon on Harumi paper
77 x 48 in.
Photo: Tom Moore
Courtesy: Wynick/Tuck Gallery



Auto Portrait July 19–August 24, 1991
Stamp pad ink, watercolour on paper
12 x 9 in.
Courtesy: Estate of the artist

Auto Portrait July 19–August 10, 1991
Stamp pad ink, watercolour on paper
12 x 9 in.
Courtesy: Estate of the artist

Garden Thoughts #2 September 29, 1985
Watercolour and ink on paper
12 x 9 in.
Courtesy: Estate of the artist

Garden Thoughts #1 September 2, 1985
Watercolour and ink on paper
12 x 9 in.
Courtesy: Estate of the artist

somehow extant) Nihilist Spasm Band, with Curnoe on drums and kazoo. "I met him at Michael Ondaatje's house here in 1970, the year I moved to London," says Stan Dragland, a fiction writer, publisher and University of Western Ontario professor. "The Nihilist Spasm Band, I must say, made awful music that cured me for years of wanting to hear any more like it. Yet from such things I came to know that I could live and work in London. In all the years I've been here, Greg laboured to make an arts community, trying to fold people into it."

However various the London artists of the sixties—and they ranged from Paterson Ewen to Lynn Donoghue to Robert Fones to Tony Urquhart—they all seemed to fall under Curnoe's insistent belief that London could be made a kind of freestanding cultural canton if everybody tried hard enough. This was an idea jumped on with highly enthusiastic skepticism by the mainstream media, including *Time* magazine, which was then still at the height of its power (and which Curnoe refused to let reproduce his work—just as he refused for years to have his work shown in the U.S.). Everyone seemed drawn there. "I remember a night when Buckminster Fuller turned up at the York to listen to the music and see what all the fuss was about," says John Boyle.

Curnoe's idea, as I have written elsewhere, was to make a scene characterized not just by regional patriotism but by *interdisciplinary* regional patriotism. Artists were also activists and musicians and magazine publishers and of course writers. Andy Patton remembers looking in the guestbook at a Curnoe show at the Wynick/Tuck Gallery in Toronto in 1991 and seeing that someone had written, 'If you want to be a writer, why don't you just write?' "It's a good question," Patton says. "Of course, he *didn't* want to be a writer, but it's a good question." McFadden traces Curnoe's textual dependency "back to his interest in comic strips. He never outgrew that. He loved word-balloons and things like that. His motivation as an artist was similar to the motivation of many writers: he wanted to get things set down right. And sometimes he found words faster [than images]. But of course, as he grew older, he also felt the sense of loss we all feel, and he worked artistically out of this deeper area, too, the same as writers do."

Funny how quickly he became famous. In 1960, he failed his final year at the Ontario College of Art (perhaps deepening his distrust of Toronto). By 1962, London was the scene of Canada's first happening and Curnoe was in the centre of the wildness and the glory, the artistic acts of youthful bravado and feats of creative daring. Says John Boyle: "Jack Chambers was important, too, but certainly the local phenomenon that started in the early sixties and lasted through the mid-seventies couldn't have happened if Greg hadn't been here. He was so open to everything of interest and to anybody with a creative life. Good stuff always attracted him."

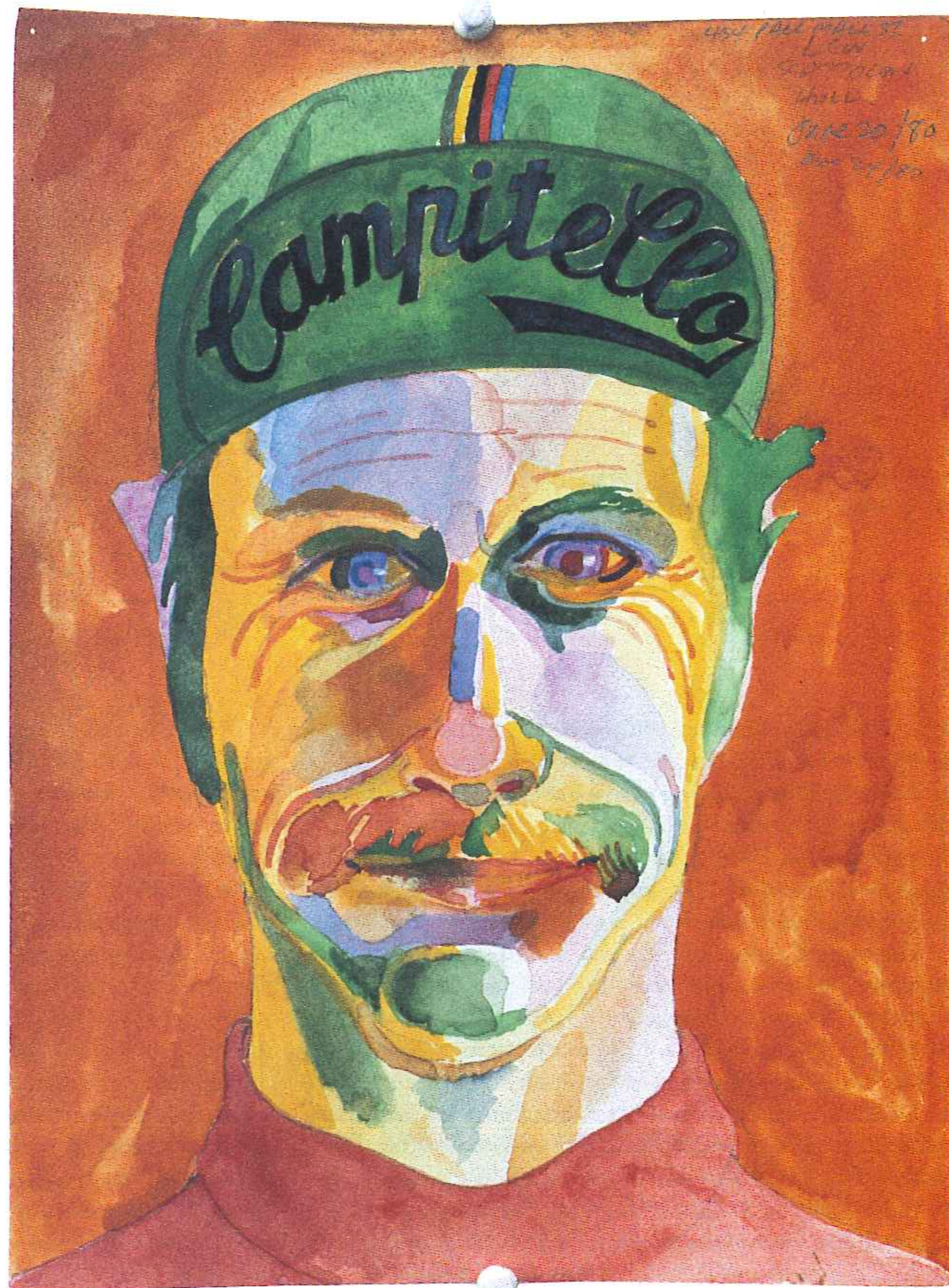
He never became rich. Boyle remembers Curnoe characteristically finding that he had only a two-dollar bill in his wallet when it was his turn to buy a round at the York. But in the fat times his income must have been substantial. For years, he was an important name in the stable of the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto, which sold his large works widely, and the London area was an inexhaustible source of small sales and sometimes transactions of a much more important sort. "My reaction when I first met him," says Peter Desbarats, the dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Western, who worked with him on architectural preservation projects, "was that I'd met him before somewhere. He was representative of a particular generation and type. He was rumpled and expressed himself with an urban folksiness." Curnoe was that classic individual of industrial society, the working-class kid who struggles to remain true to his roots while accepting what a little compromise always offers. Sheila Curnoe, having emigrated from Britain in 1957, is particularly alert to the nuances. "Greg was from South London. He'd make a big point of ridiculing North London with its upper-class lives." But not necessarily to their faces.

The biggest powers in the London establishment sought him out. Doug Bale of the *Free Press* points out that Curnoe's "access to those sorts of social structures came from Jake Moore. It was by Jake Moore's aegis that Greg advanced in London society." Indeed, Moore, then the CEO of Labatt's, was the most important figure in Curnoe's financial life. He bought scores of Curnoe's works (they constituted the memorial show at the LRAHM), allowing the Curnoes to move in 1968 into the old Weston Street litho plant with its view of the river and beyond. "It was just this L-shaped building with nothing but a maple growing up outside," Sheila Curnoe says. Ten years later, Moore helped with a loan when the Curnoes "wanted to expand," in her words, "so it looked more like a home than a factory." According to Christopher Dewdney, "The next generation would take pot shots at Greg about his relationship with the upper-middle class." Such a reaction was inevitable. So was the difficult period of doubt and retrenchment that seemed to envelop Curnoe once London was eclipsed by other scenes. A story in the *Free Press* in 1987 put the matter succinctly: "Too old now to be viewed as *enfant terrible* of the London art scene but too young yet to be seen as its grand old man, Greg Curnoe at fifty-one nevertheless continues to be cast in both roles." The fit was uncomfortable.

Pierre Théberge's massive retrospective of Curnoe's work at the National Galley in Ottawa and the Musée des beaux-arts in Montreal in 1980 was probably the high-water mark. "By the mid-1980s, Greg had become concerned about the downward trend in his reputation," says Dennis Reid. "We talked about it, including the degree to which he seemed not to be noticed in discussions in which his work would have been relevant. There was some anguish over postmodernism." Some believe that the rot started to set in when he voluntarily up and left Av Isaacs. "Av had always had exclusive rights," Reid explains, "and said he was capable of selling to any place in Canada and had international connections. But Greg believed he could handle all that himself. This led him to evolve relationships with Equinox in Vancouver and then Waddington Gorce in Montreal. Maybe others too. He was not one of those people who *believe* that they can communicate with all kinds of people, up or down. He actually did." His skepticism about Toronto dealers, combined with the necessity of eventually getting one to replace Isaacs, led him into odd venues, according to Dewdney. "At one point, he had a show at some gallery at Queen and Dufferin or somewhere. It was very traumatic for him. After years of getting senior Canada Council grants almost every year, he suddenly wasn't getting them automatically any more."

This, and not the sexual doubt of the stereotype, seems to have been Greg Curnoe's mid-life crisis. "During those years when most men betray their wives, Greg never did," says David McFadden. "He and bp (Nichol) weren't like that. I remember him saying of one poet who had a bit of a reputation, 'Well, he's just over-sexed.'" No, this fifty-year-old male's psychic crunch was different. He talked about it freely.

"I didn't associate his fall from grace with leaving Isaacs, but rather with developments in Canada and his reaching a certain age," says David McFadden. "I felt his pain, but had the feeling that it hurt him more than he wanted to let on, even with me. He said he had saturated the market in



Self-Portrait June 20–24, 1980
Watercolour
12 x 9 in.
Courtesy: Estate of the artist

Canada and was looking for foreign markets — including markets in the U.S. Sheila may say 'McFadden's out of his mind, Greg never said that.' But he did."

It was no secret, his friends suggest, that he was financially hard-pressed at times. "He was looking to an upcoming show in Vancouver and to one at Wynick/Tuck to make some money," says John Boyle. But those were still in the future when he set out with his cycling friends that weekend. One of his last public acts was a meeting in his studio with UWO students, who videotaped the interview. This was something he did every year, says Peter Desbarats. "He was supposed to get a $150 honorarium. I later heard that he called the university administrators two or three times for the cheque." So he had to be careful with money. After all, two of the Curnoe children were in university — Galen at the Emily Carr School of Art in Vancouver, Zoë at Concordia University in Montreal (while the third, Owen, lived at home).

Everyone could see in these last years how the critics were dumping on him, inescapably so, as there were new agendas. "By the mid-eighties," says Dewdney, "Greg's (nationalist) politics, which had never changed, were no longer viewed as relevant, not to a time concerned with ethnic and Third World issues. Only his gender politics changed, and this was because of his relationship with Sheila."

Sheila Thompson was twenty-two when a friend introduced her to Greg in the studio he was then using. She was working in a dental office. "I was always intending to become an artist, but for a woman at that time, especially in London, Ontario, the idea was positively silly." Instead, she became a frequent nude model for Greg, and as such felt she had a special moral and emotional stake in the paintings that resulted: all of this, decades before "patriarchy" acquired its present resonance and before there was a feminist argument about the extra-aesthetic nature of female nudes. "Yes, this dialogue started in the sixties when we were first married. You didn't have to be with Greg long to have an intense discussion or an argument. There was volatile stuff going on all the time." Towards the end of his life, he came to see that she was right. The last show he supervised (it opened at Wynick/Tuck in Toronto a few days after his death) consisted of twenty self-portraits, work that came from the same impulse as his historical and archaeological explorations. Half of them were traditional representations, mapping the contours of his face. In the others, the word "I", painted in watercolour on a coloured ground, was translated into one of a number of aboriginal and European languages (French, Cornish, Ojibwa and Onyota'a;ka), each acknowledging a different people who had settled in the London region.

Very near the end, he was on the cusp of a renaissance. This is good to remember. His sons, Owen and Galen, had become keenly interested in industrial music, says Andy Patton. "That may have helped recharge his batteries: for the first time, they really came to life for him as influences rather than as kids." And other good things were starting to happen as well, it seems. The trend wasn't just a promise of rediscovery, as it had been when his 1960s text-works were coming back into vogue. It wasn't a question of other people rediscovering him but of him making fresh and synthesizing discoveries about himself. *Deeds: Abstracts* and the other work related to it showed the results starting to come in.

Almost everyone who knew him speaks of the intensity of Greg Curnoe's enthusiasms. "Everything was always very urgent," as Desbarats says. He was a collector, with a collector's mania. "He wasn't simply like most artists who save every piece of paper with one of their marks on it," Dennis Reid explains. "He had a collection of soda drinks bottled in the region through the years, some with the soda still in them. His record and tape collections were phenomenal. Seven or eight years ago, he suddenly got into film noir and before I knew it he had collected sixty films, all obscure. That's what he was like." Christopher Dewdney remembers: "When the Falklands War started, he bought a short-wave radio to keep up with what was happening. Soon he became a short-wave nut. And his bicycles — antique and modern. When, suddenly, he got onto an historical continuum, his research was exhaustive and he was consumed totally by his own curiosity."

Here was something that promised to crystallize many of the impulses and currents in his career. Musing on the meaning of being outside the mainstream is part of what it means to be a Canadian artist and thinker. London, Ontario, to him, was not simply the particular of which Canada is the general. It was his own unique place away from the mainstream where one could lead a highly productive life: his London was to Toronto as Canada is to the rest of the world. To document and to explore and collect and reinterpret for himself the same spot far back through time seemed to take him deeper into these ideas than he'd gone before. In his last year or so, he began passing a lot of time with an Ojibwa family of the Munsee Delaware Nation on the reserve adjacent to London. "He told me about spending a whole day listening to them speaking their own language," Desbarats remembers. "'It was like being in Quebec,' he told me. He marvelled."

"Greg had moments of genius, moments that surpassed his ability to understand them," says Frank Davey, "but mostly his work was based on research." He was, among other things, a keen student of art history. Davey says that Curnoe had planned to travel to Europe in February "to further his understanding of German and Austrian expressionist painters. He was investigating ways of applying art history to himself. He collected rare German expressionist catalogues. He didn't have the sense of this art as an outward manifestation of emotional disturbances. He was interested in their vision as a mode of representation. In the library at the studio, you'll find books on people like Schiele and Nolde." Davey pauses. "He wouldn't like me to say this about him, but Greg was an intellectual."

Davey and others also remember a certain high pride. "He saw himself as a major artist, consistently doing cutting-edge work, and sometimes he was bewildered when the world overlooked that." Dewdney can recall writing catalogue essays for Curnoe shows and having to tread very cautiously. "You had to be careful writing of Greg to say nothing less than the obvious." For others, it's memories of his generosity that surface first — of how, in Dewdney's words again, "he supported a variety of human experiments" in the form of poets, painters, musicians, hangers-on.

Maybe some perspective will come out of what so far is still mostly grief and emotion. "I think it's better to go the way he did, quick, than to linger on," says Andy Patton. But then Patton is only forty-one, far younger than the others talked to here, still too young to be spending much time thinking about the absence of time. David McFadden is fifty-two and has already had a few important colleagues drop away. "Greg was my best friend," he says. "But then he was many people's best friend. That's how much energy he had."

Peter Desbarats had been meaning to recommend Curnoe for an honorary degree from Western, and had talked the matter over with Alice Mansell, the chair of visual arts at the university. She agreed that the recognition was overdue. "The idea went through the machinery a couple of weeks before Greg died," Desbarats says. "So after his death, I went up to see the powers that be and asked if we could award the honorary degree posthumously. They said no." ■