



SELF-PORTRAIT (1986),
ACRYLIC ON GOUGED
PLYWOOD, 243.8 x 121.8 x
3.8cm (96" x 48" x 1½").
COLLECTION: NATIONAL
GALLERY OF CANADA

SUMMER EVENING
ABSTRACT (1957), OIL
ON CANVAS, 127 x 152 cm
(50" x 60"). COLLECTION:
CANADA COUNCIL ART
BANK. COURTESY:
MENDEL ART GALLERY



PHENOMENOLOGY

Paterson Ewen's psychological portraits of earthly
and heavenly phenomena put him in touch with the workings of
the universe as well as his own inner nature

By ADELE FREEDMAN

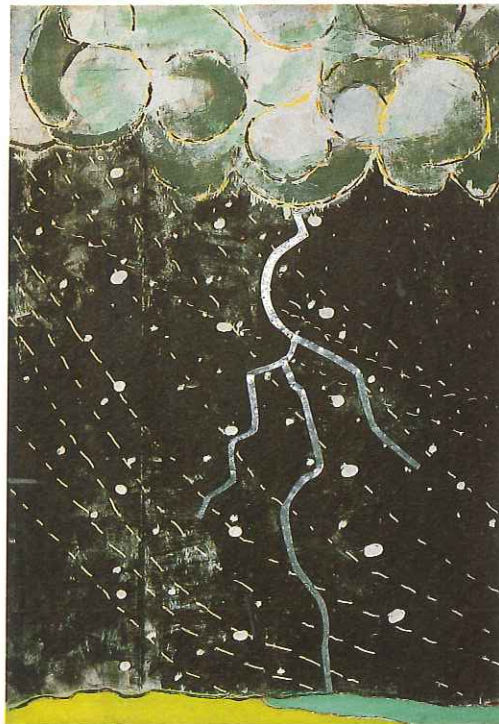
At 62, forty years of painting behind him, his journey of self-discovery not over yet, Paterson Ewen has emerged into another big day in the sun. The last one dawned in 1982, when Jessica Bradley, assistant curator of contemporary art at the National Gallery, selected him to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale in recognition of his achievements of the previous decade.

For it was in the early 1970s that Ewen, transplanted to London, Ontario from Montreal, finished with his marriage of 16 years, emerging from a dark night of the soul, fed up with formalism, brushes and canvas, embarked on the adventure for which he has become known and celebrated. He set heavy sheets of plywood horizontally onto two sawhorses, climbed aboard, marked an image with a felt marker, turned on a router, and attacked. Gouging, hacking, flaying; later rolling, dripping, sloshing or spraying acrylic paint into and onto the unprimed, man-made landscape; sometimes nailing, gluing, inlaying pieces of metal, canvas, coco matting or string — he forced into being images of natural phenomena he'd been carrying inside him since childhood.

"What always made him unique was his capacity, in a period when

"real" painting was abstract painting, to find a strategy to make landscape painting vital again," says Roald Nasgaard, chief curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario. "Whether or not that was his intention, that's what he achieved." Collectors both public and private were very responsive. This was something new in Canadian landscape painting — almost an ironic perspective on the whole tradition. But it was filtered through the consciousness of an artist in the 1970s. "When 1980 rolled around and there was a flood of European painting into North America, Paterson Ewen seemed to have been doing that for a long time."

Ewen's psychological portraits of nature's wonders and special effects — storms, rainfall, the northern lights, solar eclipses, his buffeted moons and surging suns — placed him, in retrospect, where he'd always wanted to be: somewhere out in the universe, at one "with what's going on," in touch with profound emotions and his own inner nature. It's not that Ewen or his work were barren of feeling before 1970. On the contrary, Montreal critic Jacques Ferron, writing in 1961 about a show of his abstract paintings, spoke of "cette peinture de tristesse, et aussi d'un calme sorti des profondeurs." The words still



NIGHT STORM (1973),
MIXED MEDIA ON GOUGED
PLYWOOD, 244 x 168cm
(96" x 66"). COLLECTION:
J. RON LONGSTAFFE.
COURTESY: VANCOUVER ART
GALLERY

MOON OVER WATER I
(1987), ACRYLIC ON
PLYWOOD, 228.6 x 335cm (90"
x 132"). COLLECTION: ART
GALLERY OF ONTARIO.



apply. But the discovery of plywood and router was crucial.

"George Segal, the sculptor, said something very important," says New York painter Eric Fischl, a Ewen fan. "You have to find the material that allows you to work as fast as you think." The material is a metaphor for how you think and work. The router is as important as the plywood — he found a way of talking."

Read Ewen's own descriptions of his method and Segal's point comes home. It's as if Ewen's mind becomes the router, and vice versa: "Once I place the plywood on the sawhorses and touch a magic marker to the surface to begin a vague drawing of the image, the activity begins to accelerate. Drawing is followed by routing and thoughts of colours, textures, materials rotate in my mind...Perhaps I can risk saying something that only the artist would know or dare to proclaim, and that is once begun, the work cannot fail. This is so because I make it come out. Some works of comparable size have taken six weeks to finish, some have 'come out' in three days, but they will emerge from my rotating head at some point and they will be manifested on the plywood."

At the same time, Ewen becomes what he gouges. Of his painting, *Iceberg* (1974), he once said that "the actual physical movement I make sometimes actually feels analogous to the way the things really happen. This iceberg would get that formation and those indentations by wind blowing it, slowly of course...I don't know but I don't think that's too wild a guess...it was almost as though I was blowing on it."

While they didn't rush off to buy routers, younger artists searching for a source of legitimacy for image-making took note. "I'm interested in his work because it deals in landscape as weather, landscape as psychological place and event," says Fischl, one of the most prominent. "I found him to be inspirational. There's such a great

physicality to the work, and at the same time, an inspired image. He's very much a part of the struggle for sincere imagery, as opposed to cynical imagery. For me, it was that Paterson was out there doing what he was doing, and that gave me courage to do what I wanted to do."

Ewen's plywood pieces, very rude, very tender, sometimes tortured, have received national exposure before. Now, however, his work is being shown in its entirety, although not in one place. In October, six new paintings formed the inaugural show at the new premises of the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto. On November 20, the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon opened a travelling retrospective curated by Matthew Teitelbaum called *Paterson Ewen: The Montreal Years*. Come January 22, the Art Gallery of Ontario will launch a major exhibition curated by Philip Monk entitled *Paterson Ewen: Pheno-*

mena 1971-1988. Add to this the announcement in June that Ewen had been awarded the 1987 Banff Centre School of Fine Arts National Award—and you'd expect to find him on a mountaintop.

He is to be found, instead, inside a drab, two-storey warehouse building in London, the ground floor of which he occupies. The renovated Victorian house, girlfriend, teaching position and blue Cadillac mentioned in articles circa 1982, the year of the Venice Biennale, have all vanished. So has Ewen's documented passion for chess and Nabokov. "I'm not crazy about it, it's very primitive," says Ewen, slowly, looking around his place, his face a mask, his voice a monotone. Then, "It's mostly being alone I don't like. I don't know what's happened. I just hope I can get into the next period from here. When you're turning large, major pieces, it's heaven. But in between,

it's kind of grim. I seem to be very up and down. Just say that I have peaks and valleys."

Ewen's features are less noticeable than his tall, intense, uneasy, heavy presence. He had just descended from a peak — the turning of the six large, major pieces for the Lamanna and AGO shows that are some of his most moving and powerful to date — giant portraits of the moon, most of them, ranging in mood from serene to violent, the latter panels deeply gashed, the wounds forming roiling waves and dense angry clouds. "I work in bursts," he says, "and then there are quite long periods when I don't work — a month or two." What does he do between bursts? "Suffer. Watch TV."

Who would presume to explain this man, or communicate his depths? Too many people play "What's His Trauma?": they might do

MOON OVER
TOBERMORY (1981),
ACRYLIC AND METAL
ON GOUGED
PLYWOOD, 243.8 x
335.8 cm (96" x 132").
COLLECTION:
NATIONAL GALLERY
OF CANADA





HALF MOON (1987),
ACRYLIC ON PLYWOOD,
228.6 x 243.8cm (90" x 96").
PRIVATE COLLECTION.
COURTESY: ART GALLERY
OF ONTARIO.

better to resist the temptation. Like his plywood panels, Ewen is scarred, but stubbornly he endures. His life seems to turn in cycles. Peaks and valleys. Highs and lows. Extremes. The inner landscape he describes is Romantic.

A few facts, perhaps, speak for themselves. He was born in Montreal's west end in 1925. His father had emigrated from Scotland to work with the Hudson's Bay Co. in the north, and became general manager of a fur auction house in Montreal; although the Ewen rule was no sex, no booze, he was an alcoholic, and fought incessantly with his wife. When he was 18, Paterson escaped the turbulence by volunteering for service in World War II. He ended up a machine gunner in a reconnaissance unit whose job it was to get the surrender of troops in different parts of Holland. He was 23 when he returned to Montreal. Four-fifths of his unit had been killed in combat, according to a 1968 clipping; Ewen came back "disappointed he hadn't been injured."

He enrolled in a B.A. course at McGill University because he "didn't know what to do at all." By the second year, he had begun to draw at home, and bought his first two books on art. One was about Cézanne, the other about Picasso. "I didn't understand Picasso but I took the attitude 'study and learn about it' rather than antipathy." Cézanne was easier, because his work has "a lot to do with contour."

Partway through the second year, the dean at McGill, realizing Ewen was wasting his time, urged him to transfer to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts school to study art and design. Ewen is still grateful to him. Arthur Lismer and Goodridge Roberts were two of his instructors. Through Françoise Sullivan, the woman he married in 1950, he met Paul-Emile Borduas and his followers, Les Automatistes, men like Riopelle, Barbeau, Mousseau. (Two drawings by Mousseau hang on Ewen's wall.) Montreal was the centre of energy of the Canadian art world, and Ewen was there, where the action was, at the confluence of cultures — French, British, American — that made it so exciting.

"Those were the happiest days of my life," he says. After two years of a three-year program, Lismer handed him his diploma in the hallway and told him he'd absorbed whatever formal education he needed. "It was quite a blow," says Ewen. Just married to Sullivan, an artist,

choreographer and dancer who had signed the Refus Global, Borduas' manifesto, he had been receiving \$120 monthly from the Department of Veterans Affairs for his studies, and "that was the end of that."

Throughout his Montreal years, Ewen held down a job by day while continuing to paint, when he felt like it, at night. He and Sullivan were eventually to have four sons. One of them, Vincent, is emotionally disturbed. (Among Ewen's three paintings of human figures, key works, is a portrait of Vincent. It was done in 1974. The year before he had done *Bandaged Man*, based on a tiny etching he had found in an old dictionary of a man displaying every conceivable kind of bandage. He thought of the painting, at first, as an "everyman type of thing" but as he went along, he started to think of it as a self-portrait: "I don't mean that I'm totally wrecked...we all disintegrate gradually, much as we don't like to think about it...few people go through life without some injuries and a degree of emotional pain...Then when it was finished I realized it was more of a self-portrait than I thought." Two years ago he did a brutally honest full-length self-portrait, from photographs: "I just looked at the photographs, I didn't copy them.")

Ewen started out as a figurative painter on canvas, but before long, in the mid-1950s, he turned to abstraction, a period that lasted around 15 years: "I wavered between Goodridge and Borduas and the Group," he says. "When I turned to abstract painting I never turned to automatism. I was unable to be an Automatiste or Abstract Expressionist." He was Paterson Ewen, evolving into himself. Says Teitelbaum: "The key is that he always painted the things he felt close to. His painting is rooted in perceptual issues. He loved the landscape. It comes through in his abstract work."

How does he view his early work now? "The last of being influenced by fashion. I was very influenced by minimal art. It's all gone." He was doing hard-edge paintings when he surfaced in London. There he found himself in another vital centre, the London celebrated in the National Gallery show *Heart of London*, the London of Ron Martin and Greg Curnoe and the Rabinowitches, Royden and David, of intense discussion about directions and possibilities, art and politics. "The tradition in London is to work out of your own experience. That was a liberating element," says London artist Jamelie Hassan. "For me," says Jeanne Renaud, co-artistic director of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and friend of Françoise and Paterson, "what he was doing before was part of a current that was happening in Montreal. In London, his work became very personal."

Things started to happen quickly in London, where for the first time in his life, Ewen could devote himself to painting full-time. In 1970, using pieces of felt dipped in paint, he did one painting composed just of dotted lines. His upstairs neighbour at the time became intrigued with it: "I said: 'It doesn't look very different from a regular painting.' He said: 'It looks more like something going through space.' That's all it needed. I decided then to do something to do with phenomena."

He decided to create something on canvas, something Japanese, something related to "with their rain, their type of landscape." He thought of making a huge woodcut. After hand-gouging for several days with a chisel, a gift from Henry Saxe, he experienced a kind of revelation: making prints wasn't really what he was after — the gouged wood was the work. That first plywood piece became *Solar Eclipse*, it was followed by *Solar Eruption*. At this point a friend suggested he try a router, and gave him his. "I had to be talked into it at first. But the moment I got the thing working, I realized it was for me. It's been phenomena ever since." He tried to coin the word "phenomocape," he says, thinking coining a word "might be a good idea," but it didn't catch on. "So why fight it? I don't care now."



SHIP WRECK (1987), ACRYLIC
ON PLYWOOD, 228.6 x 243.8
cm (90" x 96"). COLLECTION
OF THE ARTIST. COURTESY:
THE ART GALLERY
OF ONTARIO.

The phenomoscapes, so be it, summed up everything that had gone before. As Teitelbaum points out, there are many formal links between them and Ewen's earlier work, some of which even harbours premonitions of the router. In 1960-61, for example, Ewen was using saw blades to create paintings, and many paintings from that period have an agitated surface, the paint being as thick as 5 centimetres. The fascination for all manner of earthly and heavenly phenomena was there from childhood, when Ewen entertained hopes of becoming a geologist. And with his six new works, another stored influence has come up, that of the American painter Albert Pinkham Ryder, whose work he first encountered in the late '40s.

"He's still very obscure," says Ewen. "He was a Romantic. He painted ships and clouds." When still a student, Ewen picked up a book about Ryder and during one of his frequent visits to New York, went to the Metropolitan Museum, knowing it had some of his work. A young curator, surprised that anyone knew of Ryder, directed him to a plush gallery on 58th Street, where, in a room at the back on a little platform with green felt behind, a Ryder was brought out for his viewing: "It turns out that Albert Pinkham Ryder, to get this kind of drama, would just paint over and over images until they became very simple forms. It took until quite recently for it to come out in my work."

Never an Automatiste, Ewen nonetheless can't restrain his unconscious. In fact, one of his six latest works didn't happen like the rest. It didn't begin as a specific image, found in an old book or an old memory, whose time had come, but just came out of his spinning head as he was working. It's called *Ship Wreck*, and it stands out from the

rest of the group because of its wild, sweeping narrative qualities. The ship is a long, black form at the bottom, surrounded by serpentine waves in violent colours. A centred moon hangs low in a swooping gap of a jagged orange horizon. Like the best of the plywood works, the tension between what is being expressed — tragedy will do — and the stubbornly reassuring, earthy presence of the plywood, is almost excruciating. Furious seascape, historical drama, record of spirit etched onto matter, *Ship Wreck* seems to mark the beginning of a new cycle in the work of a no-holds-barred artist determined to wrestle with his own darkness, and transform it into something luminous.

ADELE FREEDMAN IS A TORONTO FREELANCE WRITER

PATERSON EWEN: *THE MONTREAL YEARS*: Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon: November 20, 1987 to January 3, 1988; London Regional Art Gallery: January 29 to March 13, 1988; Art Gallery of Windsor: April 9 to May 29, 1988; Concordia Art Gallery, Montreal: September 14 to October 21, 1988; St. Mary's University Art Gallery, Halifax: November 2 to December 13, 1988.

PATERSON EWEN: *PHENOMENA 1971-1988*: Art Gallery of Ontario: January 22 to April 3, 1988; London Regional Art Gallery: April 29 to June 12, 1988; Vancouver Art Gallery: July 14 to September 11, 1988; Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon: February 1 to March 19, 1989; Glenbow Museum, Calgary: December 20, 1988 to January 28, 1989.