

Disobeying Order

Facing hundreds of years of painting's history, Joanne Tod is acting up

BY BRUCE GRENVILLE

In Joanne Tod's Toronto studio a monumental split canvas leans against the wall. It reaches from ceiling to floor and from end to end of the only open wall. Two freshly gessoed canvases lie on the floor in preparation for the next painting and a stack of unassembled stretchers has been deposited by the door. As is often the case, I am stunned by her new paintings. On the one hand they continue many of the issues and ideas developed in her earlier work. On the other, they involve an entirely new set of criteria. There are few artists in Canada today who are willing to continue to expand the parameters of their activity so energetically. Joanne Tod is, without a doubt, one of the most adventurous.

The tall split canvas has an enigmatic title: *Shooter with Cliff and Eddy* (see overleaf). Its surface offers the image of a domestic interior, a living room, which blithely combines antique and modern, Eastern and Western styles. Images of domestic interiors have been common in Tod's paintings since the late 1970s; works such as *In the Kitchen* (1975) superimposes the image of a bound woman from a Japanese pornography magazine over the space of a suburban kitchen, while *Self Portrait as Prostitute* (1983) presents a lifeless, upper middle-class dining room with one of Tod's most recognizable ear-

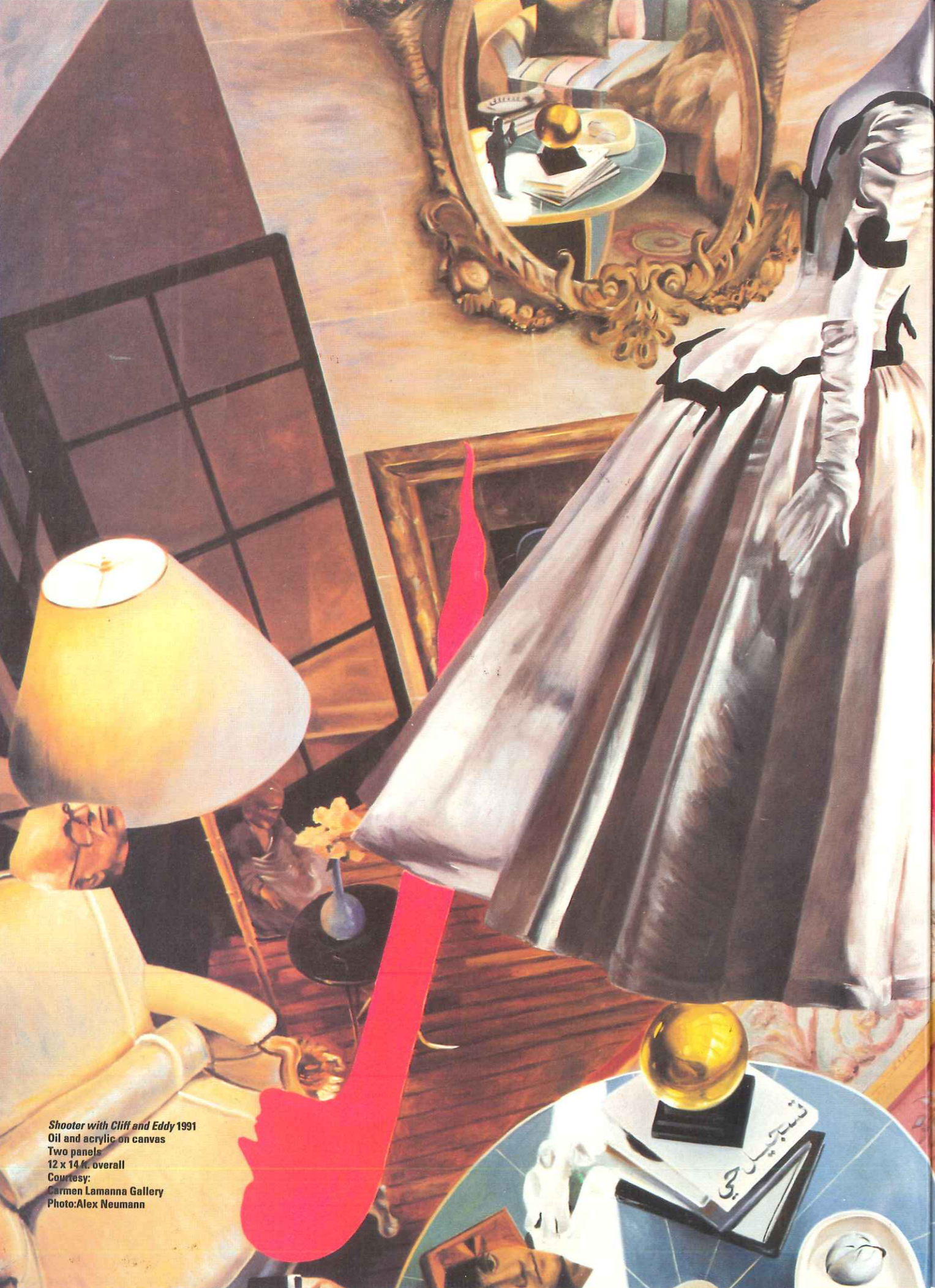
lier canvases hanging on the wall. In each instance Tod created an anomalous situation in which a conventional domestic interior is convulsed into meaning by its intersection with a socially charged image.

In *Shooter with Cliff and Eddy* the banality of the domestic interior is undercut by the hallucinatory presence of a life-size mannequin dressed in a 19th-century gown. Two large fluorescent pink shapes and a flock of disembodied male heads float on the surface. When she puts together one of her paintings, Tod relies heavily on images from periodicals and books; in this case, Tod has taken both the faces and the ball gown from the pages of a glossy magazine, and the room itself — as in many of her recent paintings — is taken from an interior design catalogue.

With the exception of the severed heads, Tod's avoidance of people as subject matter in her new paintings is quite deliberate. As far as she's concerned, putting people into her work is disruptive, distracting us from her principal interest, the construction of pictorial space. In the place of people, Tod substitutes signs. The luxurious fabrics, the indiscriminate mixing of Western *objets d'art* with Eastern religious artifacts, the overdetermined stylistic references to the Orient, the 17th-century and modern architecture are more than a massive

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Shooter with Cliff and Eddy 1991
Oil and acrylic on canvas
Two panels
12 x 14 ft. overall
Courtesy:
Carmen Lamanna Gallery
Photo: Alex Neumann



Presence 1991
Oil and acrylic on canvas
Two panels
12 x 14 ft. overall
Courtesy:
Carmen Lamanna Gallery
Photo :Jim Jardine

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accumulation of bad taste. They reiterate the predominance of the patriarchy and its history of colonialism, sexism and racism.

As Tod points out — her wildly eclectic imagery notwithstanding — it is the problem of pictorial space that is her principal focus. In the end, this aspect of her work is as laden with meaning as her iconography. “I think it was anxiety that caused that break with the representation of deep space in my paintings,” Tod recalls. “During the time that I was rejecting deep space, — in the mid-1980s — I was consciously subverting a pleasure factor, both for myself and for the viewer. Now I’m returning to what is essentially a pleasure factor but from a fetishistic point of view. Because the painting is imbued with my pleasure in making it, the viewer should be receptive to that pleasure.”

Tod’s anxiety and conscious questioning of the traditions of painting is, of course, something she shares with many artists of her generation, especially those who grew up in the critical environment of the 1980s when painting was widely rejected as a viable artistic practice. In part, this rejection was a holdover from the modernist abstract tradition that had turned its back on illusionism — the creation of a convincing, realistic space — as an unnecessary impediment to the recognition of the physical flatness of the painted canvas. But the rejection of illusionistic space was also part of a broader belief that painting was an act of seduction in which hapless viewers could not be trusted to draw a distinction between a representation and its subject. Still prisoners in Plato’s cave, we were deemed unable to tear our eyes away from the seductive illusions of the shadow world.

Tod’s choice to wrestle again with the representation of traditional pictorial space was in part based on her desire to work with ideas about space now under discussion in the contemporary art world. As Tod indicates, ownership and control are fundamental to any discussion of the sub-

ject. “Space is important,” she says, “because it implies luxury, plenitude, possession. An overview is a privileged view.” Thus it is no accident that in her current paintings Tod invariably chooses an elevated vantage point from which to view the room. This is a long-standing artist’s conceit that places the artist, and by implication the viewer, in a superior position to that which is represented.

Looking at Tod’s work, though, we cannot help feeling somewhat uncomfortable with the privileged vantage point we have been made to adopt. In *Shooter with Cliff and Eddy*, we are placed in the uneasy position of being elevated but without any apparent means of support. In *Disobeying Order* (see cover) we are drawn into an inexplicable vortex; space is no longer controllable. The dark and richly appointed bedroom is a mix of Eastern and Western styles; an exotic chinoiserie landscape has been painted on the walls, and chairs surround the bed like royal footmen. Spatially, though, the various objects in the room seem to be inexplicably drawn toward the back wall. The effect for the viewer is a kind of Sartrean nausea, a crisis in perception. In each of these new paintings the equation between rational space and the authority of the viewer is undermined. Space refuses to be controlled.

During the mid-to late 1980s Tod shifted her attention away from the domestic interiors of her early paintings toward the representation of public spaces — restaurants rather than kitchens, museums rather than living rooms, and churches rather than bedrooms. In her most recent works, however, Tod has returned to the domestic interior and specifically to the bedroom. Significantly she has chosen images of very formal bedrooms — majestic in their scale, stately in their appointments. As such they suggest the domain of the patriarchy. But within this rigidly controlled space, Tod creates a state of chaos and disintegration. *Presence*, for example, offers an extraordinary image of domestic refinement

that has been inexplicably invaded by fluorescent magenta and orange shapes. In and of themselves these shapes do not constitute a subject; they are simply intended to disrupt the formal logic of the bedroom. Tod in fact is very careful not to give them meaning. Describing the process of their production she says that they are “quasi-organic, abstract forms derived from cutting pieces of paper into arbitrary shapes.” From these she selects the most arbitrary and transfers them to the canvas. Surprisingly, these are the first images she applies to the canvas; the image of the bedroom, in this case, is then painted around them. Thus while the shapes are without meaning in the narrative sense, they nevertheless dramatically affect our assimilation of the final image. Tod’s interruption of the painting’s principal image is part of her broader effort to draw direct attention to the physical elements of her work.

This new emphasis on the corporeal can be felt in all aspects of these new paintings, including their titles. Instead of giving us information about the content of the image — what’s going on in the picture — the title of *Shooter with Cliff and Eddy* refers to the mysterious cutout shapes (and the high-speed ball gown), the cliff-like vantage point from which we observe the scene, and the current or eddy of distorted space in which the heads seem to float.

Tod’s recent adoption of multiple panels and monumental scale also points to this new physicality. Typically for Tod, any decision about the work’s form has an immediate impact on its narrative aspect. The use of multiple panels, for example, was in part a practical decision that allowed her large-scale paintings to be more easily shipped and installed. However, Tod was quick to incorporate this practical, formal decision into the narrative strategies of the work. In some instances the crack between the panels creates an abyss that threatens to engulf the pictorial elements; in others it acts as a crop-

ping device to delimit certain images and to reinforce others. *Disobeying Order*, for example, presents a vertiginous image in which a serene and majestic mannequin inexplicably inhabits the space of an exotic bedroom. The mannequin is obviously an appropriated image which has been roughly cropped to fit the shape of the painting’s four canvas panels. By rotating the image and forcing it to conform to the internal shape of the canvases, the image becomes less conspicuous than it might otherwise be, blending in with the work’s formal structure. Experiencing this picture, being taken by surprise by its incongruities, we are once again made aware of the way in which we are trained to anticipate rational order.

It’s also interesting to consider the monumental scale of Tod’s recent paintings. There are very few painters who work on this large scale today, in part because it is associated with painting’s not-so-glorious past — the grand portraits of statesmen, the heroic history paintings and the sublime abstractions of the patriarchal tradition. In Tod’s new paintings the scale is somewhat anomalous. Instead of standing as a sign of authority, the pictorial space is experienced by viewers as contiguous with their own. Tod describes it as a walk-in space, but significantly, she also refers to it as virtual reality — a synthetic space that simulates real space, but which is constructed entirely within the memory of a computer. Tod’s use of the term virtual reality is timely; it’s a catch phrase with great art world currency these days. But in her typical fashion, Tod has given the term an ironic inflection. Conventionally, virtual reality refers to a simulated space that accurately replicates the conditions of real space; the emphasis is on building a viable sense reality from within an illusion. In her new works, Joanne Tod shows us that this is nothing new. In fact, it has been the project of the patriarchy since the earliest days of the modern age. **CA**

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