Will a massive retrospective honouring Michael Snow capture the master of intellectual hide-and-seek?

The Disappearing Man

by Adele Freedman

A brilliant artist reputed for his framing of vision, Michael Snow is hard to frame. He's hungry for attention, but he doesn't want to talk about himself. Yet while he insists his biography is in his work, he hasn't been afraid of putting himself in the picture. He is, after all, the man who made an artwork of twenty-four blown-up polaroids of his own face, eyes shut, blocking the view in Venice. Another work, Authorization, shows Snow taking photographs of Snow in a mirror, Cover to Cover, his remarkable cinematic, complex, beautiful book, is a day in the life of the artist presented through paired images—front and back, photographed simultaneously by two cameras—printed recto-verso on the page. All self-portraits, they reveal remarkably little of the self, deflecting inquiries of a personal nature onto the process by which inquiries are conducted, recorded and ultimately resolved. But just who is this Michael Snow anyway?

The least that can be said of Snow is that he's had the most diverse and unusual career of any Canadian artist since. He may recoil from anything like a fix, but there's nothing in the way of a challenge he'll
distinctive, personal, as evidenced by a tufted red velvet sofa exploding with gilded putti. The oil portraits of bewigged gentlemen on her wall came from the Roia in her life, Roberto, a Cuban-born art dealer who died in 1976.

Even as a boy, Snow resisted molding. His mother tried to get him to study piano. Thanks to a convent education, she herself is a talented pianist who still plays daily on her baby grand. Flinging an arm, she declares, “I come from the other end of the century— I am still fascinated with the romanticism of the last century— Schumann, Schubert, Chopin, Liszt!” That her son in mid-century, high on weed, would pound out Dixieland and boogie-woogie in crummy Toronto bars, eventually to record and perform sporadically “free” music worldwide, didn’t enter her mind. His teachers at Upper Canada College couldn’t understand why she bothered. Said one, “Madame, you are wasting your time and money— he has no musical talent whatsoever!” Piano became Snow’s first mode of expression anyway. The self goes without saying. He’s heard this story a hundred times. So has Gale. One day, Marie-Antoinette arrived home to hear sounds coming from the basement: “Here was Michael playing! Actually playing something! In the bench he’d found some mimeographed pages showing how jazz chords are built, and how to find scales—and that was enough for him!”

Upper Canada College was more than enough, Snow hated it. His mother had hoped the compulsory sports program would do him good. Snow wasn’t into athletics. Every afternoon at 3:30 when the sporting began, the jazz-ambient teenager grabbed his bike he kept stashed in the bushes and made for the Promenade Music Centre on Eloor Street, where he sat in a booth spinning Satchmo, Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton. He informed his mother of his truancy only last fall. She is still capable of parental dismay: “And he had all the equipment! Now skated!”

Gerald Bradley Snow was Old Ontario. He became a civil engineer and surveyor after serving as a lieutenant with the Toronto Forty-eighth Highlanders in World War I. He met Marie-Antoinette, daughter of Elzéar Lesueve, a Chicoutimi bigwig, at a fancy party given by Sir William Price. They eloped. Enraged that his daughter had married a Protestant, Elzéar sent letters about damnation. Before long, the couple had a fourteen-room mansion in Rosedale and two children, Denyse and Michael, whose family nickname was Brothet. Elzéar relented. The Snows summers at his island cottage on Lac Clair, a pre-conscious source of Lac Clair, Snow’s pivotal abstract painting of 1960 wherein image and material achieve a mystical equilibrium.

In 1944, when Michael was five, the family was living in Montreal. His father was supervising the construction of a tunnel. A blast came out of nowhere. One eye was smashed, the other peppered with dust. In the mid-fifties, he lost his sight entirely. “Bradley had been in the War. He had seen all that; he took everything so courageously,” says Marie-Antoinette. “Bradley kept working with his company; giving advice. Then he took up braille, which he knew very well. He never complained. He was stoical. Michael was impressed by his courage.”

Snow’s parents eventually separated. In Peggy Gale’s forthright estimation, their parting was inevitable. “Michael’s father was a classic depressed Torontonian. He lost his friends in World War I. He married a woman of an entirely different culture who spoke six languages, read widely and was totally self-absorbed. He was gaunt, bald, blind, reserved. He withdrew further and farther. Both kids felt deprived.”

Not to be judgmental, Snow doesn’t say as much. “Father was absent, in a way,” he muses. Moments later, he zooms in on his specific presence: “Father— the man was blind— came to one of my shows at the Isacs. He couldn’t see. There was liquid between the cornea and the lens. He came in by himself with a white cane, and went up very close to one of the paintings. I went over to tell him how glad I was he’d come. You know what he said? That’s nice colour. Brother! Jesus Christ!” Puckishly, Bradley Snow died in 1984.

His son, then living in New York, spent his inheritance on music. He threw a party and hired Cecil Taylor’s jazz group to blow the night away. “I was considered gauche. It was rock and roll times. The Beatles—and I was interested in this crazy music, especially Cecil.”

Snow could never make up his mind what he wanted to be. He went to the Ontario College of Art in 1948 after receiving the art prize at Upper Canada College. “It was really frightening. I don’t know why I was there other than I got the prize. I took the design course. I wasn’t ready to make a choice.”

By the time he graduated he was obsessed by painting— still is: “What do you do with these things? And how do you become like those greats! How did Picasso do it? For a time during the fifties he tried to choose between music and art,
The audience, 1961-63
Sculpture, Toronto
Photo: David Whitt

Night Out 1984
The Eaton Centre, Toronto
Photo: Carl Celemann

The Audience, 1986-63
Sculpture, Toronto
Photo: David Whitt

but found he couldn't. "The variety of my work ultimately came from confusion. I was losing my sight when I was becoming an artist, so I guess I stressed the optical aspects of art. What I'm trying to do is make people see things in front of them -- the 'now' in the contact with the work."

What they saw was a shock as they walked into the S.L. Simpson Gallery in February 1993 was two colour photographs of eyeballs facing each other across the room -- one blue iris, the other brown -- each enlarged to a diameter of 30 feet. Some people walked straight back out of the picture, say, "It's too much," or "I won't look at it." Others reacted with awe. "It's as if you're seeing the world through an optical lens," says Louise Dompierre, chief curator of The Power Plant and responsible for the 20-year-old segment of The Michael Snow Project. "I felt really uncomfortable being next to an organ so vulnerable, blown up to that size." Video artist Kim Tomczak loved both images: "There were these two big eyeballs looking at you. Who does this eyeball belong to? What's behind the eyeball?" At the same time there was the surface: here's the thing that sets it.

The blue eye belongs to Snow, and the brown to Gale. "The eyes are obvious. I remember as a teenager looking in the mirror and realizing they're odd. When we did the photographs -- we went to specialists in commercial photography who rigged up a special camera -- and blew it up, I discovered with great interest that eyes have a strong personality connected with other natural forms, in my case butterflies and feathers. Michael's looked like crystals, like quartz. Because they're big enough to work into, they have a sense to do with topology and geography than the human eye. Michael's always been interested in deciding the size of things. Originally he wanted them ten feet across, but he reduced them to six feet so they could be manoeuvred in and out of buildings."

Walking Woman is all about la belle peinture — he's such a colourist, isn't he? He's so painterly! Snow would agree, only he likes to frame his work by talking about the process of making it. "If you think about the basic elements of a medium, you might escape influences and references, even if they come up sideways.”

One label that makes him upright is Pop. "What criss-crossed with Pop art was the whole idea of the flat subject, which Jasper Johns did and which led to Lichtenstein's comic strips. They took subjects already in the world as two-dimensional forms and used them in an art context. I wanted to make a two-dimensional subject and put it in the world, and see what happened. What pissed me off is I made a huge leap in my mind, trying to escape the group of abstract expressionist painters, like those guys were, and sometimes I appeared in Pop anthologies! I didn't have a fighting chance.

The whole thing was so American. Inevitably, since I was Canadian, it would be thought my work was derived.”

Although finally abandoned in the form of stainless steel markers on the grounds of the Ontario Pavilions at Expo 67, Walking Woman lingered on in the life of Snow's art as a yearning to entrap the random and incorporate everything in sight; he does have a mass. She also bolstered his muni-ciant fascination with variations on a theme. Whatever the medium, and in thoroughgoing ways, Snow works in sets and cycles. Walking Woman's ultimate metamorphosis was into the Goldberg Variations.

The originality of Wavelength, the forty-five-minute zoom that shook the world, was never in doubt. Part film, part acid trip, it was shot in Snow's loft in 1966. When it took first prize at the Knokke-le-Zoute Film Festival in Belgium the following year, it made his international reputation. Wavelength is possibly the one thing Snow has ever done that everyone has had to look at. Robert Fulford is absolutely convinced the last scene of Antonioni's The Passenger, a very long zoom, is beholden to it. Snow followed up on his masterpiece with four large abstract painted wood sculptures, Sight, Scope, Blind and First to Last, each concerned with framing, fragmenting and heightening vision, making it possible a quarter of a century later for the AGO's Philip Monk to base a quarter of the retrospective on just the years between 1967 and 1969.

In the case of an artist who has told as long as Snow, there is strong critical tendency to prefer the early work — the so-called breakthroughs — to what came later. It was upon Snow's return to Toronto in 1972 that he began, inses-santly, to be called a Renaissance Man, the flip side of being all over the place. There are those in the next generation of artists who think he never recaptured the brilliant intensity that made his years in Manhattan an explosive — and historic — excursion. Much of his work in the 1980s has been disassembled as one-liners, variations taken as rehearsals and foolishly ventures into crowd-pleasing assignments. "Mike took on a lot of commissions — Eaton Centre, a government building in North York, a fat company in Mississauga," says Av Isaacs, Snow's dealer for thirty-four years, who closed his gallery in 1990. "He took a long time over the holograms for Expo 86, which seemed a novelty to a lot of people. There was not a continuum.”

There were flops. An enormous stainless steel truck stuck in the middle of downtown Toronto traffic; another commission. A long-awaited exhibition of paintings in 1991 — paintings about the history of painting, Snow's first canvases in twenty years — for once lacked paintiness. Snow defends the first, down to the forest of dadaistic architecture that paid for it. Of the latter, he will only say, "It's so hard to do meaningful paintings any more." He will not give in. He will not give up. "There's no doubts in my mind, finally, that Mike's a genius," says Isaacs. "So who's perfect? Every genius isn't.”

Truly a heroic figure in a country begrudging of its own, that can't abide heroism and barely tolerates art, Snow has achieved what few others have managed: he's kept us inter- ested. He won't do the expected thing. He won't play it safe. A man of many faces, he will lose some followers only to pick up others. Derrick de Kerckhove, a McLuhanite, thinks the photoworks exemplary: "He questions the reality of what we thought was real. He deals with the non-neutral relationship between a work and its consumers.” Another fan is Alain Robbe-Grillet, who worked with the artist in New York last fall, and knows — "really well" — Wavelength and La region centrale, his awe-inspiring three-hour epic of the Canadian north shot by a remote control machine in 1971. No people, no animals, no plot. "I used to think ordinary people could do La region centrale, Snow says wistfully, "but people seem to need stories.”

The Michael Snow project is still in process. Snow makes it up as he goes along, exposing himself in his art perhaps more than he intends. His private life sounds almost ordinary. The creator of Walking Woman goes about his days within the traditional framework of the family man. Throughout the weeks, he aims to be home by six to watch Star Trek with his son, Saturday's it's off to St. Lawrence Market en famille in search of smoked pork chops. By the time the retrospective is over, he'll be making ready for the annual family adventure in Newfoundland, where home is a cabin with no electricity that he built and furnished himself. Snow offered a glimpse into his summer retreat by pulling out three big albums filled with snaps. "It's a secret," he says. "Oops, it's not a secret," he protests and caddies.

Here they are having dinner. There they are on the dock. There's one of Alec's sheep. Gale's holding a plate. Mike's gone fishing. No art in sight.