

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

The  
**Disappearing**  
**Man**

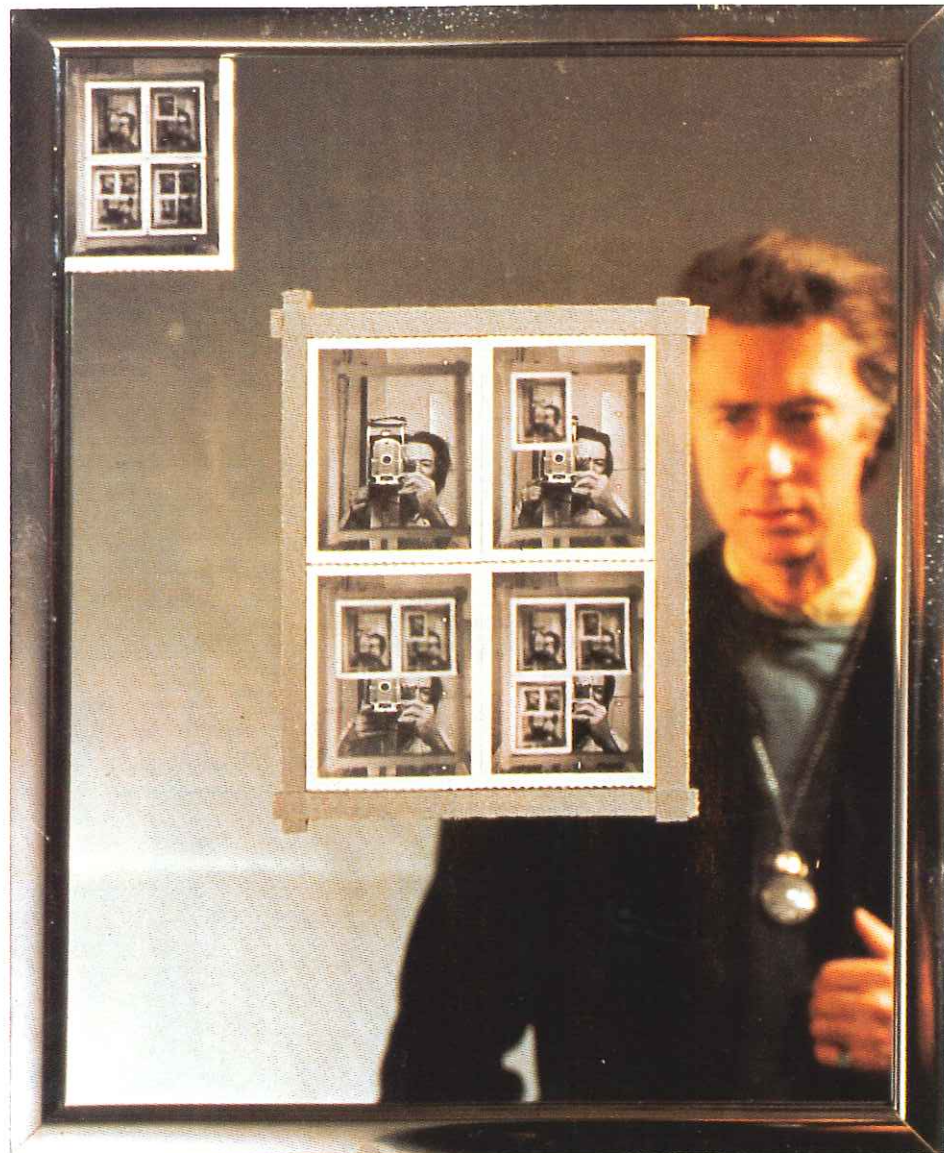
by Adele Freedman

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

Portrait of Michael Snow by Nigel Dickson





Authorization 1969  
Mixed media  
22 x 18 in.  
Collection: National Gallery of Canada

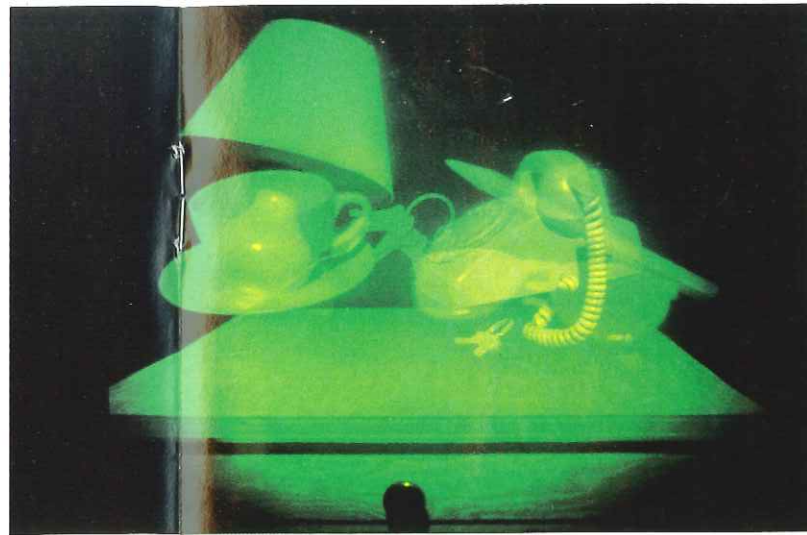
distinctive, personal, as evidenced by a tufted red velvet sofa exploding with gilded putti. The oil portraits of bewigged gentlemen on her walls came from the Roig in her life, Roberto, a Cuban-born art dealer who died in 1976.

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 spontaneous "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

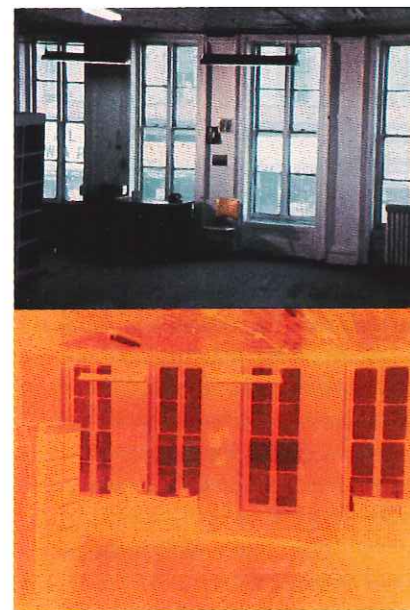
your time and money — he has no musical talent whatever!"

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-smitten teenager grabbed the bike he kept stashed in the bushes and made for the Promenade Music Centre on Bloor Street, where he sat in a booth spinning Satchmo, Ellington, Jelly



Still Life in 8 Calls (detail) Expo 86  
Mixed media and holograms  
Courtesy: S.L. Simpson Gallery



Stills from Wavelength 1967  
Courtesy: Art Gallery of Ontario

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! New skates!"

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 Élzeur Lévesque, a Chicoutimi bigwig, at a fancy party given by Sir William Price. They eloped. Enraged that his daughter had married a Protestant, Élzeur 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 Brother. Élzeur relented. The Snows summered 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 1934, 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 further. 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 Isaacs. 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 a nice colour, Brother.' Jesus Christ! Fuck!" Bradley Snow died in 1964. 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,

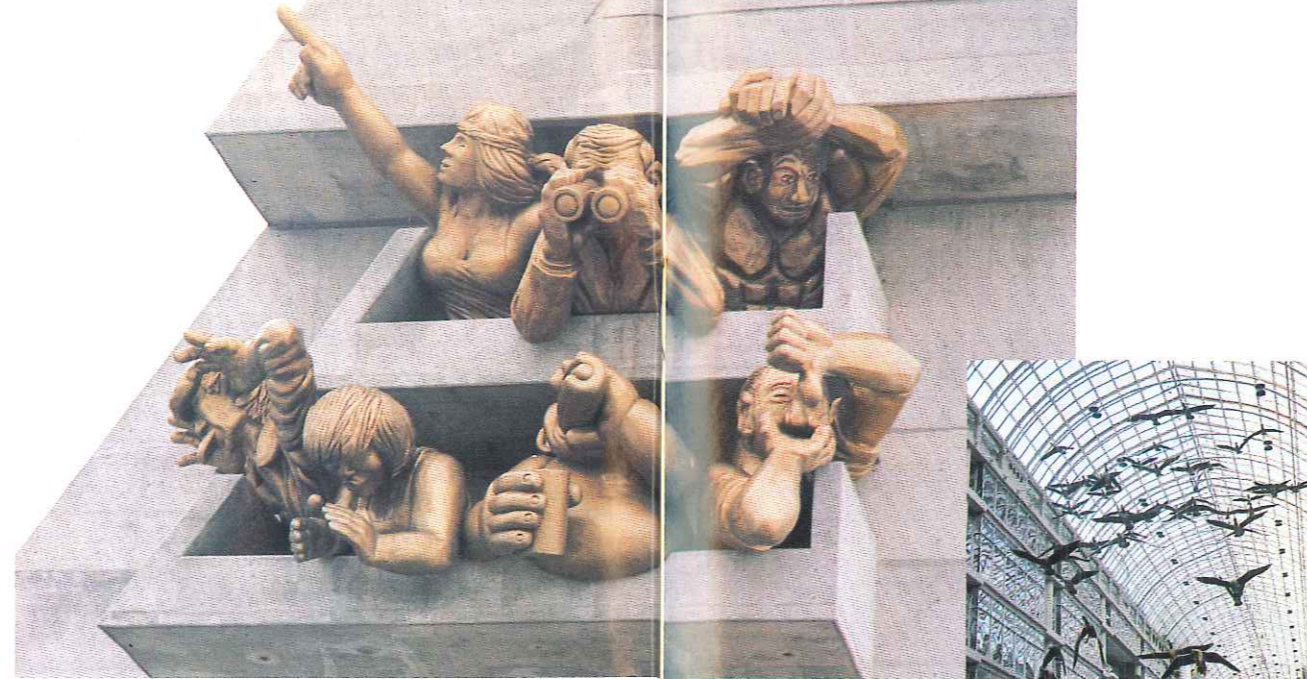
but found he couldn't. "The variety of my work ultimately comes from confusion. Father was losing his sight when I was becoming an artist, so I guess I stressed the optical aspects of art. What I'm trying to do is make people see things in front of them — the 'now' in the contact with the work."

What people saw when 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 six feet. Some experienced *Conception of Light*, as the piece is called, as more unsettling than illuminating. "It's a very simple idea — how vulnerable the eye is," says Louise Dompierre, chief curator of The Power Plant and responsible for the 1970-94 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 irises: "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 sees."

The blue eye belongs to Snow, and the brown to Gale. "The eyes are obviously the important thing," says Snow, who gives his own peepers occasional workouts using the same book Aldous Huxley consulted in an attempt to prolong his vision; Snow refuses to wear glasses. "We've gazed into each other's eyes. I had this idea ten or twelve years ago," Snow says, veiling a hint that son Aleck is the delight in the conception thereof. "It was risky. One blowup would have been analytical. Because there are two, and they're complementary, they identify each other. Hers is floral, mine is more underwater."

Gale was skeptical at first. Ten years later, she will confide, "My eyes are unusual. I remember as a teenager looking in the mirror and realizing they're odd. When we did the photograph — 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 walk into, they have more 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."

"Michael always presents himself as vague, blurry, absent-minded, fumbling," says Gale. "But there's nothing very casual about Michael." Snow leaves for the studio every day at 8:30 a.m. One recent morning, he was going through a pile of black-and-white photographs of *The Audience*, his sculpture for Toronto's domed stadium, digging it all the way. Made of carved, sawed and sanded fiberglass sprayed gold, the work consists of two groups of brassy, elbowy, swollen, grotesque, recognizable types, considerably bigger than life. They hang high up on the outside, making fun of the crowd to its face as it streams up the two main approaches to Toronto's behemoth of a ballpark. There's the type that



*The Audience* 1988-89  
SkyDome, Toronto  
Photo: Sean Weaver

sticks out his tongue and wags his ears; another is a super-fitness type, hugely buxom, with headband; the shutterbug is lasciviously bent over a camera. Floodlit at night, *The Audience* is frozen motion, more ballet than burlesque, fingers pointing at the sky to grab that ball before it hits the moon.

When *The Audience* appeared in 1989, it polarized Snow's own fans. Journalist Robert Fulford, an early Snow-watcher, thinks it's "a total mess." Others like him find it crude, aggressive, and demeaning of common folk — a case of runaway Rosedale noblesse oblige. The aye side admires it for its people-friendly vulgarity, its cheek, its brassiness. "He's really poking fun at public art," says videomaker Lisa Steele. "It appears to be bronze, but it isn't. Snow's used a high-art reference in a low-art context." "It's Gothic! It's beautiful!" says Loretta Yarlow, the discerning director of the Art Gallery of York University. Architects tend to share the opinion of Frank Stella, who declared on a visit, "Mike's the only one who could have gotten the scale right." Stella got it right too. Snow at his most brazen beat SkyDome at its own monumental game. Later — too late in his opinion — he took on the management: "I met with the stadium people yesterday, the postcard people and T-shirt people. All this time, I probably lost half a million dollars." He struck a deal: novelties to come.

Gerald Robinson, an architect who met Snow in the fifties, recalls how "Michael would tell people outright what a beautiful work he'd done. He was very able to admire his own work." Different epoch, same story. One moment Snow compares *The Audience* to a Bernini sculpture in front of a cathedral in Rome: "Bernini had a fight with the architect. His figures are doing some kind of rejection of the building."

*Flight Stop* 1979  
The Eaton Centre, Toronto  
Photo: Carlo Catenazzi

He turns next to Picasso: "It's a lot like *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, a direct-address thing, a brothel scene — they're all appraising you." Next, picking up one of his photos: "Look at what's going on here! It's incredible! In the sixties, I was interested in underground comics — Robert Crumb — but this is more like Daumier. Here's the one I call Buddha of Consumption. The guy with the beret is an artist, a kind of Christ. Here's the critic. I call him Thumbs Down — beautiful arm, eh?"

Snow has always had his ways of getting his art out of the gallery. Some made it on wings to The Eaton Centre in 1979. The famous geese — feathered in black and white photographs of geese — soaring in the atrium of Toronto's mall-to-end-them-all became its main attraction. When they flew into town, they changed the course of public art, which up to then had run to plop art on the plaza and macramé in the lobby. Snow multiplied a Canadian icon into a gaggle of puns that acquired logo status. But he was not amused to discover his flock festooned with red ribbons to convey season's greetings to shoppers in December of 1982. He initiated legal action. The Eaton Centre cut the ribbons.

Some of Snow's art just walked out. Between 1961 and 1967, he made a personal trademark out of a two-dimensional female figure in motion: *Walking Woman*. She sprang out of Snow's desire to find a new way to make paintings. As he says, with a rush of pink emotion that confirms an

undiminished interest in greatness: "In the background is this looming achievement of the history of painting, and I wanted to add to it." The history of painting with a bouffant hairdo and sometimes a half-slip? He's dead serious.

"In a way, artists have designed characters or types — there's a Renoir, a Modigliani," he says, reviewing the origins of *Walking Woman*. "I wanted to continue that. I wanted to make a subject for my work, and then make my subject known to people. I wanted it to be part of the scene, anywhere people walked. It was Duchamp in reverse — not found works, but lost works. It was pretty radical." It occurred to Matisse to set figures against colour. "It occurred to me to make a figure that was just a figure." He made some drawings of women. One was a sideways figure of a female walking. He chose that one.

Driving forward in reverse, he made it look as though he'd ripped her off a canvas. He took a big piece of plywood, drew a rectangle on it, and sliced out the shape with a matte knife. Feet, hands and top of head were sacrificed to signify liberation from rectangular bondage. Pygmalion had found his purpose. "Not only did I have a positive shape to put against the wall, but I had a positive and a negative — stencil shapes. I could trace or paint around them, and make more. The whole thing about reproducing it — reproduction — related to woman. My mind was jumping."

Women reproduce, Snow propagated. He disseminated his cutout all over the place. He took a plywood silhouette of his muse out for a walk one June day and stood it at bus stops and in subway stations. His first photowork was born as he shot it against moving backgrounds of pedestrians, subway cars, turnstiles. He mounted sixteen of the photographs on a plain white background and called it *Four to Five*. "It was a use of photography that had nothing to do with the fine photographic tradition. It was about putting a two-dimensional shape into a three-dimensional world, to take two-dimensional photographs of it, to make a thing."

In 1962, Snow and Wieland were pioneering loft-living in Soho. Snow hit his groove. *Walking Woman* hit her stride, metamorphosing into a coffee table, curtains, stickers, rubber stamps, stencils from which to make the tiny paintings which showed up like graffiti — Snow considers himself a godfather of graffiti art — in subway cars. Kilroy was there. This being the early sixties, Snow escaped the sort of feminist critique he was to receive three decades later. As Louise Dompierre would have it, "There's a formal reason why *Walking Woman's* head is cut off, but an image has meaning. *That woman is amputated!*"

When *Walking Woman* settled within gallery walls, it was by means of paintings, collages, drawings, sculpture. Snow used every kind of paint — watercolour, tempera, oil, enamels, spray enamels, acrylic — on many different grounds. "Walking Woman is not an intellectual game," says the AGO's Dennis Reid, organizer of the section of the retrospective covering 1951 to 1967. "The intellectual element in Mike's work is closely married to the visceral level, which is not generally appreciated. He's Mr. Integration for God's



From left: Michael Snow, Avrom Isaacs, onlookers, with 4 Grey Panels, at the Isaacs Gallery 1965

Bottom, from left: Michael Snow in New York studio 1961  
Courtesy: S.L. Simpson Gallery

Expo Walking Woman:  
(Stretched figure) 1967  
Brushed stainless steel  
91 x 47 x 96 in.  
Collection: Art Gallery of Ontario

Sideway 1962  
Wood and aluminum  
6 feet tall  
Courtesy: S.L. Simpson Gallery

61, 62 1961  
Oil on canvas  
60 x 45 in.  
Collection: Avrom Isaacs



sake! 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 uppity 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 Pavilion 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 maw. She also bolstered his musician's 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 toiled 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, incessantly, 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 dismissed as one-liners, variations taken as rehashings and foolhardy 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 tree 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 painterliness. Snow defends the first, down to the forest of dreadful 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 doubt in my mind, finally, that Mike's a genius," says Isaacs. "So who's perfect? Even geniuses aren'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 interested. 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 consumer." Another fan is Alain Robbe-Grillet, who lunched with the artist in New York last fall, and knows — "really well" — *Wavelength* and *La region centrale*, his awesome 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 dig *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 week, he aims to be home by six to watch *Star Trek* with his son. Saturdays 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 spurts and cackles.

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