Excerpts from a Description of Tom Dean who has done the same thing for the Universe

By Gerald Hannon

Boys make grand, crazy plans and dream them right through to the end and just don’t seem to know that some things can’t be done. Boys bring stuff home to show mom. Boys like to play with their widners. Boys wonder what all the fun is about. Boys wonder. Boys do ridiculous things sometimes. Boys get hurt. Boys can be solemn.

I'm not talking 'Im Dean as Peter Pan—which is the awful thing that happens when you don't grow up—not when Tom Dean is fifty-one years old, and is married, and has three children (not to mention two others, Sofia and Antonis, now adults, from some vague and ancient liaisons), and a house, and a car, and a dog, and a cat, and is going to Venice to show the whole wide world what's being called "The Whole Catastrophe," which means the whole wide world is getting a bunch of house dogs and a lot of bronze widners and some babies and some babies and, as they say in the magazine ads, much, much more.

Tom Dean says, "A lot of what I do embarrasses me and I have to overcome that, that sense that it's too faked, oh, how can I do that or say that?"

Boys wonder.

I think of him as the artist with permanent bed-head.

I've yet to see him when he hasn't looked as if he's just gotten up—even at an AGO opening celebrating his work and his.
"Yeah," says Ginger, "but I don't think they understand much about modern art."

Excerpt 1: Sleep-Out

We are in Future Bakery on Queen Street West, not far from where he lives, and I've asked him to talk about the earliest work he can think of that still means something to him. He puts his coffee down on the table, looks slightly away and staves off into that noisy, smoke-filled room. Perhaps ten seconds go by. They feel like a minute, and he hasn't moved or said a word. Another ten. I resist the urge to wave my fingers in front of his face. Maybe another ten. And then, "It was a set of paintings that were an exact reproduction of the linoleum on the floor where I used to live. I still see those as the seed of everything I've done since. It took months to do—they're tedious. It was about being blank; I threw out all subjective, aesthetic experience. You could think it was just a piece of linoleum nailed to the frame on the wall. I had a sense that all the meanings we attach to things are very superficial, and it was about stripping that away, of emptying things through meaningless labour. That piece became the dot paintings, a long, laborious process that continues in my work in various forms.

"The most fundamental pleasure is in some sort of labour. Being lost in labour I think of as an ecstatic, transcendent condition."

I got used to the bleep-outs after that. They happened almost every time we talked. Seems he thinks about what I ask.

Excerpt 2: Wobblers

I am at seth Brine, the foundry that is casting the pieces for Venice. "You'll really like his penises," his wife, Ann, had told me earlier at Art Metropole where she works. (I bought some Tom Dean stationery when I was there—there's a drawing of a penis at the top of the page with the words "Men are great" beneath it.) "They're not just erect, or just limp. They're that, and everything in between, too." And there they are, on skulls and trays at the foundry, heavy bronze penises, life-size and better (I asked Tom if he'd used his own for a model but he hadn't), and sometimes gone a little weird, with teardrops on both ends of the shaft.

"So what's with all the wobblers?" I asked him later (Ann had also shown me his Cock Shirts, photos from 1972, in which he treats his penis like a party balloon and twists it into the most alarming shapes—though I note that he can't quite make a possible). "'Tm being subsidized by Kirishia's," he jokes. "It's all subliminal advertising."

Joking aside, he talks about penises as "a curiosity not only interesting but astonishing. In a way, they're a perfect sculptural study—a little mass that can move, that's compact, that can be soft or hard. It's the same with babies. Babies flop around in the same way. They're nice, malleable, articulate, compact mass. If I had to give students an exercise, I'd say this year, it's all babies and penises."

Excerpt 3: Purveys

Cosmo is ten. Ginger and Yoonie, the twins, will be twelve in July. They are Tom and Ann's children, and someone described them, when they were younger, as being like the kids in the horror film Village of the Damned so blond and so pretty and so smart it was almost scary. The four of us are sitting in the TV room. Cosmo warns me about the Purveys, soft toys that speak something called "Purblah" but can learn English if you speak to them, and points out that two of them are sleeping beside the TV and that I shouldn't wake them because they'll start talking and we won't be able to. I can't resist, and they open their eyes and start babbling softly to
each other, but Cosmo flips them under a blanket on the couch so the hair of us can chat, though I keep staring at that slightly twitching, sweating bulge under the blanket.

"Mosdy it's the pressure they don't like," Ginger tells me. I'd asked how her friends react to Tom Dean's work. Cosmo says, "A friend of Ginger's said that Tom didn't even make one of the things in the show at the NCA, that it was just a stack of liquor bottles."

"Yeah," says Ginger, "but I don't think they understand much about modern art."

Excerpt: Modern Art
I'm having lunch with the family at the big, round table in the kitchen and Tom talks about having seen a Jeff Wall show somewhere and says, "I don't get it." Later he will tell me that much of twentieth-century art is "like a secret society, almost as if there were some conspiratorial lapse of better judgment about it. A lot of it is incredibly unlikely and opaque." Which might sound cynical, but it's not, because there's a marvellous bravado in it, a boy's derring-do, a sense that thrills him in his own work of having "pushed things to some extreme that radically breaks with given ways of seeing and thinking and believing." He remembers going to the National Gallery in Ottawa when he was a teenager and seeing the conceptualist show there. "I was just thrilled by it. It was an alternative, another way of thinking that made me say, "Wow! This makes sense to me! I can't figure out nine-tenths of it, but it suited me from the beginning. It was a vehicle for obscure ways of thinking."

Excerpt: Violence
I am watching a video of a 1974 performance piece by Tom Dunn and Margaret Drago that took place in the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Tom is wearing an open white shirt and what looks like leopard-skin tights. He and another performer, a woman, begin singing a duet, "À cè damm la maele," from Mozart's opera Don Giovanni. After they finish, he tap-dances to the same tune played on the piano. Then six little girls come out
and tap dance. Off they go, and he puts on boxing gloves and begins three rounds of real small cin-up boxing with another young man, also wearing boxing gloves. The audience begins to look uncomfortable. The audience begins to boo. By the end, his nose is bleeding.

"I wanted to scare people to death," he tells me. He also says that what he had originally wanted was to sit down in front of the audience and weep for three minutes, but "I just wasn't able to do it. I even went to a hypnotist to see if he could make me weep on demand, but it didn't work. So that performance was really second-best. The sports reporter who also did the arts reviews in Montreal told me that I needed professional help." What he didn't say, but what seemed clear to me, was that the performance was violent from the beginning, that the piece was about violence being inflicted on you: how you know how to package it. "La ci darem la mano" is a very pretty duet, but it puts a pretty face on yet another ugly Don Giovanni seduction scene, one that eventually leads to his beating the poor woman's betrothed. The audience, though, laughed happily through it. Good packaging.

Excerpt 6: Stillness

We are in Tom Dean's garage, which used to be his studio until he enlarged his basement, and I am hearing about The Billy Jesus Dance Contest in Montreal back in the seventies. He still has some of the poaters that advertised it, and many of the submissions from other artists and maybe a few crazies who responded, in compliance with what seemed the only rule, "whatever you would do for the newborn baby Jesus." (Someone submitted a lot of drawings of Jesus as a bunny.) He also shows me a whole folder of material from the St. Lawrence Lace-METHOD School of Art and Dancing (which contrasts to S.L. Lace, get it?), which too drew a lot of applications from other artists in the same nonsense, who enjoyed the snowballing silliness of it. Then there was the huge, weed-sprouting mound of earth he kept in his Montreal studio and called his "indoor park." And The Judgement Day Burlesque events he organized in Toronto, which culminated in a march down Queen Street with a police escort.

I am a great admirer of silliness, regard it as almost a virtue, like chastity. Its origins are in childhood, but it is a particularly adult form of play. It is a subversion of the obvious. Though he is not always being silly, much of Tom Dean's work is subversive in precisely that way. The question, he says, is "how to locally say what's going on here. You have to be able to say the dumbest things—often cutting through the crap means saying the obvious. People can talk around an issue forever and lose track of what's laughably self-evident."

I think of his Teen Communards series—in its Wonder Bread packaging. I think of his Beat Seller series—soft-core porn and your daily newspaper giddily sharing the same frame. Of course, the "laughably self-evident" isn't always, well, self-evident—not, at least, without a lot of thought. "I have a big abstract mental life," he tells me (of those fabulous sleep-earns) and talks about how much of what he does, even apparently ludicrous stuff like the Cock Shirts, is a result of thought processes that are "formal and cerebral and not at all ludicrous. What gets me going, makes me want to make something is quite abstract. But in playing with it you discover, if you have a good armature, that a lot of other things can hang from it comfortably."

Synthesis: Play

Stillness is the flip side of wonder. The jaded are never silly.

I tell Tom Dean that I remember, as a child, falling off a swing when it had reached its highest point, and though I knew I would be hurt, there was one instant when I felt the whole world was rushing up into my arms to greet me. He knew exactly what I meant. He tells me he was in Grade 6, and went outside for recess and nothing in particular happened but maybe, he says, it was a first moment of real unconsciousness of being alive and it was just so perfect, a perfect joy that has stayed with him ever since.

He put grey cards out on the street once, and people would see them and sometimes jump at them, sometimes pick them up. "It was a dance piece," he says, city sidewalks dancing for Tom Dean.

Stillness is the flip side of wonder. When you are in Grade 6, you are a boy in wonder at the fresh world the way you find it. When you are fifty-one, you are a man in wonder at the world the way it could be, with stresses that float and lead you nowhere, with your wiccer as Silly Putty, with a commitment to describing the universe in terms of hair-pieces, and comedians, and strange voices and lots of happy words.

Boys, and sometimes the men they birth, make grand, crazy plans and dream them right through to the end and—gloriously free of the rest of us—just don't seem to know that some things can't be done.

Leonard Paul

Leonard Paul is a Mi'kmak artist who studied painting at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Paul's work is cross-cultural in that it reflects both mainstream Canadian and native themes. His first solo exhibition entitled "Portrait of a People" was curated by the Art Gallery at Mount Saint Vincent University. Paul is the recipient of the Governor General's Medal for his work in art and he is an important member of the group of younger native artists who are emerging in Eastern Canada. His work is in a number of major public and private collections in Canada.