

BELOW: Tom Dean
March 1999
Photo courtesy
Art Gallery of Ontario

RIGHT: Tom Dean
figures for *The Whole
Catastrophe*, as seen
in the foundry at
MST Bronze Limited, 1999
Photo Isaac Applebaum



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 wieners. Boys wonder what all the fuss is about. Boys wonder. Boys do ridiculous things sometimes. Boys get hurt. Boys can be solemn.

I'm not talking Tom 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 Antonin, 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 bronze dogs and a lot of bronze wieners and some babies and some babes 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 far-fetched, of 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."

selection as Canada's representative at this year's Venice Biennale.

It's cute though. He's cute. Big guy, big sleepy blue eyes, and when you first meet him you think, "Oh dear. Talented, a hunk, but possibly very dopey."

Excerpt 1: Bleep-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 stares 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—very 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: Wieners

I am at MST Bronze, 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 skids 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 testicles on both ends of the shaft.

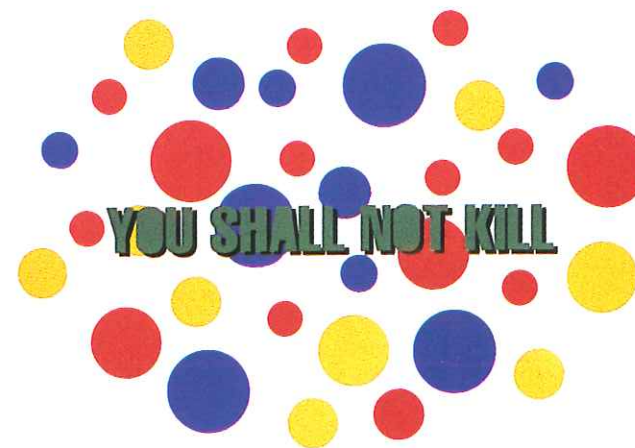
"So what's with all the wieners?" I ask him later (Ann had also shown me his *Cock Shots*, photos from 1972, in which he treats his penis like a party balloon and twists it into the most alarming shapes—though I note that he can't quite make a poodle).

"I'm being subsidized by Kwinter'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: Furbys

Cosmo is ten. Ginger and Yvonne, 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 Furbys, soft toys that speak something called "Furbish" but can learn English if you speak to them, and points out that two of them are sleeping beside the TV and that I musn'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



ABOVE: Tom Dean
The Ten Commandments (6 of 10) 1999
Screenprint on paper 121.9 x 91.4 cm
Printed by Alan Flint
Published by Thomas H. Bjarnason
Photo courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario

LEFT: Tom Dean
"Dog" figures from The Whole Catastrophe
at MST Bronze Limited, 1999
Photo Isaac Applebaum

BELOW: Tom Dean
Wonder Woman 1999
 Installation view
 Screenprint on cotton fabric
 Made with the assistance of Susan Dicks
 Collection of the artist
 Photo courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario



each other, but Cosmo flips them under a blanket on the couch so the four of us can chat, though I keep staring at that slightly twitching, muttering bulge under the blanket.

"Mostly it's the penises 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 AGO, that it was just a stack of liquor bottles."

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

Excerpt 4: **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 consensual lapse of better judgement 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,

'Yes! 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 5: **Violence**

I am watching a video of a 1974 performance piece by Tom Dean and Margaret Dragu 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, "Là ci darem la mano," 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



ABOVE: Tom Dean
*"Calendar Girl" and
 "Clasped Hands" figures from
 The Whole Catastrophe*
 at MST Bronze Limited, 1999
 Photo Isaac Applebaum



Tom Dean
Monday, March 8, 1999 (*My Broken Heart*)
(page details) 1999
Ink on printed newsprint
Produced with generous assistance
from *The Globe and Mail*
Photo Carlo Catenazzi
Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario

and tap-dance. Off they go, and he puts on boxing gloves and begins three rounds of real smash'em-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 OK if you know how to package it. "Là 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: Silliness

We are in Tom Dean's garage, which used to be his studio until he enlarged his basement, and I am hearing about The Baby Jesus Dance Contest in Montreal back in the seventies. He still has some of the posters 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 Ezee-Method School of Art and Dancing (which contracts to S.L. Ezee, get it?), which too drew a lot of applications from other artists in on the 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 Judgment 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 charity. 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 lucidly 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 *Ten Commandments* series—in its Wonder Bread packaging.

I think of his *Best 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 (ah! those fabulous bleep-outs) and talks about how much of what he does, even apparently libidinous stuff like the *Cock Shots*, is a result of thought processes that are "formal and cerebral and not at all libidinous. 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

Silliness 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 ecstatic moment when I felt the whole wide 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 consciousness 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 just glance at them, sometimes step around them, sometimes pick them up. "It was a dance piece," he says, city sidewalks dancing for Tom Dean.

Silliness is the flip side of wonder. When you are in Grade 6, you are a boy in wonder at the fresh wide 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 staircases that float and lead you nowhere, with your wiener as Silly Putty, with a commitment to describing the universe in terms of hair-pieces, and colanders, and strange vases and lots of happy vowels.

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

LEONARD PAUL



Leonard Paul, *Elders Live on*, ink, watercolour and acrylic, 16 x 25 inches.

Leonard Paul is a Mi'kmaq 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.

ZWICKER'S GALLERY

5415 Doyle Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3J 1H9 Telephone: (902) 423-7662 Facsimile: (902) 422-3870

Member of the Professional Art Dealers Association of Canada Member of the Professional Art Dealers Association of Nova Scotia

Member of the International Society of Appraisers