

The art of play: Alberta painter Chris Cran featured in major retrospective at National Gallery

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<http://ottawacitizen.com/entertainment/local-arts/the-art-of-play-alberta-painter-chris-cran-featured-in-major-retrospective-at-national-gallery>

* A short video of Cran during a walk through of the exhibition is also found at this link.



Canadian artist Chris Cran with some of his work from his exhibit “Sincerely Yours,” which will be on view at the National Gallery of Canada from May 20 to September 5.
(Errol McGihon – Post Media)

A refreshing chinook from Alberta has blown into the National Gallery of Canada. The breeze is provided by the whimsical, inventive paintings of Calgary artist Chris Cran.

Although he is a serious artist with serious things to say about art, culture and society, Cran manages to leaven those messages with a dose of humour that eases the viewer into his conversation.

The 66-year-old is the subject of a major retrospective, called *Chris Cran: Sincerely Yours*. More than 100 pieces are included, ranging from early works, such as the 1985 *Self-Portrait with the Combat Nymphs of Saigon*, that feature the artist in various situations; to an exploration of Pop and Op art styles (he calls this kind of homage to an art movement “recycling”); to his discovery of the potential of stencils; to more abstract works that play inside a self-described frame and finally to a period that exploits all of the above and that is dotted, literally, with faces pulled from magazines and displayed, as he says, like the omnipresent putti found in Renaissance art.

Part of Cran’s charm is his sheer delight in exploring the possibilities of art.

In an essay included in the exhibition catalogue, the comedian, writer and *Kids in the Hall* alumnus, Bruce McCulloch, describes his friend as a “boy, but in the best way possible, wrapped in an old, curious, well-travelled body.”

The show is organized by the National Gallery, the Art Gallery of Alberta with a contribution from the Southern Alberta Art Gallery.

The National Gallery’s senior curator of contemporary art, Josée Drouin-Brisebois, says the idea of this retrospective was first broached about three years ago in Calgary.

“It came up in conversation first, with me and Chris over coffee. Every time I go to Calgary I see Chris, visit his studio. He is very generous and we always have a great time.”

The two have a professional relationship that spans about a decade. The National Gallery has been collecting Cran’s work for some time. In fact, about 15 pieces in the current show are part of the national collection.

As the germ of the idea was taking shape, Drouin-Brisebois was also aware that the National Gallery had not done a major show featuring an artist from Alberta for a very long time.

“This was a great opportunity to consider whom we would like to showcase. And also he hadn’t had a big exhibition in a long time either,” she said.

“I think it’s important when an artist is alive to do a big exhibition. You learn a lot more putting something like this together, (including) the stories that come out.”

The Art Gallery of Alberta got on board enthusiastically and the show in Ottawa also added in some works from the Southern Alberta Art Gallery based in Lethbridge.

Drouin-Brisebois believes visitors will enjoy Cran’s humour and the fact that he puts the viewer at the centre of the work.

“For me, it’s exciting to have an artist that is so interested in the visitor,” she says.

In an interview after the tour, Cran talked about his hometown, his artistic playfulness and the pleasure he takes finding something new.

Cran was born in British Columbia, but he's called Calgary home since attending the Alberta College of Art and Design in the late 1970s. The city is, he says, his comfort zone.

"When I got out of art college the drive was to go to Toronto or New York, one of the big centres. But after a while, people started staying in Calgary. If I want to go and see New York, I can.

His humorous approach to art and life "was a natural inclination from day one. I had fun parents and they put that in me."

But it is his natural curiosity that has played a part in his evolution as an artist. He has moved from style to style through his career.

"It was about doing something that I hadn't done. For me it's about play. When I teach my students I talk about that.

"It's to have fun. When you are having fun, you are open to all sorts of things and new possibilities present themselves. When you are having fun, you are not afraid and you'll take a chance. And if it doesn't work out ... no big deal."

He doesn't necessarily know where his sense of play will take him next, but he knows he will find new directions in the experimentation.

"And that's the pleasure of it. I just wander, really."

His self-described "striped paintings" are an example of those wandering ways.

These mesmerizing works involved laying down a base of colour, sticking thin lines of tape onto the colour and then painting an image on top of everything.

He then used stencils to cut out words and symbols on the tape. Finally the tape strips are peeled away.

What he discovered was when the tape strips are removed, lines of colour emerge from behind the painted still life or landscape and come into the foreground. This happens, he said, because the lines left by the tape are in sharp focus and they advance while the still life or the landscape paintings are deliberately blurred and they retreat. But, he says, he discovered that if the still life was not blurred, the result was muddled.

That's the power of play and the importance of taking a chance.

Chris Cran: Sincerely Yours

Where: National Gallery of Canada

When: Until Sept. 5, 2016